

INPRINT

CULTURE



The Lone Ranger and other heroes embody positive aspects of the state while maintaining a frontiersmanlike individualism.

Pop literature: hi-ho status quo

The Empire's Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar and other innocent heroes do to our minds

By Ariel Dorfman
Pantheon Books, 223 pp.
\$6.95 (paper)

Widows

By Ariel Dorfman
Pantheon Books, 146 pp., \$11.95

By Pat Aufderheide

These two books address, in very different ways, similar concerns about the shaping of popular consciousness. The first, a collection of essays, analyzes the hidden themes of commercial "subliterature" such as comic books. The second, a novel, attempts an alternative to factory-made myths for our time.

The Empire's Old Clothes is one of the best examples of engaged essay writing on popular culture to emerge since the insouciant first flourish of *New Journalism*, which was accompanied by sharp and often self-righteous critiques from the New Left. This book draws on the best aspects of both—it has intellectual passion along with a love for both the material and the audience. Inviting readers to join him in a "long—and mischievous—look at these cultural products," Dorfman focuses on the children's books, Disney comics, Lone Ranger stories, *Reader's Digest* and a Chilean comic book. He finds in such supposedly disposable commodities a wealth of weighty themes: race and culture, self-image, the modern citizen, and even foreign policy of the U.S.

For Dorfman, these products are all items in a half-century-long trajectory in popular culture. They are agents in the post-Depression shaping of popular consciousness, both within the U.S.

and beyond, wherever the empire of information has reached.

Dorfman also finds that these products serve a distinct function: to resolve, in an imitation of art, what is irresolvable in life. When the Lone Ranger or a superhero fixes up the world without changing it, when the Disney ducks come across magically produced treasure, when the *Reader's Digest's* unforgettable characters improve themselves endlessly without touching the terms of their world, they deliver happy endings to readers who have none of their own.

Outside looking in.

Dorfman, a Chilean exile, has every reason to be curious about

the effects of popular culture. He has been looking at it as an outsider-insider for a long time. A well-known writer and cultural critic during the Allende years, he wrote (with Armand Mattelart) the controversial sociological analysis *How to Read Donald Duck*. He was also involved in projects to create noncommercial populist popular literature. Dorfman was well-suited to his task of interpreting (and changing) the terms of American culture for a Chilean audience. He had spent 10 childhood years in New York, happily inundated with the products he now analyzes in *The Empire's Old Clothes*. After the Pinochet coup in 1973, he and his family went into exile in Europe,

until three years ago when they moved to the U.S. Most of the essays began, in fact, as shorter and more strident pieces written for Chileans. Now, rewritten for an American audience, they were also expanded and reworked.

Dorfman takes apart a text with dexterity and—despite an easygoing writing style—incisiveness. These essays are not, how-

The Empire's Old Clothes is fine writing on pop culture.

Ariel Dorfman: bereaved exile

By Pat Aufderheide

In your essays in *The Empire's Old Clothes* you mention the gap between the alienated quality of most modern fiction and the forced resolutions of commercial pop literature.

I think that one of the main problems of literature today is how to resolve this question: how can you write something that speaks of the problems of our time deeply, that opens up reality, and do it in a way that the people who are used to mass culture will understand, accept it and liberate their feelings along with you? In Latin America, Gabriel Garcia Marquez has solved the problem.

Is that what you wanted to do

with *Widows*?

I think so. But in fact the novel got away from me. I wrote it to be in the bestseller tradition—no experimentation, no stream of consciousness, a plot, a protagonist. I was trying to deal with people in the real world.

I probably thought of creating a modern myth at the beginning, but I seem not to have the talent or the character for doing that. Reality is too much a problem for me. I drew on legends and traditions, like *Antigone* and *The Trojan Women* and the myth of Prometheus, but the real inspiration was a poem I had written on the confrontation of women and men. In a sense, women are the center of Latin American politics. Things have not changed in Latin America, because of what

the women are and what the men have made of the women—both less and more than full human beings.

What I was trying to do was to break the stereotypes. I took this person who politically I despise, this turncoat, and I wrote his love story into it. This is a guy who would torture me if I were in Chile, but I wanted to give him humanity, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to write. Politically I will judge people, but literarily I must allow them all their humanity—and I think that makes it even worse what they've done.

Do you think that mythmaking is something to avoid?

No. But I think one of the political problems of the left is that we create wonderful myths and then become captured by them. In order to change reality, you have to believe that people are heroic. You have to believe in the idea of Prometheus, in the Titan, you have to believe that the people, all of them together, are invincible. On the other hand, this same myth can become congealed and freeze into the notion of a prole-

ever, the familiar charges against rot-your-mind mass culture that so often make reading left cultural criticism a predictable chore. While Dorfman attributes immense power to commercialized popular culture, he also approaches it with a sympathy for its appeal that allows him to find more in it than the usual discovery that commercial culture reveals the terms of commerce.

In his essay on the *Reader's Digest*, Dorfman considers how the *Digest* defines knowledge. Whatever else, knowledge here is not power. It is not "de-stabilizing." Knowing something will not require taking any action—in fact, quite the reverse. The *Reader's Digest* promises a daily dose of information as a preventive therapy, to keep values and beliefs tidily in place. Dorfman calls it "a tourist guidebook for the geography of ignorance."

History halted.

This isn't the only place where Dorfman finds that history has stopped, where values are eternal and stability is the natural order of things. In all these cultural products, messy, contradiction-riddled history has been abolished. In the Babar books, a naked African savage elephant makes a painless transition to kinghood, clothes and civilization with the help of the "Old Lady"—the emblem of Western culture—and he goes to live in Celesteville, where all historical epochs merge in an eternal rule of paternalism.

In the Disney adventures, history never existed. The ducks skip from barbarism to civilization and back in their adventures, using commerce as the great equalizer. The Lone Ranger, that dependable righter of wrongs, is "an answer to a permanent emergency," a constant returner of things to the *status quo ante*.

The Lone Ranger and other superheroes, Dorfman recalls, arose during the Depression, with an obvious appeal to citizens who saw themselves as hapless victims of anonymous market forces. Further, the superhero embodied the positive aspects of the state while maintaining heroic frontiersmanlike individualism, leaving the negative aspects to the clumsy but well-intentioned police forces.

But times change, in life if not in the comics. The Lone Ranger has become passe, and recent superhero movies have satirized

tarian hero, into an uncritical vision that nothing can go wrong, which destroys or at least damages your ability to change.

How do you hope that *Widows* brings about change?

I hope this brings people in the U.S. nearer to people who are "outside history," because this is their story. I wanted to create more consciousness of both the distance from Latin America and the nearness to the humanity of Latin America.

In *The Empire's Old Clothes* you analyze the messages imbedded in mass cultural products. But the people who typically read them are unlikely to read your criticisms.

I have thought about this since I began writing the essays. In Latin America, an intellectual has two audiences—a very small, reduced group of people who may or may not read him, and a vast range of illiterate or semi-literate people. In the U.S. the writer does not think that the second group is the moving force of history; in Latin America we—the writers—do. They have been left

their subjects. Dorfman argues that the time for heroes that guarantee the forces of law and order may be past. If people once wondered if they could weather their personal crises, they now wonder if society-wide problems have any solution. Superheroes these days have a snaker relationship to authorities. The job of resolving irrationalities of the mundane world is getting tough, even for superheroes.

Dorfman also makes cultural distinctions. His comparison of the unenviable, powerless image of childhood in the Babar books with that of the Disney comics, where the innocents hold all the cards, is a cross-cultural mini-essay. The distinctions also explain why Babar is strictly for kids, while Disney's ducks are for "children of all ages." He also speculates on the difference to a superhero's image once it's exported. To a Third Worlder, he charges, the superhero carries an authoritarian-father air of an outsider laying down the law, while at home he's more like an omnipotent Mr. Fixit.

It is easy, given Dorfman's style, to disagree—no one will find all of Dorfman's arguments convincing. But they are stimulating. His personal style also lets Dorfman frankly explain his investment in his work. "The enemy is inside, and we find it hard to distinguish him from some of our innermost thoughts," he writes. But "there is in men and women a deep refusal to be manipulated. We have in ourselves intimations of another humanity." And, he says, we have our children, who we must enable "stubbornly to reinterpret reality."

Lost and found.

In one aside, Dorfman draws a contrast between our contemporary high-culture art of alienation, which stresses contradictions and powerlessness, and pop culture products full of hyperactive individuals who abolish contradictions. *Widows* is one attempt to find a middle ground. It is a deceptively slight piece of fiction that takes as its subject a phenomenon so horrifying and so pervasive that most of us simply don't think about it: the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly disappearance of ordinary citizens in nations with oppressive regimes.

Widow's framework stresses its cross-cultural significance. To

sneak the novel past Chilean censors Dorfman wrote it under a pseudonym, setting it in Greece and pretending it was the long lost manuscript of a Danish resistance fighter. But gradually the fiction became so integral a part of the work that even when he decided to publish it under his own name he kept it.

The story is simple: a body is discovered in a river. First one village woman—the village is desolate of men after years of partisan warfare—then several and finally 37 women all claim the body as a relative of theirs. The authorities are first puzzled, then angry. They talk to a priest; a journalist arrives. They seize the original troublemaker, then her grandson. They release one of the disappeared men, trying to prove that the women, so convinced their men are dead, are wrong. They lean on the services of a local peasant who has be-



come the landowner's stooge. But they continue to confront the intransigence of the women, who can be killed but not denied.

It may be a simple tale, but it is not simply told nor simply digested. For one thing, the characters refuse to stay safely archetypal. The women's obduracy can be cruel, even inhumane, while the military men can be found guard-

ing their family snapshots like private wounds. The painfully inarticulate love affair of the landowner's stooge reveals the same insecurity and defensive *machismo* that peasant poverty engendered in him and that his military associations foster.

The language intermittently departs from transparent narrative as if it had been seized by the

IN THESE TIMES JUNE 29-JULY 12, 1983 19 characters, who sometimes infuse it with a vivid poetry (a reminder, by the way, that Dorfman is also a poet). A young girl describes her mother "not knowing what to do with her feelings, dead birds I thought in spite of myself I thought of dead birds trying to fly that couldn't get out of Mama's eyes, the hot rain of her body building up between her legs...."

It is a novel one is tempted to read aloud, and to read slowly, and to read again.

The story both transcends its setting and also explores it intensely. This is not one person's story or a dramatization of an issue, but the texture of experience—a tale that has all the fiber of social relationships—between the military men and the women, between parents and children, husbands and wives, masters and servants.

Dorfman's work is of special interest to citizens of the First World, so used to either lecturing or being harangued at. In *The Empire's Old Clothes*, he has made it clear the ways in which we make it easy for ourselves to forget there are complete human beings anywhere else. In *Widows* he has made it impossible to deny.

Dorfman's novel Widows is a simple tale, but it is not simply told nor simply digested. Its subject is horrifying: the daily disappearances of citizens in many countries.



Marcelo Montecino

out of the center stage, but they are the producers, and therefore to reach them, to talk to them is a central question for all Latin American intellectuals. On the other hand, you cannot but write from your tradition, from your sophistication and education. You can't run away from it or make believe it doesn't exist.

The notion of childhood takes on several meanings in your essays. Childhood is a flexible concept. We use children constantly as a way of looking on ourselves, because they supposedly can be modelled into anything. There are characteristics everyone agrees children have—innocence, helplessness, defenselessness. In order to cope with people in the Third World and also with minorities and oppressed people within your own society, you create an image of them as if they were children. You take the idea that they are "underdeveloped" and you say that they have to grow up, to become like us.

Many of the products you analyze have been overtaken in popularity today by products like video games and TV shows.

I was looking at the formative influence on American consciousness in this century. The people who first read the Hardy Boys and Disney and the *Reader's Digest* and the Lone Ranger were born in the teens and '20s and they are the ones who have shaped the country today.

I'm not trying to describe current consciousness. The culture is not a one-way street, it's like a city. It's got all sorts of avenues going and coming. What I wanted to do was to look at the strain that appeared 50 and 60 years ago and see how it has grown. I think that culture is in crisis today.

You argue that these cultural products are all answering a fundamental rebelliousness.

I write from that vision and that faith—that we are rebels, that we can stand on our own. If these values, these comics, these products were to have dominated us totally we would have stopped being men and women. But most of the people alive today believe in the future, in their kids, in love. They believe they can make a difference.

The reason I am so appalled at mass culture is because I think it takes the best thing—this optimism, this faith, this common sense—and uses it for the worst purposes. Instead of using all this to change the world, it uses it to keep the world as it is. And the way the world is is a mess.

How has being in exile conditioned your art?

Exile makes you re-examine your presuppositions, makes you look at things that once were stable in your world—as stable as your geography—and look at them again. The distance kills you, but

it also fertilizes you. In exile you are forced to recreate culture. You are forced to surround yourself with it as a weapon and a defense.

There's another sense of exile. We have been cast out and we have been cast into silence. Silence is the ultimate punishment; for this to happen to a writer is the most ironic of punishments. For two years I didn't write; I was silenced by the amount of death inside me. Then it became a kind of therapy, a way to turn something negative into something positive.

I am obsessed by the problem of the missing. I think that behind the idea of missing people is more than just the suffering. There are whole continents that are missing—Africa, Latin America—whose humanity I am trying to bring into literature. And personally, I am missing something—I have been bereaved of a country. I think I have written that loss into my novel. I had to look into a mirror to do it. I probably would have written a very realistic novel if I had written it in Chile. Exile made me write a testimony, but also an allegory.

Sylvia

by Nicole Hollander

