

Modernisation without a cause

– Carl Barks reflections on modern landscape

Mats Eriksson

People have become maggots consuming the carcass of the earth

Carl Barks¹

Design is merely an inducement to consume

Superstudio²

WHAT MAKES A Donald Duck-story by Carl Barks elucidative for the problems of social modernisation is not least the political role that the Disney empire played in the post-war period. It had then become far more than an entertainment industry. Ever since 1935 when the United Nations acknowledged Mickey Mouse as an international goodwill symbol, Disney had been a truly political person in the USA that could always count on government support. When the very lucrative European market was closed due to the Second World War (by that time Europe stood for half of the company's profit) Disney was instead led by the State toward Latin America. Washington expedited the solution of a strike that paralysed his studio, and at the moment when he balanced on the

"Lost in the Andes", a Donald Duck-episode by Carl Barks serves as the starting-point for a discussion on the processes of occidental modernisation and its inherent expansionism.

As an early (1948) example of the imperialistic theme in Disney comics, Carl Barks presents with a rare self-irony the hidden anxieties of American expansionism and capitalism – a system that has dominated our view on modernisation for the last century. But Barks also points out a new direction for modernity, a motif very similar to that the Italian group of architects Superstudio explored in their writings and photo-collages from the late sixties.

This motif reveals modernity in a pure state, and bearing the seed for a future cause stripped from economical reasons.

border of bankruptcy the government began to order propaganda movies, which kept the company alive throughout the war. Nelson Rockefeller, then co-ordinator of foreign affairs concerning Latin America, arranged for Disney to travel as a good will ambassador in Latin America and make a movie, *Saludos Amigos*, to win back the hearts and senses exposed to nazi and communist propaganda³.

For Washington this was a step in their *good neighbour policy*, introduced by the presidents Hoover and Roosevelt in the thirties, in which military intervention was abandoned in favour of a pure economical influence, i.e. to make the South American countries depend upon North American industry and its capitalist system of mass-production and mass-consumption. The means to do this included a massive



When Donald discover the square eggs it makes a big uproar in the influential circles of society.

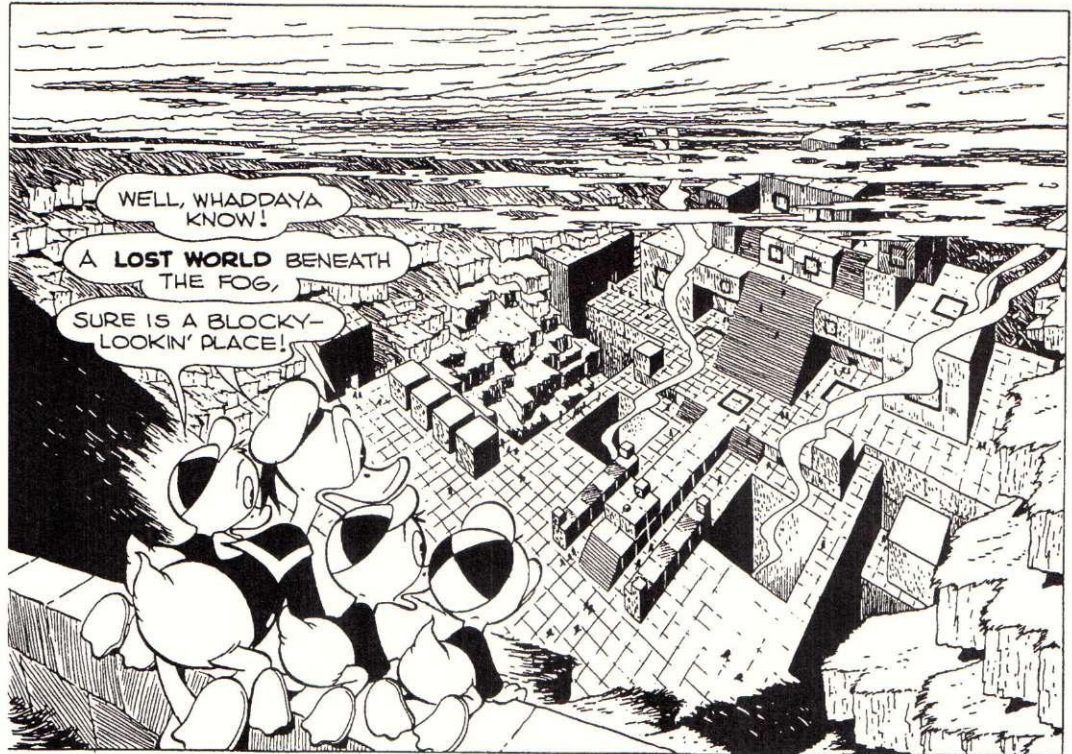
indoctrination of the *American lifestyle* produced by seemingly innocent mass-media products such as comics directed at the younger generations. Disney played a major part in this cultural imperialism. As the Chilean book *How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialist ideology in the Disney Comic*⁴ by Dorfman-Mattelart strikingly confirms. The book is the first critical examination of the political message in Disney comics distributed in Latin America, written in 1971 during the short period of the *Unidad Popular* regime. In a broader sense the study reveals how capitalistic and imperialistic values are supported by their culture and cultural export. That Dorfman-Mattelart touched a sore spot became obvious

after the coup of the military junta in 1973 when the book was burned together with other progressive and Marxist literature.

The Disney-animals were not as innocent as they seemed, but no empire is free from internal criticism. Carl Barks is probably one of the most scrutinised cartoonists ever. A number of literary analyses concerning the ideological ambivalence in his comics has been made ever since his name was made known to the public in the early seventies. He had then been producing Donald Duck adventures, from 1943 to 1966, as an anonymous cartoonist behind the Walt Disney signature. And even though Barks himself was a conservative his comics show a

fresh satire on American society that sometimes seem very radical and even contains elements of social realism that is not to be found anywhere else in the simplified and reactionary production of Disney. "When Barks is at his best", as David Kunzel writes, "he represents a troublesome and guilt-conscious ideology, that from time to time loses its innocent mask ..."⁵

In 1948 Barks made the Donald Duck-episode *Lost in the Andes* the first in which the theme of imperialism was fully explored. Soon it became a common genre of the Disney production. As Dorfman-Mattelart shows with statistics, 47% of the comics studied in their book involved a confrontation between the heroes and



The hidden empire of Plain Awful is obsessed by orthogonality.

characters from different continents and races – and they were seldom portrayed as equals. Probably this percentage was a lot higher in the comics distributed in Latin America than in the USA at the time. Apart from amusement these stories served as an apology for the United States desire to lead the modernisation in the Third World.

It does not seem to be a coincidence that *Lost in the Andes* came at that time and that the main part of the story was set in Peru, however, with irony and conscious ambiguity Barks managed to turn it into a veritable satire on American culture and expansionism, read between the strips.

The story in short

Donald, fourth assistant janitor of the Museum of Natural History, happens to drop an old cubic stone from Peru on the floor and discovers that it is actually an egg. The fact makes a sensation among scientists and businessmen – the latter for the commercial and productive potential in square eggs. A scientific expedition is sent on ship to Peru to find the place where the eggs came from and the hens that produced them.

In the museum as well as on the expedition the work is characterised by a bizarre hierarchy where orders are distributed through a long chain of assistants of different grades and where the last resort always proves to be Donald and his nephews. In accordance with

this ruthless system they soon wind up alone in the mountains of the Andes searching for the square eggs, with the rest of the crew safely resting on the ship in the harbour of Peru. During a long hike, at times interrupted by Peruvians trying to sell them dices and fake egg-cubes made of cement, Donald and his boys get lost in the dense fog of the Andes. Suddenly they stand in front of a big city, lying beneath the fog in a hidden valley, where every visible form is square and cubical. Even the inhabitants have square heads and square noses and they all talk American with a broad southern accent that they learned from the only visitor they had before – a professor from Birmingham that been there in the 1860's.



On the gridded plane of their Utopia the square Indians are moving freely in a majestic natural surrounding.

The ducks find out that the only food-supply in the valley is square eggs that the inhabitants pick on the mountain slopes. When Donald asks about the hens he realises that the natives never reflected upon the origin of eggs – they do not know what a hen is. Soon the nephews discover some specimens of chickens disguised as square stones on the slope. The hens break cover in alarm at the sight of the young ducks blowing bubble-gum balloons. For their discovery the ducks are appointed to be “secretaries of agriculture” in *Plain Awful* (the name of the city). But when the inhabitants are shown the bubble-gum that revealed the hens, they take offence. There is only one law of the city and it says that whoever produces a round form will be sentenced to lifetime penalty in the stone mines. The only solution is for the nephews to learn how to blow square bubbles. In the end they succeed and can go home with two chickens in their luggage.

At their return the scientists and businessmen are gathered around the chickens. They are thrilled by the thought of breeding a new race of pre-packed poultry. At that moment the birds stand up and crow. They both turn out to be cocks. Donald is crushed and humiliated, and the story ends with him going berserk in a diner where he is being served omelette and roast chicken.

Ambiguous imperialism

The imperialistic theme is apparent in this episode although it is presented in the form of comedy: the motif of the story is an expedition from the USA with the purpose of exploiting the na-



The rigorous handling of eggs in *Plain Awful* are suggesting the abundance and inexhaustible resources of a civilisation in harmony with nature but also the alienation from the productive means characterising the age of mass-consumption.

tural resources of Latin America. In his analysis on this story, Göran Ribe traces the literary lines back to the classical motifs of *the hidden valley* and *the lost civilisation* made popular in stories like Swift's *The Travels of Gulliver*, Voltaire's *Candide* or in the exotic adventures of the British 19th century author Sir Henry Rider Haggard⁶. Just like these stories from the historical era of World Imperialism, the story of Barks contains all the traits of an apology for colonialism in the Third World. It is also true that this story fulfils most of the criteria that Dorfman-Mattelart describe as typical for Disneyistic prejudices about Third World inhabitants; they are all portrayed as savages dressed in loincloths; they have no technology; they are self-sufficient and live on great natural resources; their political system is tribal; they are childish, rash, trustful, happy, generous, superstitious etc. All characteristics to entitle the expansion of the civilised world. But still *Lost in the Andes* is hardly a simple act of imperialistic propaganda. Rather it explores

the anxieties of western civilisation and the hubris of its expansionism.

The first part of the story leads us through the brutalities of the American system (here, contrary to Disney regulations, it is actually spelled out that Donald lives in the United States) built on capitalistic repression of workers and a crude commercialism. Onboard the expedition ship the frustrations are the repressive social structure is portrayed by a growing aggression of intonation further down the levels of the hierarchy. The commercial exploitation triggered by the discovery of square eggs is described by scurrilous portraits of the profiteers: scientists with overgrown beards and dribbling businessmen. The Peruvians that Donald first meets with are also corrupted by American capitalism, all the time trying to cheat him of his money with false eggs.

The satire of Carl Barks is also present in *Plain Awful*, the hidden city. When Donald discovers the crazy, square Indians they are not just an innocent primitive tribe but a people already effected by western

influence by the professor that made them talk and sing in American. They worship the simple American objects from the professor and keeps them in a museum much like the one Donald works in. But the American influence has had a somewhat different effect on the isolated people of *Plain Awful* than on the other Peruvians. What the ducks actually confront is a surreal and exaggerated mirror of their own civilisation. The inhabitants are almost religiously obsessed by the strict orthogonality of modernistic thinking and planning. They clearly show the alienation from the natural productive means in the modern age: though the eggs are picked, handled, classified and prepared collectively in an almost industrial way the Indians never question where they come from. The fact that Donald and his boys are appointed with the title "secretaries of agriculture" from the president and their later condemnation by the rigid irrationality of the law reveals an absurd, Kafkaistic bureau-



A Journey from A to B.
 "There will be no further need for cities and castles.
 There will be no further reason for roads or squares.
 Every point will be the same as any other..." *Superstudio*.

cracy behind the innocent mask of a constitutional democracy.

The gridded field

All this suggests that although Barks worked inside a system of cultural expansionism he also had the urge and ability to direct irony toward his own system and reveal the guilt of western culture. Criticism is always hidden beneath the veneer of comedy and it would be a bitter position if it did not raise some hope for an alternative way for human progress. This side of Barks is not as obvious as his satire on American society, but in this context he is also exploring images for a zero-point in modernisation. This theme is visualised on the confines of the cities where two key-scenes take place: the ducks first encounters with the square

Indians and their discovery of the square chickens. The scenery consists of a flat Cartesian grid juxtaposed to the fractal lines of natural landscape. The strict orthogonal surface where people move freely represents the origin of modernisation, an open-minded process of cultivation not yet degenerated by economical interests. It is free to seize in all directions. It lacks the inflicting schemes of the city – no roads and squares. It is non-hierarchical and always in a close but definite relation to nature. Obviously Barks is here using a motif from the overgrown ruins of the lost Inca-empire, probably taken from photographs in *The National Geographic* where he used to get inspiration for his exotic adventures, but juxtaposed to the terrors of modern society these images

offer a moment of contemplation – an interlude for dreams of a future modernistic utopia. The importance of these scenes is emphasised by the vigorous and careful drawings of the back-ground environment, which is rare in a comic tradition of the *action-image*⁷.

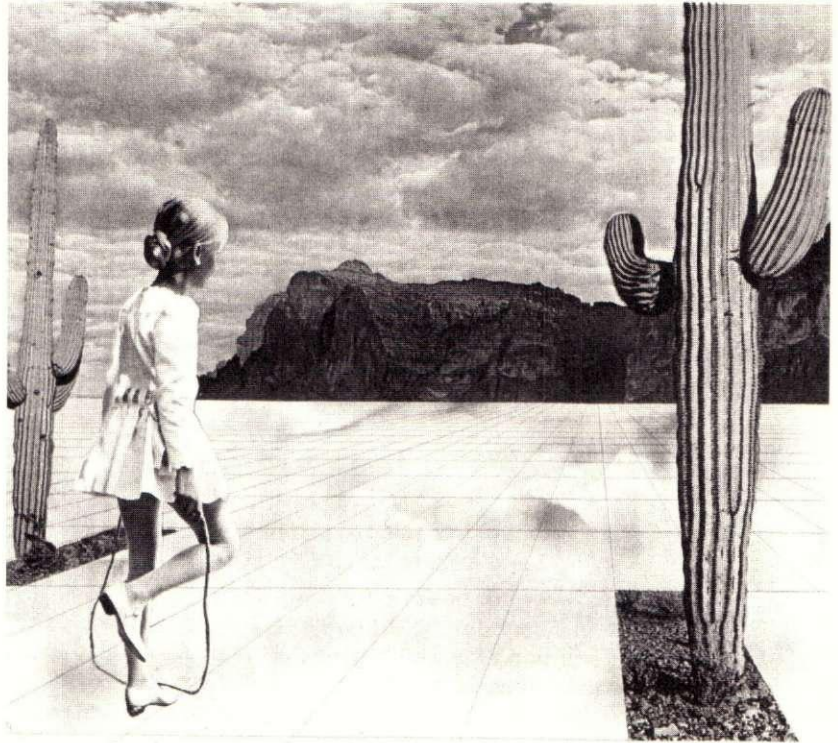
There is a striking resemblance between Barks vision and the imagery of *Superstudio* from the late sixties⁸. The Italian group of architects used the theme of the Cartesian grid, expressed in photo-collages and written pamphlets, as an ideological statement for an alternative modernism. For them the gridded plane represented a network of energy and information extending to every inhabitable area. It was a metaphor for an ordered and rational distribution of resources. In their field of

modernisation every point would become equal to any other. There would be no need for buildings, roads and squares since the field would supply every basic human need in every spot. Collective events would be just a matter of interaction between freely moving individuals. Nomadism would become the permanent condition. In comparison to other contemporary utopists exploring the megastructure as a collective social event, (Archigram in England and the Japanese Metabolists), Superstudio seem to have pushed this philosophy the furthest, creating the ultimate structuralistic utopia as a purely reductive, anti-architectural act.

The terror of the common object

Superstudio got their main influence from the Situationists, an international group of artists active through manifestos from 1957 to 1972, where Guy Debord's and Constant Nieuwenhuys' criticism of capitalist society and their credo for a "unitary town planning" were the most important contributions. In *New Babylon* from 1960 Constant prophesies the end of individualist culture and instead postulates a constantly changing urban fabric that would respond, independently of all aesthetic considerations, to the collective transformation of man in a society freed from capitalistic alienation and oppression⁹.

For Superstudio, as for the Situationists, the problem of current modernisation is located within the economical system of mass-production and mass-consumption. Objects have ceased to only meet our immediate requirements but have become devices for a false so-



The distant mountain
 "Look at that distant mountain ... what can you see?
 is that the place to go to? or is it only the limit of the habitable?
 It's the one and the other, since contradictions no longer exists,
 it's only a case of being complementary"
 Superstudio

cial communication and as such obstacles for human relations. "Objects are status symbols," Superstudio proclaims, "the expressions of models proposed by the ruling class. Their progressive accessibility to the proletariat is part of a 'levelling' strategy intended to avoid the conflagration of the class struggle"¹⁰. The common object is no longer trustworthy because, no matter how innocent it looks, it is part of a proliferating economical system that will enslave the masses and in the end consume all natural resources.

Designers of all disciplines play a crucial role in this process by creating this complex, artificial panorama between man and environment. By forming the cities for those in power they will secure the hierarchies in society. By designing new products for new technologies they will entice the masses to be part of an accelerating machinery of production and consumption, i.e. make people depend on a non-creative work as a result of automatation. Therefore Superstudio establishes the three key objectives; the destruction of objects, the elimi-

nation of the city and the disappearance of work. Instead they propose a more basic and humane modernisation – a socially levelled plane in which everyone should find the full development of his possibilities. “The objects we will need will be only flags and talismans, signals for an existence that continues, or simple utensils for simple operations”¹¹.

Of course, it is easy to reject this vision as an expression of the naive idealism that characterises the hippie-movement and even to suspect a double standard of morality in their utopia, as Colin Rowe points out by saying that “... around the corner we may be pretty certain about the superior restaurant and the Lamborghini which is waiting to take us there”¹². And even if the electronic network, that is growing today into a global embrace, in itself shows some similarities to Superstudio’s visions of a free nomadic plane without social hierarchies, it gives no sign of diminishing the laws of commercialism and the machinery of mass-production but rather the opposite, to intensify it. The resource-consuming society will not be blessed by technology as long as the economical reasons for its development stays the same.

It is by exploring the fundamental processes of territorialising and cultivating landscape, through images, that Superstudio finds their strength. The simplicity and poetry in their imagery will surely live longer than the ideological agitation. Here they produce a *tabula rasa*, a point zero for modernisation. It is a naked vision of the civilised man: his social and cultural relations (man to fellow man) and his

environmental relations (man to his artificial and natural landscape). The images take us through a *catharsis* of our society where the very absence points out the complexities of its social modernisation.

The theory of the frontier

A common feature in the images of Barks and Superstudio is that the gridded field is always put in relation to the fractal lines of natural landscape. In this juxtaposition we can fully understand the motor for the dynamism and progress of our civilisation. This uncomplicated relation between the field of modernisation and its natural surrounding also puts the criticism of the object, as defined by mass-production, into a new light. It is the artificial landscape of mass-produced objects that keeps us from seeing this basic relation. The progress of man in an over-civilised society has long passed its immediate bonds to nature, to natural needs and natural obligations – the true origin of our civilisation.

With the risk of oversimplifying a complex development, we can try to follow this thread through the story of modern territorialisation in North America. The nineteenth century growth of population in the New World is in many aspects the spiritual birthplace of modernisation and global expansionism as we know it today. It developed at the western frontier. What Jean-Pierre Fichou has called *the theory of the frontier* was first formulated in 1893 by the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his essay “The Frontier in American History”¹³. He describes how settlers, farmers, craftsmen, tradesmen and other fortune-hun-

ters moved in waves toward the western parts and pushed the frontier further ahead. This zone, in constant motion, where settlers came in direct contact with virgin soil and native Indians – who represented a totally different culture – gave rise to new attitudes that contributed to the formation of a national character and its future expansion in the modern world.

Some of the pioneers had left the East where they felt like prisoners of an institutionalised system, just as their parents once left Europe to free themselves from social bonds. The frontier offered the freedom of self-made men. It nourished individualism, as everyone no matter where they came from had to rely on their own ability to make the land profitable, but also created an innate democracy in that everyone was set in the same situation, fighting the same enemies and the same forbidding land. The principal of equal possibilities are better rooted here than anywhere else.

The notion of abundance and inexhaustible resources was the driving force behind the march westward. Wealth and lavishness became the driving force that has ever since come to characterise American society and expansionism. The *settle and sell system* of the pioneers, when one piece of land was cultivated it was sold on to another farmer and the pioneer went on to the next, is a great expression of this spirit. The longing for movement – by the words of Turner *The Movement Factor* – born in the West is now to be found in the optimistic progress and adaptability of American business and institutions. The dynamism in the everyday life of the pioneers indicates

that they were more eager to act than to reflect and that the optimism and will to act never left the field open to intellectualism.

What was created at the frontier ,
Fichou writes,

was above all a new mentality. Here the strength and weakness of American culture was founded: adaptability, flexibility, inventiveness, optimism, courage, openness to the world and individualism but also violence, materialism, superficiality, restlessness, adventurousness and naiveté¹⁴.

No one can deny the success of this mentality. Soon expansionism became an American feature that was confirmed as the federal states grew stronger. After taking the native land in control – already in 1890 the continent was declared conquered – American culture began to conquer the world.

Even though the spirit of American expansionism is deeply rooted in the history of the frontier, the strategies of its further expansion is altered to serve a full-grown industrial economy. The centrifugal movement of a territorial imperialism is changed to the centripetal movement of an economical and cultural imperialism. The instruments are not so much geographic annexation and political intervention as economical attraction and cultural indoctrination. Instead of sending out war machines they send businessmen. They do not appoint governors in foreign countries but control, often in secret, foreign economies and even foreign cultures. The commercial product is often making way for the cultural product. By the exportation of con-

sumer goods, the nation is exporting or preparing to export its lifestyle and culture. The exportation of national surplus does not just guarantee the survival of the system but also turns out to be an effective weapon in the political struggle against communism, with great propaganda value.

So there we are again, back in the Disney factory and the irony of *Plain Awful*: from the human struggle against the elements to the terror of objects in a matured civilisation. But the vision of Barks and Superstudio does not end there in the vicious circle of economical acceleration. It can help us to see further or to imagine other reasons for modernisation.

The fractal line in the field of modernisation

If we take a closer look at the relation between the gridded field and the fractal line in these images we will notice that it does not reflect the same relation as at the western frontier. The boundary is not just a passive confine of the cultivated and inhabitable area, that is exploited and pushed in front of civilisation. It is rather the opposite: a line in active motion, turning back or breaking up the field of modernisation. In Barks vision the field is invaded by stones and greenery, just like in the ancient ruins of the Inca-empire, and in the photo-collages of Superstudio the theme is further developed by water, mountain formations and animals moving freely over the field as naturally as people. Somewhere a cactus breaks the flat surface, making unexpected marks on the rigidity of the artificial plane. That is the simple message of these images; that a civilisa-

tion that has long passed the limit of adapting to its natural surroundings must instead let natural processes evolve freely inside its own field. A society in which the concept of nature has become a cultural construction of the same extent as the man made landscape must demolish the conceptual boundaries between culture and nature.

The forces behind such a development are crucial and are surely not to be found in the short-sighted economical system of mass-production, using natural resources for the maximum of profit. In the ecological perspective with its long term economical considerations and growing understanding of natural cycles, there is another objective for human progress. This cause will trigger a new adventure of modernisation in technology, manufacturing and building for the next century and for that we need images to keep in direction. As the arguments of the ecological movement have often been taken as proof of a retrogressive attitude towards modernism and modernisation, it is worth remembering that in our culture there is no utopia to turn back to as the origin of modernisation served the same economical laws as it does today.

It is true that a modernisation with ecological overtones does threaten the foundations of growth and wealth – the industrial production for mass-consumption – just like the birth of this industry threatened the traditional handicraft. However, it is also true that mass-production triggered the greatest adventure of design history – it transformed its means of expression. In the same way ecological modernism will demand new methods for

designing different from those of mass-production or traditional handicraft. Probably by a reformed industry more suited to systems of recycling and adaptable means of production.

The movement factor is still working even though the motor for progress is shifting, the great task for future designers and architects will be to stage a modernisation where nature and culture can act in the same field, a town planning constituted as a continuous change of human landscape where designing is a collective act. Imagining another cause for modernisation.

Notes

1. This sentence is taken from a questionnaire filled in by Carl Barks. Published in *Bild och Bubbla* 5–6 / 1994, Stockholm. (Used by permission from Bill Grandy and Kathy Morby, Carl Barks Studio).
2. From *Description of the Microevent/ Microenvironment* by Superstudio in *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* ed. Emilio Ambasz, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1972. (p. 245)
3. Kunzle, David: Preface to Dorfman-Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck* (see note 4)
4. Dorfman, Ariel-Mattelart, Armand: *Konsten att läsa Kalle Anka. Om imperialistisk ideologi i Disneyserierna*, Stockholm 1977 (*How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, New York 1975. Translation from *Para leer al pato Donald*, Valparaiso 1971)
5. Ibid (p. 23)
6. Ribe, Göran: *Vilse med ankorna*. Published in *Bild & Bubbla* 5–6 / 1984, Stockholm.
7. This term was coined by Gilles Deleuze, in relation to narrative cinema, as a distinction of the movement-image in which the perception-image relates movement to “bodies” (nouns) and the action-image relates movement to “acts” (verbs). *Cinema 1 – the Movement-Image*, London 1992
8. Superstudio: *Description of the Microevent / Microenvironment* (see note 2)
9. Excerpts of Constant/Debord’s writings are translated in: *Programmes and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, London 1970
10. Superstudio: *Description of the Microevent/Microenvironment* (p. 245)
11. Ibid (p. 246)
12. Rowe, Colin/Koetter, Fred: *Collage City*. Published in *Architectural Review* 158, 1975, no. 942 (p. 74)
13. Fichou, Jean-Pierre: *Den amerikanska kulturen*, Alhambra Förlag AB, 1993. Translation from *La civilisation américaine*, 1987.
14. Ibid (p. 22)



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