Disney comics from Italy♦

http://i.am/filologo.disneyano/

A Roberto, amico e cugino

Introduction

Most of us die-hard Disney fans are in love with those comics since our earliest childhood; indeed, many of us learnt to read from the words in Donald's and Mickey's balloons. Few of us, though, knew anything about the creators of these wonderful comics: they were all calligraphically signed by that "Walt Disney" guy in the first page so we confidently believed that, somewhere in America, a man by that name invented and drew each and every one of those different stories every week. As we grew up, the quantity (too many) and quality (too different) of the stories made us realise that this man could not be doing all this by himself; but still, we assumed by default that all those unnamed creators were in America with him. Nothing could be further from the truth, though: not only did Disney never draw any of his comics characters; not only did he only script Mickey Mouse for a few months at the very beginning of the strip in 1930; as well as this, several other countries produced original Disney comics: in the case of Italy, starting as far back as 1931, only one year after the creation of the strip!

This article is an introduction to the vast subject of the Italian production of Disney comics. Due to the obvious space constraints of a magazine publication, an attempt to touch on all the worthwhile subjects in this area would have resulted in little more than just *mentioning* them. I felt this tantalising approach inappropriate, so I instead chose to focus on an arbitrary selection of topics that I then felt free to discuss in depth. I am disappointed at how many fundamental items (authors, particularly) I've had to leave out, but I still feel that with this strategy I am giving you a more interesting and informative article.

So what exactly shall we look at? First of all, the fascinating "prehistory" (early Thirties) where a few pioneering publishers and creators established a Disney presence in Italy. Then a look at some of the authors, seen through their creations. Because comics are such an obviously visual medium, the graphical artists tend to get the lion's share of the critics' attention; to compensate for this, I have decided to concentrate on the people who actually *invent* the stories, the script writers (though even thus I've had to miss out many good ones). This seems to be a more significant contribution to Disney comics studies since, after all, it will be much easier for you to read a lot about the graphical artists somewhere else. And of course, by discussing stories I will also necessarily touch on the work of the artists anyway. Our tour will close with an annotated bibliography pointing you at the established reference works that, if you're prepared to learn some Italian, will tell you a lot more about this fascinating world.

A little note: I may sometimes sound enthusiastic about everything I describe, while *you* may have personally seen many Italian stories that clearly weren't any good. You should not draw the conclusion that I blindly like *every* story ever made in Italy. Quite the contrary—in fact I think that, for example, most (not all) of the Italian stuff produced in the Nineties is substandard. So it's not that I like it all, it's rather that I simply don't tell you about the stuff that I consider bad. Hell, I can't find the time and space to tell you about so much of the *good* stuff, why would I bother with the bad?

The Prehistory

The first Disney character to make its appearance in a comic strip was of course Mickey Mouse: in his now

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famous first panel, dated 13th January 1930, the young hero reads a "How to fly" magazine and dreams of becoming a great aeroplane pilot like Colonel Lindbergh, the first transatlantic aviator. The strips of this continuity are closely modelled on the *Plane Crazy* cartoon (1928), which was in turn Mickey Mouse's first appearance ever. Both the short cartoon and the strip had been written by Walt Disney and drawn by Ub Iwerks. The strip had been commissioned by the King Features Syndicate in 1929 after witnessing Mickey's success on screen. That strip, published six days a week and sold to the daily newspapers by the Syndicate, was to become one of the most significant comic media of all times, hosting over the years the timeless masterpieces of the great Floyd Gottfredson such as *Island in the Sky*, *Mickey Mouse outwits the Phantom Blot* and the Eega Beeva cycle.

The strip was however still young and immature when an entrepreneurial Lorenzo Gigli decided to acquire the rights to reprint it on the weekly *L'illustrazione del Popolo* of which he was the editor in chief. This he did in March 1930, only *two months* after the strip first appeared in the American dailies! Gigli's flair for his early discovery of this little gem, of which nobody at the time could forecast the fantastic future, and his brilliant genius in giving Mickey Mouse his Italian name of "Topolino" (this attribution is not certain but no better guess has been put forward so far), didn't however do him much good. The strip's success didn't match the films' and he had to give up and move on to something else. But he is the one who should get credit for introducing the Disney comics in Italy at such an early stage in their development.

After Gigli's short-lived experiment there were no Italian editions of the original Mickey comics for quite a while. There were, however, several attempts at exploiting the popularity of the cartoon character by redoing apocryphal Mickey strips, often without any formal agreements with the KFS: Giovanni Bissietta (1930) and Guglielmo Guastaveglia (1931) are among the authors who drew these homemade Mickeys for various Italian publications. It must be said, though, that these early experiments are only of interest to the comics historian: they weren't worth much for their merits as comics stories and didn't have any perceivable influence on the subsequent production.

Except for one case, that is. Giuseppe and Mario Nerbini, father and son, publishers in Florence, also wanted to bank on the success of the Mickey cinema shorts and launched a weekly children's newspaper called *Topolino* (*Mickey Mouse*), whose first issue came out on the 31st of December 1932. Its cover page was a locally produced six-panel story with the Mouse while the rest of the newspaper contained other stories (not Disney-related) and some short novels. But soon the angry Italian representative of the King Features Syndicate knocked on the Nerbinis' door to threaten court action about the breach of KFS's copyright. The publishers, who had duly requested and obtained the permission of the Italian distributor of the Mickey movie shorts, professed their ignorance and innocence, as well as their willingness to negotiate an appropriate agreement with the KFS. The parties agreed to a deal and the Nerbini publishing house ended up buying the exclusive rights to the Italian reprints of the Mickey strips, which by that time were already Gottfredson's. So Nerbini's *Topolino* was allowed to continue: it quickly dumped the homemade Mickey stories and it became the (now rare and highly prized) publication that carried the official Italian editions of the original strips.

In 1935 Arnoldo Mondadori, a publisher who was to become a major player in the Italian scene, managed to buy *Topolino* off an absent-minded Nerbini, who meanwhile had his attention on other projects that were doing much better. Mondadori took this move quite seriously and sought the best possible contributors for *Topolino* (which, as was already the case under Nerbini, didn't contain only Disney stories but also many great adventurous comics "with real people"). At more or less the same time, the quality of the Disney strips being sent over from America was steadily and surely improving, with Gottfredson as chief artist and coordinator and some excellent team members (Ted Osborne and Merrill de Maris) as plot writers. *Topolino* was blossoming into a really great publication.

The great creative mind behind Mondadori's *Topolino* was Federico Pedrocchi. He joined Mondadori in 1935 as an author of adventure comics. By 1937 he was editor in chief of *Topolino*, coordinating, supervising, making it all happen; it was not uncommon for him to write the plots of some of the non-Disney stories that appeared in the comic. His great editorial flair went so far as to recognise the potential of Donald Duck as far back as 1937: he made him the hero of long adventures, and gave him a publication of his own (*Paperino*), at least five years before the Americans did (with Barks and Hannah's *Donald Duck finds Pirate Gold*, FC 9, 1942). Note that we are speaking here of the pre-Barks Donald, the one that was born in 1934 with *The Wise Little Hen* and that we had seen in Taliaferro's short strips and in Gottfredson's continuities such as *The Seven Ghosts*. For the début of this new weekly title, Pedrocchi himself wrote and pencilled an entirely new story: *Paolino Paperino e il mistero di Marte* (*Donald Duck and the Mystery of Mars*), this time with full and explicit approval from Walt Disney. This is thus the first true occurrence of a full-length, legitimate "Disney made in Italy" story. In the period that followed, Pedrocchi produced a few more stories, including two with Snow White, sometimes as writer and artist, more often only as writer, delegating the art to others such as Enrico Mauro Pinochi and Nino Pagot. The outcome of these first few (autonomous but fully "licensed") stories is, again, mostly of historical interest: there aren't any memorable masterpieces from this period. There is an enthusiasm, a depth and a dynamism that were lacking in the early "unofficial" stories that were little more than gags; but the overall result is still somewhat stiff and clumsy. To be honest, the characters themselves hadn't yet reached their maturity and, in these early experiments the Italian authors were experimenting with these inexperienced "actors" almost as much as their American inventors were.

World War II, during which the United States became the enemy of Italy's fascist regime, forced the Italian

publishers to suddenly stop printing any stories written in America. This eventually included the Disney material too, which was in some cases completely redrawn substituting new (thus non-American) "placeholder" characters: the short-lived Tuffolino replaced Topolino (Mickey), and similarly for all the other characters. As a curiosity it is worth noting that, while all the other American comics were already off limits, the children of Italian dictator Mussolini, who were particularly fond of Mickey Mouse, managed to delay the ban on Disney for as long as possible, as related by Francesco De Giacomo in *Quando il Duce salvò Topolino*, IF terza serie, n. 4, 1995.

The hiatus forced by the war marked many changes: Pedrocchi was killed (as a civilian) by an allied machine gun and Mario Gentilini became the man at the helm. The newspaper-sized *Topolino* was replaced by its pocket-book-sized counterpart in 1949; the numbering restarted from issue 1 and is still going to this day, having reached issue 2000 in 1994. Guido Martina started writing scripts and, shortly afterwards, what would later be called the Italian School of Disney authors really took off, although strictly speaking there never actually was an organised "school" in Martina's lifetime but rather a swarm of individual authors working more or less on their own. All this, taken together, marks the end of the Prehistory and the start of the real History of the Italian Disney comics.

Guido Martina and the Great Parodies

It is under Gentilini that Guido Martina, later to become a central figure in the panorama of Italian Disney comics, wrote his first story, *Topolino e il cobra bianco* (*Mickey and the white cobra*, Martina/Bioletto, I TG 713 .. 738 and I TL 1-A, 1948 .. 1949), that, being somewhat too heavy on the horror and weird side, has undergone the silent censure of never being reprinted (except in limited-run amateur fanzines) and is thus very hard to come by. Martina, "the Professor" (he was a high school teacher but had a degree in Literature and another in Philosophy from two different universities [Martina]), wasn't new to *Topolino*: although not continuously, he had been translating the American Disney strips into Italian since 1938. Martina was a man of great scholarly culture but also—a rare combination perhaps—one with a great unrestrained fantasy and little respect for conventions. He had no qualms in representing all the aggressiveness in his characters (Scrooge running after Donald with a whip, an axe, a salt-loaded shotgun or even a cannon), so much so that many of his early works are now routinely censored. But he had a gift for writing solid and complex adventures and his encyclopaedic culture allowed him to develop the tiniest hint or idea, be it from science or literature, into a good story. He had a great influence on all the other Italian authors due to the way in which he developed the personalities of the characters he used. He also had a significant impact on the form and linguistic structure of the entire Italian Disney production: in his stories (and, before that, in his translations) the characters always spoke proper Italian, often using sophisticated words outside the normal vocabulary of a teenager. Contrast this with the American strips where, perhaps in deference to a comics tradition that meant to depict the language of its characters with more realism, slang was quite common and characters such as Goofy would never utter a sentence without "eating out" or somehow distorting half of the words. Martina's Goofy, instead, speaks proper Italian and so do all the other characters, from the most distinguished academics to the lowliest thieves. This important aspect, faithfully preserved in all the stories of the Italian school, probably also contributed to the very wide acceptance of *Topolino* in Italy: parents were happy to give the comic to their children because it was in some sense educational (expanding their vocabulary and exercising their grammar) without being pedantic or boring.

Many of Martina's stories from the late Forties and early Fifties feel rather dated now, especially due to the archaic flavour of their artwork. There is one, however, that—its overloaded and uninviting Bioletto artwork notwithstanding—deserves special mention: *L'Inferno di Topolino* (*Mickey's Inferno*, Martina/Bioletto, I TL 7-A .. 12-A, 1949 .. 1950). This incredible *tour de force* is a witty parody of Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*, the cornerstone of Italian literature, the first major literary work to be written in Italian rather than Latin. *La Divina Commedia* (1307-1321), of which *L'Inferno* is the first of three books, is a gigantic and very dense poem in 100 cantos that all Italian schoolboys have to study extensively, over the course of three years, generally at an age where they have little interest for it. Everyone is familiar with it, its plot, its rhymes and rythm and its elaborate verbal constructions. Martina, who loved this masterpiece and knew it backwards and forwards, did an amazing job of retaining all the flavour of the original. The panels do sometimes contain balloons, but the true narration goes on in the triplets of finely crafted hendecasyllables that mimic Dante's with great effectiveness. As well as being metrically perfect, the lines of verse use the same ancient Italian terms and constructions as found in the *Commedia*. To add to the game, Martina drops a few of Dante's original lines here and there, making them fit perfectly within his own. The effect is hilarious: anyone who had Dante drilled into his brain for three years (which is to say more or less everyone who attended an Italian high school as a kid) will very definitely hear the same echoes ringing back in his ears. Bioletto's gothic artwork can look harsh and even menacing, but is after all an appropriate match for the subject: Martina, whose taste for satire about violence and cruelty will never completely disappear, describes in sadistic detail all the tortures that the devils perform on the damned, lashing, skinning, electrocuting, burning, sawing off heads and limbs and so on. *L'Inferno di Topolino* requires some context to be appreciated but is undoubtedly a masterpiece and the work of a genius. And another little detail makes this story unique: in recognition of the fantastic amount of work that went into the adaptation, the publisher agreed to publicly credit the author's name: the little splash panel says "Sinfonia allegra di Walt Disney" ("Silly Symphony by Walt Disney", an echo of the classical Sunday pages) and "Verseggiatura di G. Martina" ("Versification by G. Martina").

This Disney parody of a famous literary work was to be the first of a long series. Martina was, for the first few years of the pocket-sized *Topolino*, the only writer of new Italian scripts and, during the Fifties and Sixties, remained the primary and most prolific one: over the course of his entire career he wrote more than 1200 stories! The creators that joined Mondadori in the beginning of this new era and formed, together with Martina, the core of the Italian school, were Giuseppe Perego, Pier Lorenzo De Vita, Giovan Battista Carpi, Luciano Bottaro and Romano Scarpa. With the exception of the latter, they were all primarily graphical artists and all of them illustrated almost exclusively Martina scripts for the first few years of their career. Bottaro and especially De Vita were Martina's favourite partners for this periodic game of revisiting the classics of the world's literature, from the ancient Greeks (Homer's *Iliad*: *Paperiade*, Martina/Bottaro, I TL 202-A .. 204 A, 1959; and *Odyssey*: *Paperodissea*, Martina & Dalmasso/De Vita, I TL 268-A .. 269-A, 1961) through the Spanish *Don Quixote* (*Paperino Don Chisciotte*, Martina/De Vita, I TL 137-A .. 139-A, 1956), the German mythology as retold by Wagner (*Paperino e l'oro di Reno ovvero l'anello dei nani lunghi*, Martina/De Vita, I TL 210-A .. 212-A, 1958), to the French adventures of Dumas's Musketeers (*Paperino e i tre moschettieri*, Martina/De Vita, I TL 162-A .. 163-A, 1957), the British Stevenson (*Paperino e l'isola del tesoro*, Chendi/Bottaro, I TL 216-A .. 218-A, 1959) and many others. Not to mention, of course, all of Italy's own classics, from the 13th century with Marco Polo (*La storia di Marco Polo detta il Milione*, Martina/Scarpa, I TL 1409-A .. 1412-B, 1982) to the 14th century with Andrea da Barberino (*Paperin Meschino*, Martina/De Vita, I TL 197-A .. 199-A, 1958) through to the Renaissance with Tasso (*Paperopoli liberata*, Martina/Carpi, I TL 598-A .. 599-A, 1967) and beyond. Some of these stories may not appeal to the youngest readers since, as happens with all parodies, much of their humour comes from the way in which the original situation has been transposed and from the gags arising from the adaptation. A reader (say, a young kid) unfamiliar with the original literary work may see the story only on its own merits and find it a bit too long and complicated (note how most of them had to be split into at least two if not three or more parts, for a total of at least 60 pages per story), to the point of being somewhat boring: the frequent hints at the original work will be lost and appear instead as pointless digressions. On the other hand, where the unsuspecting reader enjoys the story as a standalone work, a pleasant surprise is to be expected on discovery of the original classic: "Hey, but I know this story: this guy was actually Donald Duck..." and all the gags will come back to mind when reading the episodes that inspired them. It is quite an accomplishment to succeed in such a challenging double act and, to be honest, I wouldn't say that all of Martina's parodies can be innocently enjoyed by the unsuspecting kid; some of them are indeed a bit too heavy. But the reader who already knows the original and is in a position to recognise all the hints and gags will doubly enjoy these witty and playful reinterpretations.

Pier Lorenzo De Vita's unmistakable artwork adds a typical flavour to them: his characters were never 100% Disney; they sometimes even looked misshapen, probably owing to the artist's frequent disregard for perspective. With his Disney work, De Vita went for the visual impact rather than for the lifelike rendition, so much so that his Mickeys and Donalds sometimes look like caricatures; in fact the reader who is familiar with De Vita's peculiar stroke may be surprised to learn that our artist also worked on non-Disney comics (such as the western saga of *Pecos Bill*, also written by Martina) in a totally different and much more realistic style. De Vita's graphical strength is in his convincing and very dynamic representation of emotions, moods and personalities. The hilarious and little-known story *Topolino e la pappa del pupo* (*Mickey and the baby food*, I TL 939-B, 1973), brilliantly scripted by Abramo Barosso, is a good example both of De Vita's "who cares about perspective" drawing style and of the ability of his deformed caricatures to immediately communicate raw emotions. The story is a flashback in which Mickey and Goofy, commenting on how perfect and wonderful Goofy's nephew Gilbert is now, remember how terrible he was when he was a little baby. The scene moves back several years as Mickey remembers his visit to Goofy, then all busy preparing baby food for the terrible little Gilbert who couldn't even speak yet. This is a fantastic sequence of gags, perfectly timed by Barosso and espressively rendered by De Vita, that have me laughing out loud every time I reread them. De Vita's Disney style, which had little variation over several decades of continued activity, always felt somewhat ancient, even in his more recent stories from the Eighties. His style is fairly unique and easy to recognise. He renders Peg Leg Pete and the Beagle Boys as oversized fatsoes and a typical detail is that his guns don't fire straight: the trajectory of the bullet is curved and possibly not even in line with the barrel of the gun. Like his contempt for perspective, this seems to be part of his spontaneous way of drawing, running off a picture in a few strokes instead of working out a careful network of construction lines in pencil. This is what gives his not-quite-Disney artwork its mix of archaic flavour and great expressiveness.

Romano Scarpa, Gottfredson's Italian heir

Looking back at it, the pocket-sized *Topolino* that restarted after the war had gathered, by the early Fifties, an impressive collection of creative geniuses, some of whom we already mentioned above. It is no surprise that, with such a team, the Italian Disney production eventually became known all around the world. The greatest of those creators, and the one who was to become, many years later, the best know Italian Disney author abroad, was Romano Scarpa, from Venice. He was one of the few who, like Gottfredson and Barks, was equally comfortable as a writer and a graphical artist, and his being a complete author is part of the reason for his success. He was brought up on the newspaper-sized *Topolino* and was a great fan of the Gottfredson strips. He had been flirting with the idea of drawing for *Topolino* since his childhood:

the few who have the privilege of having access to a collection of the (now extremely rare and expensive) newspaper *Topolino* will find a Scarpa drawing of Venice's Basilica di San Marco in the readers' mail page of a 1940 issue, sent in by our author at the tender age of 13; and, in another issue from 1941, they'll find an editor's reply thanking young Romano for his splendid portraits of Mickey and friends. In love with Walt Disney's *Snow White* cartoon, after attending the Art School and graduating from the Art Academy, Scarpa set up his own cartoon animation studio, which he ran between 1945 and 1953. His studio produced a few good shorts, but the market wasn't ready to absorb them in a way that could guarantee financial stability to his business, so Scarpa turned to comics. He started at Mondadori in 1953, after a "job interview" consisting of drawing an entire page of a Snow White story—what could have been better for him? He passed this test with the highest honours and was immediately asked to illustrate a Snow White story written by Martina, *Biancaneve e Verde Fiamma* (I TL 78-A .. 80-A). It is worth tracking down that story, if you can, just to admire how beautiful and modern his stroke already was in 1953, at his *first ever* Disney comic story (the Italian publisher Comic Art has a deluxe and extremely faithful reprint of this and four other early and hard to track down Scarpa stories, as well as some very interesting essays by the noted Scarpa experts Gori and Boschi, in volume 21 of their excellent though expensive hardback series "Capolavori Disney").

Like practically everyone else, Scarpa starts by pencilling (and, for the first few stories, also inking—something that he'll delegate to others later on) Martina scripts. Among these early works, one of the most interesting is *Topolino e il doppio segreto di Macchia Nera* (*Mickey and the double secret of the Phantom Blot*, Martina/Scarpa, I TL 116-A .. 119-A, 1955). Martina does a great job of reviving Gottfredson's most disturbing and devious villain in a very convincing way, and Scarpa is up to it with his slick and agile strokes. The fiendish criminal wants his revenge on Mickey and Chief O'Hara who sent him to jail; so he secretly manages to hypnotise Mickey and force him to unknowingly perform criminal acts that will send him to the electric chair. We find ourselves again in these dark, gothic atmospheres that are now banned from the Disney canon but that were the hallmark of the golden period of the Gottfredson strips: when death was palpable, real, possible. The detective Mickey was then so much more believable because the dangers he faced were genuinely menacing, not tame and fabricated. The same happens here: a sharp knife is planted in Chief O'Hara's desk by an invisible hand; our heroes are locked in their own office by an unseen criminal; the tension builds up to the crucial scene where Mickey, under deep hypnosis, repeatedly plunges his sharp kitchen knife in the bed where Chief O'Hara was supposed to be sleeping! All along, Martina and Scarpa show that they've read their Gottfredson carefully: when Eega Beeva helps Mickey escape from jail, Mickey's chosen disguise is the same he was wearing in the classic Blot story, with the false beard, spectacles and chequered trousers; and when the Blot prepares another one of his death machines, this time to get rid of Goofy, he repeats once again that his heart is too tender for him to see anyone die... All in all, a brilliant thriller, and one of the first great stories from the Italian school.

Soon after this, in 1956, Scarpa writes his own first script, *Paperino e i gamberi in salmì* (*Donald and the crayfishes in salmi sauce*, I TL 132-A .. 133-A), which of course he himself illustrates. This first solo story is a good, solid thriller, several notches above the many run of the mill detective stories that will later become common in *Topolino*. Scarpa also invents a new character, Zio Gedeone, *brother* of Uncle Scrooge and inspired director of a Duckburg newspaper, that our author originally modelled on his editor Mario Gentilini. This character will not become a permanent addition to the Duckburg world but will nevertheless reappear a handful of times in stories by other authors as well as in a minor 1967 story by Scarpa himself, *Paperetta Yè-Yè e i gatti indossatori* (*Paperetta Yè-Yè and the mannequin cats*, Scarpa/Scarpa, I TL 616-B). Although Gedeone didn't have much following, it is interesting to note Scarpa's first contribution to the Disney cast because over the years he will become one of the most prolific and successful creator of new Disney characters of all times, after Barks: among his many brainchildren are Peg Leg Pete's girlfriend Trudy, the teenager duck girl Paperetta Yè-Yè, Scrooge's lady admirer Brigitta, the fat and incompetent businessman Filo Sganga and a couple dozen others, some almost forgotten but many now used by legions of Disney authors all around the world.

As a writer, Scarpa reaches his full artistic maturity very shortly after his first script: the excellent 1957 story *Topolino e il Pippotarzan* (*Mickey and Tarzan-Goofy*, Scarpa/Scarpa, I TL 158-A .. 159-B), where Mickey meets Goofy's *twin brother* Pappo that now lives in the African jungle as a modern-day Tarzan, already shows the beginning of a long golden season of creativity (extending at least until 1963), in which Scarpa will write his best masterpieces. There are many hilarious scenes that remind us of Scarpa's past as an animator, such as the one where Peg Leg Pete must take his tank apart piece by piece in order to transport it across a frail wooden bridge, or the one where Goofy's brother has to throw out an entire zoo of wild African animals from his hut in order to let Mickey and Goofy in. But there are also some deeply touching scenes such as the final sequence in which Pappo is first convinced to leave his African home and then at the last moment jumps from the boat to swim back because he can't do without it. Practically anything by Scarpa/Scarpa in that period is worth its weight in gold, but there is no room to list all of those great stories here (look at [Blue] and [Yellow] instead). Let's just mention a few significant ones. A riveting Mickey Mouse thriller is *Topolino e l'unghia di Kalì* (*Mickey Mouse and Kali's Nail*, I TL 183-A .. 184-A, 1958): a brilliant spy story with the exotic twist in which a four-armed demon, in the shape of the Indian goddess of death Kali, terrorises the neighbourhood with its intrusions and horrendous screams. Scarpa's Mickey is the same positive and proactive hero that Gottfredson created in his strips: he is clever, strong, resourceful, above all honest, but also human and fallible. Mickey is a difficult character to

handle because his many qualities, together with the serial nature of the comic medium that guarantees that he'll be around next time, may easily turn him into a boring, invincible superhero: it's easy to write a Donald story, but it takes a great author to breathe life into a believable Mickey. Scarpa was a great fan of the Gottfredson strips and, as soon as he got comfortable with writing his own stories, made his old dream into a reality: like a child inventing the sequel to a beautiful story once the book is finished, Scarpa picked up the Mickey continuity that Gottfredson had to give up in 1955 due to the orders of the King Features Syndicate and started producing Mickey adventures in the style of Gottfredson's unforgettable masterpieces. He carefully followed in the footsteps of the master he had never met, paying attention to the tiniest details: calligraphic "Walt Disney" signatures here and there, the strip's rhythm of a gag every four panels, sometimes even a "forgotten" sign in English instead of Italian, as if pretending that it had been left there by a careless translator! And many fell for it. Many really believed that *Topolino e il mistero di Tapioco Sesto* (*Mickey Mouse and the mystery of Tapioco the Sixth*, I TL 142-A .. 143-A, 1956), to name but the first of these stories, in which Mickey rescues an old tramp that turns out to be king of a faraway state, was genuine Gottfredson material. But if they did, it's not because of these details: it's because Scarpa had penetrated the true *spirit* of the great Mouse and was now in a position to reinterpret that Mickey and make him live again. It helped, of course, that he was the great artist that he was; and it helped that he *did* pay so much attention to the details; but the fundamental reason why his operation turned out to be believable is that Scarpa *had* Gottfredson's Mickey inside himself like no one else, and possessed that rare gift of the great storytellers that made him capable of imagining and retelling the Mouse's life. Scarpa didn't just invent new stories as isolated events: instead, he made Gottfredson's Mickey live on and just *told* us all the adventures that Mickey, being the character he was, necessarily ran into. One should note the continuity in Scarpa's own Mickey adventures: I wrote extensively on the continuity (or lack thereof) of Disney comics of all kinds in the central essay of the Don Rosa book [Rosa], and this probably isn't the appropriate time or place to discuss those issues again, but let me simply remark that, outside of Gottfredson, it has traditionally been quite uncommon for Disney stories to refer to events occurred in previous stories. In this series of masterpieces by Scarpa, instead, the author decides to let time flow across stories, just like it did in the strips, and to carry over selected events from the past. Thus *Topolino e la dimensione Delta* (*Mickey Mouse and the Delta dimension*, I TL 206-A .. 207-A, 1959), perhaps my all-time favourite Scarpa story, sees the reappearance of the fascinating Dr Einmug, the wise and eccentric scientist of Gottfredson's *Island in the sky* (daily strips 1936-11-30 .. 1937-04-03), as well the birth of a new character, Atomino Bip Bip, "an atom magnified two birilliard times" and endowed with special powers such as the ability to change one material into another with a flux of mesons emanating from his mouth. Atomino will "carry over" into the next few stories of this cycle, following Mickey much in the same way as Walsh and Gottfredson's Eega Beeva did ten years before, and eventually going back to where he came from, again much for the same reasons as his Gottfredsonian counterpart—namely that his superpowers would have eventually made things too easy and that he'd risk stealing the show from Mickey.

With all this it must also be said that Scarpa's graphical ability took longer to perfect than his writing skills. He always was a first class artist but, in the years when he was writing his best stories (late Fifties to early Sixties), his artwork, though quite good in absolute terms, was still evolving and developing. So much so that, when compared to the later works of his graphical maturity (late Sixties and early Seventies), his "golden age" stories (based on the plots) must be classed in the "Ancient" period for their artwork! [Scarpa WWW] The newer Scarpa from 1967 onwards, together with Carpi's late Sixties works such as the wonderful Martina-authored saga of *Il romanzo di un papero povero* (*The story of a poor duck*, I TL 586-A .. 587-A, 1967), represents what I consider the apogee of "classical" Italian Disney artwork: clean and neatly elegant strokes, free of any sort of hatching, and perfect proportions in the characters. At that stage, however, Scarpa had mostly given up writing his own scripts because he found that the financial recognition for writing good stories was not comparable to the time and energy that he devoted to it. In an interview from 1988 [Blue] he reluctantly admits that he realised that he could be much better off by just pencilling someone else's work rather than painfully working out all the plot himself and putting his brain and heart into building a nice adventure.

Rodolfo Cimino, the master storyteller: from ancient magic to romance (not forgetting tapirs)

So, who wrote Scarpa's scripts while the master's pencils were at their best? The ubiquitous Martina, you might guess. Well, actually no. Sure, Martina kept on producing mountains of stories, some of which very good, and a portion of these landed on Scarpa's desk (an excellent one would be *Topolino e il terribile Kala-Mit*, *Mickey and the terrible Kala-Mit*, I TL 610-A .. 611-A, 1967, where Goofy becomes weightless and endowed with mind-reading capabilities—handy weapons against the story's terrible villain who blackmails the Earth and steals vast quantities of tomato tins), but Scarpa's most significant partnership from this new period is probably that with Rodolfo Cimino. The two men, both from the North-East of Italy and both born in 1927, had been in touch with each other since the days of Scarpa's animation studio (i.e. before Scarpa even started working for Mondadori). In the early Sixties Cimino inked Scarpa's pencils for a while as can be seen in *Paperino e il colosso del Nilo* (*Donald and the Colossus of the Nile*, Scarpa/Scarpa, I TL 292-A .. 293-A, 1961), where Scarpa's fantasy and genius anticipate by several years the technical solution eventually adopted in real life by the engineers to save the Abu Simbel monuments from being flooded by the new dam—namely to cut them up in blocks and rebuild them

somewhere else. But Scarpa suggested that his friend might do better with scripts than with inks. Thanks to that hint, that Cimino fortunately accepted, the Italian school acquired one of his most talented authors.

Cimino's first scripts date from the early Sixties. It only takes him a few years to perfect his personal style and reach, from the second half of that decade, the high standard he'll keep up for a good quarter century. In *Zio Paperone e l'aurum nigrum* (*Uncle Scrooge and the aurum nigrum*, Cimino/Scarpa, I TL 476-A, 1965) Scrooge finds an ancient parchment mentioning the mysterious "aurum nigrum" as an infallible remedy against moths; he is sensitive to the issue because he was just fighting moths that were eating holes into his banknotes. So he sends Donald and the nephews on a remote island in search of samples of the material, which they find from the local witch-doctor. Their radio report to Scrooge is intercepted by the Beagle Boys who mistake the "aurum nigrum" for "black gold" (since that's what it literally means in Latin) and rush to the island to rob the Ducks. A long fight follows, with the Ducks and the Beagle Boys respectively helped by a good and an evil wizard, until the Ducks safely return home only to discover to their disappointment that the "aurum nigrum" was something they already knew about after all... This story shows us a few of Cimino's favourites: Scrooge finding ancient documents about some old treasure and the Ducks travelling to distant lands and meeting primitive peoples. Cimino tells us about these primitive cultures with great love and respect and in many of these stories the Ducks will meet an old man who, although he may only speak a Tarzan-like Pidgin, will eventually show that the wisdom of his ancient people, and perhaps some a little bit of ancient magic that modern science can't fathom, is worth more than the technology or the wealth of our heroes from Duckburg. Some good examples along those lines might be the following stories: *Zio Paperone e il tappeto propiziatore* (*Uncle Scrooge and the propitiatory carpet*, Cimino/Bordini, I TL 822-B, 1971), where an old hermit, with a white beard longer than he's tall, owns a special carpet that makes aggressive people reasonable; and Scrooge has a very hard time trying to get it from him, because as soon as he enters the hermit's house and steps on the carpet, he "becomes reasonable" and realises that the carpet is best left to its natural owner... *Zio Paperone e le montagne trasparenti* (*Uncle Scrooge and the transparent mountains*, Cimino/Cavazzano, I TL 831-A, 1971), where the appeal of the transparent mountains for Scrooge is that he will easily be able to find the gold inside. As the head of the local tribe explains, the mountains had been made transparent by the potion that the old witch doctors prepared years ago at the request of their friendly giant. The opposite potion is hidden in a secret place that will only be found by someone who can see the "roots in the sky", says the legend. Scrooge is interested in making the mountains revert to plain earth to dig out the gold, because the transparent rock is too hard for that. *Zio Paperone e l'avvoltoio grifone* (*Uncle Scrooge and the griffon vulture*, Cimino/Gatto, I TL 775-A, 1970), shows the Ducks on the tracks of a mythical bird whose feathers, when used as quills, turn the writer into a genius. In *Zio Paperone e il tabù calciatore* (*Uncle Scrooge and the kicking taboo*, Cimino/Gatto, I TL 854-A, 1972) a tribe in the middle of the jungle safeguards the last few "taboos", cosmic stones that catalyse and materialise the will of their owner; Scrooge wants one to defend his money bin. In *Zio Paperone e la polvere di stelle* (*Uncle Scrooge and the star dust*, Cimino/Cavazzano, I TL 784-B, 1970) the Ducks, while riding their bicycles in the desert near Duckburg, lose their bearing but find some star dust that turns wishes into reality: you can ask for water or food and it magically appears. Scrooge, of course, wants to take all the dust to his money bin; but a travelling Indian explains that they will never be able to find their way home while they have the dust, because its radiations make the compass go crazy and generate clouds that mask out the stars and sun.

From these stories we note another important aspect of Cimino's storytelling: his stories, while never patronising, are morally good. He succeeds in inventing nice plots that embed in them some basic idea of *fairness*, without for that spoiling them with a sickening moralistic or religious flavour. His stories don't all necessarily have happy endings, but they never depict the hero as successful after having done something evil; like many ancient fables, they give the reader the comforting sensation of a world in which, despite all the injustice, there still is a higher reward in good. Contrast this with Martina or, for example, Giangiacomo Dalmasso, another prolific writer who by the way wrote the scripts of almost all the "inter-story connections" of the *Classici di Walt Disney* reprints: in *Zio Paperone e la riconquista dei beni* (*Uncle Scrooge and the recapture of the goods*, Dalmasso/Gatto, I TL 823-C, 1971) Scrooge mistakenly believes that an earthquake is about to destroy California and thus quickly sells all his real estate possessions to Rockerduck, thinking he's cheating his silly rival by selling him something that will soon be worthless. On discovering that the earthquake wasn't at all imminent, Scrooge *narcotizes* and *abducts* Rockerduck (!) and, pretending to be an extraterrestrial, asks for an enormous ransom in diamonds, which Rockerduck can only pay by reselling all the real estate back to Scrooge. Moreover, when Rockerduck and Scrooge face each other at the Billionnaires' Club, and Rockerduck accuses Scrooge of being the fake extraterrestrial, the old duck not only lies blatantly but manages to persuade his colleagues to disgracefully kick Rockerduck out of the club! Finally, Scrooge cheats his nephew, to whom he promised a seven-digit reward for his help, by writing him a cheque for $0.999,999. This type of plot is completely alien to Cimino's style. Sure, Cimino too can and does often depict a greedy and dishonest Scrooge; but he also ensures that, when Scrooge misbehaves, Destiny gives him his own back. Donald, who is often at the receiving end of Scrooge's cheats, will occasionally be protected by this Destiny that will somehow force Scrooge to give his nephew the fair reward he deserves. This is evident in the stories mentioned above: in the propitiatory carpet story, for example, Scrooge wants the carpet in order to "soften" the businessmen he invites, so that he can close better deals. But, in the end, the soothing influence of the carpet has as much effect on him as on his competitors, with the

net result that his deals are now much fairer, but only marginally more profitable. And, again thanks to the carpet, Scrooge is actually happy with this state of things, and even gives a little money to Donald instead of throwing him out with cannonfire. At the end of the kicking taboo story Scrooge installs the stone in his money bin and instructs it to keep all the rascals away. But when he denies Donald the $2000 he promised him when he needed his help in the jungle, the taboo doesn't let him enter the bin because he is himself a rascal until he pays up! In *Zio Paperone e il fumo della discordia* (*Uncle Scrooge and the smoke of contention*, Cimino/Bordini, I TL 690-B, 1969) Donald and the nephews, after being sent out on a silly mission by Scrooge trying to sell little mirrors to the natives of some faraway islands, discovers by chance that he can somehow trade in foul-smelling smoke. So he secretly bottles some of the smog coming out of the chimneys of Scrooge's factories and sells it on, for once making a profit of his own. But the hawkish Scrooge can't tolerate that: after paying a secret investigator to discover that Donald is selling *his* smoke, he sues his nephew for damages, notwithstanding the fact that Donald was actually improving the efficiency of Scrooge's industries by reducing their polluting emissions. But, after a lengthy court case, the judge (a fat owl) rules that Scrooge's dispersible and useless smoke shall be repaid by Donald with the equally dispersible and useless *sound* of the gold coins he earned...

Court cases, in fact, are another Cimino *leitmotiv*: in keeping with the fundamental theme of "cosmic fairness" that I highlighted above, the judges are generally depicted as wise men that will eventually give out fair sentences. To keep the story realistic, a capitalist such as Scrooge (or perhaps Rockerduck) will generally be able to afford the best lawyers to bend the law in his favour, and the judge will have to reluctantly ratify the lawyer's argument; but, in Cimino's world, the same law that Scrooge wanted enforced to frame his poor helpless opponent will often come back and bite him from behind, when he sees it applied to himself as a double-edged sword. Note that the opponent is not always Donald, either: in several excellent stories Cimino pits the tycoon against the business startups of Brigitta and Filo Sganga. Both characters, by the way, were created by Scarpa: Brigitta is a mature lady in love with Scrooge, whom Scrooge can't stand because he mistakenly fears that she'd spend all his money; Sganga is a fat and not very bright businessman, very entrepreneurial but not very successful, and a good friend of Brigitta, who often teams up with him when she wants to take her revenge on Scrooge. As a matter of fact, for several decades Cimino was practically the only writer, apart from Scarpa, who successfully created stories with the Brigitta-Sganga team. And very good stories they were, too: in *Zio Paperone e le scarpe integrate* (*Uncle Scrooge and the integrated shoes*, Cimino/Scarpa, I TL 792-A, 1971) Brigitta, after Scrooge has been particularly unkind to her, sets up a company with Sganga to compete against Scrooge in the business of manufacturing and selling shoes. With help from a friend of hers from the Fiji islands, who is married to the local witch-doctor, Brigitta produces special shoes that integrate the vital impulses of a chosen animal (gazelle for running, monkey for climbing, horse for kicking...) to endow the wearer with the corresponding ability. In another story with a similar basic skeleton (Scrooge offends Brigitta; Brigitta in revenge teams up with Sganga and beats him commercially; Scrooge has to give up; Brigitta stops competing against Scrooge in exchange for some quality time with him), *Zio Paperone e il maleficio blu* (*Uncle Scrooge and the blue curse*, Cimino/Scarpa, I TL 686-A, 1969), the competition is in the jewellery business. Scrooge invokes some obscure laws to, in effect, legally steal a mysterious blue pearl from Brigitta and Sganga's store, but this backfires on him as the curse of the pearl turns his other stones into dust.

Another peculiarity of Cimino is his creative use of language: as we saw when speaking of Martina, the Italian Disney authors have always been careful to use proper language, with properly formed grammatical sentences and so on. Cimino does so with a twist: he often picks uncommon words, adding a somewhat archaic and *recherché* flavour to the language of his stories. This is great fun for kids: I remember learning lots of new words, and surprising my parents because of my vocabulary, from stories that I much later identified as Cimino's. An all-time favourite of his is the word *tapir* (in real life a large ungulate mammal the size of a small hippopotamus), just because it sounds funny I suppose, which his characters frequently use as an insult to denote a dim-witted, slow-moving opponent; also, a trip to an unheard-of country will often go via *Tapirland* (or some variant thereof); and when Scrooge embarks on an old wreck because he doesn't want to afford the expense of a proper boat, the wreck is likely to be called *The Tapir*.

Most of the examples above come from that golden age of Disney Italian comics that goes from the early Sixties to the early Seventies: that was the period in which many of the artists we mentioned reached their full graphical maturity: take any of the stories above and you'll see some of the best pencils in the careers of Bordini, Gatto, Scarpa, Carpi, Cavazzano (and several others we haven't properly looked at yet). But Cimino kept on producing excellent scripts for many more years: one of the best, in which by the way the traditional Disney characters are only there as extras, is *Il bel cavaliere e la regina del lago perduto* (*The handsome horseman and the queen of the lost lake*, Cimino/Cavazzano, I TL 1782-A, 1990), the first of the *Nonna Papera e i racconti intorno al fuoco* (*Grandma Duck and the tales around the camp fire*) tales. Beautifully illustrated by a "modern" Cavazzano [Cavazzano WWW] in excellent shape, this story (told, as the name of the series suggests, by Grandma Duck to the entire Duck family around the camp fire during a pioneer-style vacation in the desert) is set in the Far West of cowboys and outlaws. The hero is Johnny il melodico (Johnny the melodious), a young cowboy with a guitar instead of a six-shooter. Chased by the bad guys into the depths of the desert, Johnny is about to die of thirst. But, as he sings his last song, a miracle happens and the lost lake reappears; and, with it, a beautiful mermaid, queen of the lake. Johnny and the mermaid fall in love, but the lake is jealous: with a terrible thunderstorm it abducts Johnny, whom the queen only saves by promising the lake that she'll leave him. The lake then retreats and disappears,

taking the queen with it and leaving Johnny unconscious in the middle of the desert. Sad echoes resound in the sky: it's the voice of the mermaid begging Johnny not to forget her. This scene is very touching and masterfully rendered by Cavazzano's evocative pencils. Johnny escapes from the desert and, in a few years, becomes a famous singer, giving concerts all around the world. But one day, as he's coming back by train, old and white-haired, to his native town, he feels that even at the apogee of success he is actually a failure, because he never reached what he wanted most. But an old woman beggar in the train reads in him the signs of his old story and predicts that he'll soon meet again the one he loves. The final scene, with Johnny responding to the call only he can hear, then once again facing death by thirst in the desert, then finally reunited with the beautiful young mermaid now turned woman, with the sad look in Johnny's eyes because he now feels old and inadequate for her, and with the final twist that allows them to fall in each other's loving arms, is an absolute masterpiece. The mermaid of course evokes some Andersen, but the similarity is only superficial; there is sentiment and sadness, but Cimino doesn't share Andersen's cosmic pessimism and his story, while deeply moving, is fundamentally positive. Cimino's choice of using the Disney duck world only as a frame for his own story affords him the greatest of freedoms: by using characters that won't have to reappear in any future stories, he can do with them what he likes, including letting them age and go away. This is a wonderful and fascinating story that confirms Cimino as the best romantic poet that Italian (and maybe the world's) Disney comics have ever had. And for further confirmation of this bold statement one must only look at another famous story, again by Cimino and Cavazzano, from almost twenty years before: *Paperino e l'avventura sottomarina* (*Donald and the underwater adventure*, I TL 873-C, 1972), where Donald falls in love with the sweet Reginella (whose name means "cute little queen"). Donald is on a scuba-diving expedition when he is captured by a strange underwater people, actually coming from another planet. He falls in love with their queen and the two live a happy season of fondness and love, until the unexpected happens and Donald is forced to abandon Reginella forever. This masterpiece, too, is tender and romantic, although the duties of the Disney continuity here prevent Donald from living his life's love story to the end. And on this point it is worth remarking that it is precisely Cimino's temporary escape from the normal Disney world, when he transports Donald in the underwater world of Reginella's people that is in fact another spatio-temporal dimension, that allows Donald to live his brief season of love with an intensity that would have not been possible in his normal world. Our duck's permanent relationship with Daisy has to be tantalizingly incomplete, for reasons of comics continuity: nothing new can happen, or the Disney world would change; so Donald is condemned to a perpetual limbo of uncertainty with the voluble Daisy, who will keep on making up her mind day by day on whether she prefers him or his cousin Gladstone for going to the next ball. With Reginella, instead, Cimino has the freedom to make Donald live outside of these constraints, if only for the space of one story, and that's one of the ingredients that contribute to making this adventure so intense and memorable; but the Disney continuity forces him to forgo the happy end. Reginella and Donald will meet again in several other episodes, the most touching of the entire series being the second, *Paperino e il ritorno di Reginella* (*Donald and the return of Reginella*, Cimino/Cavazzano, I AT 213-A, 1974), while the remaining ones don't really compare; but the story is always somehow polluted by the sword of Damocles of the continuity, forcing Cimino to conclude each story on a sad and all-too-predictable "I'll never see her again, that's it this time, really". It is now clear why, for his 1990 masterpiece, he decided to leave the established Disney characters out of the story altogether.

Carlo Chendi

Carlo Chendi is an old glory of the Italian Disney team and has been with Topolino since before Cimino: he joined in the mid-Fifties. More oriented towards episodes from everyday life rather than magical and exotic adventures, he nevertheless was one of the first authors to follow in Martina's footsteps with parodies of literary works. His first one was memorable: *Il dottor Paperus* (*Doctor Paperus*, Chendi/Bottaro, I TL 188-A .. 189-A, 1958), from Goethe's *Faust*, set in feudal Europe, in which Donald is an old alchemist trying to distil the elixir of peace; he makes a pact with the Devil in exchange for his youth, so as to have more time to discover the formula for the elixir, but because of his absent-mindedness he gets involved in a variety of other adventures almost without realising it. Another good one was *Paperino e l'isola del tesoro* (*Donald Duck and Treasure Island*, Chendi/Bottaro, I TL 218-A, 1959), loosely based on Stevenson's *Treasure Island*; set in the seventeenth century Caribbean seas, it puts Scrooge at the head of a gang of pirates whose components are, surprisingly, a bunch of oversized Beagle Boys! This fantastic setting allows Chendi to explore the tyrannic facets of the personality of Scrooge in a more explicit way than would have been possible in Duckburg: as the leader of the pirates, the old duck makes it clear that the only thing that counts for him is his money; he has no respect or consideration for "fairness" or for the well-being of his allies, subordinates or relatives, who eventually rebel against him. (This is of course more the Martina-style Scrooge than the one invented by Barks.) Chendi and Bottaro will use this fantastic pirate setting again in several other stories over the years.

Another significant parody that the two authors followed up with more stories in the same setting is *Paperino il Paladino* (*Donald Duck the Paladin*, Chendi/Bottaro, I TL 247-A .. 248-C, 1960), set in the Middle Ages, where Donald is a brave and fearless but extremely unlucky knight: he beats all the enemies, but all the credit goes to the lazy freeloader Gladstone. It is interesting to note, as remarked in the Yellow Book, that the fantastic language, sounding like archaic Italian, that Chendi created for this story was later recycled in a movie of similar subject, *L'Armata Brancaleone* (1966)—one of the relatively few known cases, together with Barks's *Seven Cities of Cibola* and Scarpa's *Pippotarzan*, in which cinema quietly borrowed back from Disney comics.

Chendi's fruitful and productive teamwork with Bottaro lasts for many years and is not limited to Disney work; in fact at one point they open a comics production studio (together with another Disney artist, Giorgio Rebuffi) called Bierreci, from the Italian names of the initials of their surnames: B (bi), R (erre), C (ci). A noteworthy thread created by Chendi and Bottaro, which is remarkable if nothing else for the number of stories that it generated over the decades, both by them and by others, is the one about Witch Hazel v. Goofy. Hazel was a minor character created for the cartoon *Trick or Treat*, which Barks rendered as a comics story in 1952 (*Donald Duck* 26); Chendi resurrected her in 1956 for a duck story, *Paperino e l'aspirapolvere fatato* (*Donald Duck and the enchanted vacuum cleaner*, Chendi/Bottaro, I AO56013-A, 1956) but later relocated her into the mouse universe with *Pippo e la fattucchiera* (*Goofy and the Witch*, Chendi/Bottaro, I TL 236-A, 1960): the witch visits the Earth and is sorely disappointed that people no longer believe in witchcraft, not even when they see her fly on a broom. The most deeply rooted scepticism comes from Goofy, who still thinks she is only a resourceful salesperson even after she performs all sorts of magic tricks on him. This saga continues over countless stories of the Italian production, still being written to this day: every so often, Hazel reappears on Earth with the impossible task of convincing the miscreant Goofy that witches exists, and that she is one. Goofy, paradoxically, is too dumb to understand that whatever magic happens to him really *is* happening, and always find elaborate pseudo-rational explanations according to which Hazel's magic tricks are just illusions.

Another interesting Italian series started by Chendi, whose origins can again be traced to Barks, is that of Daisy Duck's diary. These are stories from everyday Duckburg life in which Daisy often appears in the role of member of the local women's club. The hilarious events that she lays down calligraphically in her diary are usually disastrous for poor Donald, but she doesn't seem to feel any guilt for this... Chendi writes over 20 such stories, several of them again with Bottaro but many others with a wide choice of artists from Chierchini, Gatto and Perego to P.L. De Vita, Scarpa and Cavazzano.

Coming back to parodies for a moment, although as we saw the majority of them were written for Bottaro, Chendi also created a few masterpieces that were drawn by other artists: a particularly famous one is *Paperino missione Bob Fingher* (*Donald Duck Mission Bob Fingher*, Chendi/Carpi, I TL 542-A .. 543-A, 1966) a hilarious spoof of the 007 film *Goldfinger*. Uncle Scrooge is presented as the chief of the PIA (Private Intelligence Agency) and he recruits Donald as secret agent Qu Qu 7 (an untranslatable joke—"cu cu sette", same pronunciation, corresponds more or less to "peekaboo", i.e. what children say when they find each other while playing hide and seek). Donald's mission is to defeat the criminal plan of Bob Fingher who wants to raid the money bin (Fort Knox in the film). Chendi's plentiful gags make Donald a less than heroic secret agent, since most of his techno-gadgets (devised, of course, by Gyro Gearloose) tend to backfire unexpectedly: Scrooge gives him a car with an engine so powerful that it could propel a ship, but leaves him with an almost empty fuel tank... similarly, the ejector seat that is the hallmark of James Bond's car ejects Donald himself as its first and only victim. There are also more direct echoes from the actual film, such as the villain using his shoe (with a razor sharp steel edge) as a deadly projectile, in reminiscence of analogous performances by Goldfinger's Oriental helper using a hat. One of the claims to fame of this great story is that it attracted praise from the States: George Sherman, then vice-president of Walt Disney Productions in Burbank, sent a letter of congratulations to Gentilini, who passed it on to Chendi. The Italian critic Becattini interestingly remarks, in his preface to the 1994 reprint of this story in the *Grandi Parodie* series, that Sherman so much liked the idea of ducks playing secret agents that he instructed two of his authors, Dick Kinney and Al Hubbard, to create a regular mini series based on this idea—whence the birth of Double-O-Duck and Mata Harrier in American Disney comics. Few have noticed that Chendi himself resurrected the PIA, Qu Qu 7 and so on about ten years later: the story, *Paperino dall'acquario con dolore* (*Donald Duck from the aquarium with pain*, Chendi/Gatti, I TL 1053-A .. 1054-B, 1976), was a pretty good script, but unfortunately the artwork did not do it justice.

One of Chendi's best creations comes in 1981: after the retirement of *Topolino* director Mario Gentilini, his successor Gaudenzio Capelli asked his staff to come up with new ideas, and Chendi's contribution was Ok Quack, an extra terrestrial duck with blonde curly hair (rather similar to our Germund's, I should perhaps add, if only a little longer...) who arrived on Earth with a flat, cylindrical flying saucer shaped like a gigantic coin. The splendidly drawn *Paperino e il turista spaziale* (*Donald Duck and the tourist from space*, Chendi/Cavazzano, I TL 1353-A, 1981) shows him in the money bin with his spaceship, which he—alas—reduces to the size of a real dime when Scrooge complains that it is squashing his money. This, of course, makes the interplanetary vehicle easily confused with all the other coins of which the bin is plentiful. From then on, thus, in this and in the following stories, Ok Quack's principal activity in Duckburg becomes to check all the coins in circulation with the hope of finding his spaceship. In one or two rare climactic occasions, Ok Quack actually does find the right coin and expands it back to the ship, but by a stroke of bad luck worthy of Donald he loses it again immediately afterwards, before having a chance to fly back to his planet.

As a space alien, he benefits from special powers such as the ability to speak the language of locks and mechanisms (through which he can enter Scrooge's money bin at will) and, in later stories, the ability to move objects with the power of his mind. What makes him interesting, however, is not so much his superpowers as his attitude towards life: a mixture of naïvety and wisdom that makes him incapable of understanding why earthlings worry about such irrelevant things as money. He is in a sense similar to the first Eega Beeva, the "man of tomorrow" that Bill Walsh created in 1947 for the daily Mickey Mouse strips drawn by Gottfredson. Like him, Ok Quack is uneducated but fundamentally good, and his soul has not been

contaminated by the poisons of modern society—a "good savage" in the sense of Rousseau. The apparent absurdity of his behaviour is actually the author's way to gently highlight, as if in a mirror, the absurdity of our own habits. Ok Quack is a deep, philosophical character and, to avoid turning the stories into moralistically boring tales, Chendi soon partners him with Umperio Bogarto (also masterfully drawn by Cavazzano), a fat and incompetent detective who usually helps him in his quest for the special coin, thereby also pulling the balance of the story more towards the farcical aspects. They form a wonderful pair. Both are, ultimately, clueless when it comes to dealing with the real world: Ok Quack because he comes from a totally different civilisation, and Umperio Bogarto because he is too dumb and clumsy, inheriting facets from the personalities of both Goofy and Fethry Duck.

We should also mention in passing that Chendi is a comics connoisseur; he is very familiar with the classic American Disney comics and he has also been for many years a pen friend of both Gottfredson and Barks. Note for example his mix of Barksian elements in the 1993 Ok Quack story *Zio Paperone mecenate per forza* (*Uncle Scrooge the Forced Benefactor*, Chendi/Cavazzano, I TL 1964-A, 1993), based on the existence of a tunnel starting from Scrooge's money bin (erected on the location of the old fort which was built on top of the hill before the city of Duckburg was founded) and leading to the statue of Cornelius Coot.

In the early Nineties Chendi conceived and produced a new publication for Disney, *Topostrips*, that would faithfully reprint the glorious Gottfredson strips. Unfortunately this didn't last for more than three issues, due to practical problems with the format's unsuitability for advertising.

Giorgio Pezzin, the techno-genius

Since we mentioned Cavazzano once more as the artist that accompanied Chendi in the Ok Quack saga, we might as well take this cue to talk about the great Giorgio Pezzin, who in the early Seventies staged a small revolution in Disney scripting similarly to what Cavazzano did on the graphical front. In fact the connection is even tighter than this because the two Giorgios, both from Venice, started their respective revolutions together, and formed a brilliant long-term partnership that gave birth to many comics projects, even beyond Disney.

"When I met Giorgio Cavazzano", writes Pezzin in the brilliant booklet *Giorgio Cavazzano* edited by Silvano Mezzavilla (Editori del Grifo, 1994), "I was a high school student with an interest for drawing and, above all, bursting with imagination, so much so that I could entertain an entire class for hours (when the teacher wasn't there) by telling one joke after another. So I was clearly over-excited when a common friend introduced me to Giorgio, who was looking for inkers. Things worked out differently, though: I couldn't find enough time to ink, so I tried writing scripts instead, partly also because Giorgio himself was looking for an accomplice in order to start something of his own. This is in fact the new piece of information I could contribute concerning my adventure with Giorgio: at the time I didn't know it, but Giorgio too was then "new", almost as much as I was. After a long career as the inker of Scarpa, he was looking for an opportunity to show what he could do. I followed him like a Messiah, of course, and this is how we happened to become the first Disney authors who worked for other publishers (abomination and heresy!). He was the first Disney artist to draw outside of the panels, to abuse the perspective and so on, and I was the first writer to follow him in his revolutions... because I didn't know I was doing it."

Pezzin sends his first scripts to Disney when he is around 20. The first story attributed to him, *Zio Paperone e il ladroraduno* (*Uncle Scrooge and the thiefs' meeting*, Pezzin/Gatto, I AT 159-B, 1970), in which Scrooge distributes a million dollars to each citizen of Duckburg in a clever plan to capture lots of thieves simultaneously, is not a script beyond the ordinary, but it isn't bad at all for a first attempt. After a long silence lasting for several years, *Topolino* prints the fantastic *Paperino e la visita distruttiva* (*Donald Duck and the destructive visit*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 947-A, 1974), which opens the crazy techno careers of the two Giorgios. In this story, Donald and Fethry Duck are involved in industrial espionage against Rockerduck, but they are soon found out by herculean security guards, who then start chasing them around the complex in a fast-paced sequence of gags. The ducks finally steal a beautiful red sports car with more high-tech gadgets than James Bond's: by pressing a button, for example, they can drop a barrel of molasses on the car of their chasers; unfortunately, by pulling another lever, the sports car itself comes apart! The plot is relatively unimportant: what makes the story brilliant is the vitality and energy of the action, the rapid fire of gags and the dynamism of Cavazzano's artwork. After several decades, Pezzin is the first author to rediscover and reintroduce the fast pace of the slapstick cartoons into the comics, but he does so with a technological twist: he merges the extreme gag frequency of Laurel and Hardy with the gadgetry arsenal of 007. And Cavazzano is there with him, ready to illustrate with the greatest expressiveness and dynamism both the fun side (which he makes even more rubbery and cartoony than the Disney standard) and the technological side (which he instead makes breathtakingly realistic for a Disney comic, in stark contrast with the wildly deformed and elongated caricatures that he uses as characters).

This story is the spark that sets alight a wild forest fire: Pezzin and Cavazzano are, from now on, unstoppable; their production over the next few years includes some of the most savagely hilarious stories ever to appear in a Disney comic, including in particular *Paperoga e il peso della gloria* (*Fethry Duck and the weight of the glory*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 1007-A, 1975), *Paperoga e l'isola a motore* (*Fethry Duck and the motor driven island*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 1050-C, 1976), *Paperino e l'eroico smemorato* (*Donald Duck and the forgetful hero*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 1059-A, 1976). These are the stories out of which, when two Italian comic fans that were both kids in the Seventies meet each other, entire

pages get retold word for word amidst unstoppable laughter, in a spontaneous challenge to repeat with the greatest accuracy the sequence of idiotic lines uttered by Fethry Duck, and to describe with equal care for detail, as well as conspicuous gesticulation, the visual imagery in those classic panels. People will be riding in a car with a group of new friends they have never met before; somehow the subject of these stories will come up, and then all of a sudden those involved will start reciting bits of the stories in a very serious voice (correcting each other over the exact words) and laughing between themselves for half an hour even if this exercise has already been performed several dozen times by each of them in other occasions (but over the same stories!). Comics don't get much better than this, and these stories are definite masterpieces— I have an enlarged colour reproduction from one of them hanging in my office, and this acts as a trigger for the process described above whenever I get a visitor with the appropriate cultural background...

In the first of the three stories mentioned, Fethry Duck becomes a crew member aboard a futuristic nuclear submarine built by Scrooge's industries and about to be demonstrated to the military. The whole story is a continuous firework of delightful gags, some linguistic, some visual, and some a combination of both. The submarine is so advanced that, if the propellers fail, it can use its "fins" to swim, explains Scrooge; and, since the hull is made of a flexible type of steel, it can "pull in its stomach" to avoid torpedoes. The inside is crammed, but as advanced as a spaceship, and Scrooge proudly lists all the luxury items he has been able to fit in (including a "freeze-dried swimming pool", i.e. "just add water"...). One of these advanced wonders of technology is an "electronic barber": a large metallic appliance the size of a large washing machine, with a hole in the front where you can stick your head. Unfortunately, one of the crew members pressed the wrong button and had his gums shampooed—this is not lethal, but he is now knocked out, which is why Fethry Duck ends up replacing him (and unwittingly wreaks havoc on the submarine). Gums ("gengive") are a very funny-sounding word in Italian and it may be interesting to remark that the great cartoonist Benito Jacovitti was very fond of using them whenever he needed an absurd word, as he explicitly admitted in his interview by Boschi, Gori, Sani in *Jacovitti* (Granata Press, 1992). Having your gums shampooed doesn't have any second interpretation, it's just meaningless, but it sounds unconditionally funny. I realise this may not be so in other languages, so please bear with me if you're not laughing yet, but maybe Cavazzano's visualisation of this dramatic event may help you with that... The teamwork between the two authors in this story is absolutely top-class: just like Pezzin peppers his script and his snappy dialogue with gag after gag even at the microscopic level, so does Cavazzano of his own initiative, on top of what's dictated by the script: the battered Fethry Duck at the end of the story features not only the classical sticking plasters that denote injury in the language of comics, but even a bandage to one of his long *hairs*!

The *isola a motore* story tells of a mysterious entity that makes Scrooge's aeroplanes disappear. Donald and Fethry are sent to investigate as secret agents, with appropriate equipment. Once again, the story is full of gags, of which several are good examples of Pezzin's taste for "humour by exaggeration": when Scrooge hears the news that another one of his planes has disappeared, he starts crying like a baby, and the Air Force general and the technician who were following the radar with him start bottle-feeding him while rocking his swing cot! Similarly, the secret agent kit that Scrooge gives his nephews consists of a small briefcase full of miniature gadgets (silenced bombs, anti-aircraft micro-cannons, coffee pot, inflatable 50-HP outboard motor and many more, including a freeze-dried pistol) but accompanied by a 30-cm-thick hardbound book containing the instructions. "Humour by exaggeration" will always remain a feature of Pezzin's style in subsequent stories: the Martina theme of Rockerduck eating his hat out of frustration when Scrooge beats him is brought to paroxysm by Pezzin, who has Rockerduck ordering hats for lunch by the truckload. Similarly, another regular Pezzin feature is the television anchorman (or woman) announcing something amazing and the people at home starting a dialogue with the person inside the television (who replies) to express their disbelief, ask for more details or complain about what's happening.

The third story I mentioned, *Paperino e l'eroico smemorato*, sends the two cousins in search of personalities of the past so that Scrooge can make money by publishing their autobiographies. They eventually find an old man that Fethry Duck recognises as an ace pilot of World War I—but unfortunately the man doesn't even remember his own name, much less any of his wartime exploits, due to a concussion caused by his sinking a battleship by crashing his plane on it. The only possible cure that might give him back his memory consists of recreating the original shock by making him sink another battleship with the same method. As usual, the frantic rhythm of the story is perfect, with action leading to gag leading to more action and so on at a very fast pace. The synergy between writer and artist is brilliant, and Cavazzano's striking mix of cartoony characters and extremely realistic planes and ships makes the story unforgettable. Particularly remarkable is the famous full-page panel, with daring perspective, of the fighter plane dropping on the battleship with all its bombs—certainly an absolute novelty for a comic like *Topolino*. Pezzin claims that the editors were not too keen on these innovations and that for this reason they tried to "hide" the story in the middle of the comic (usually *Topolino* started and finished with a long 25-30 page Italian story and was "filled" with shorter American, Danish and Brazilian productions).

In those years (mid-Seventies to early Eighties), as we noted, Pezzin and Cavazzano worked together on many more non-Disney comics series they created from scratch, including *Walkie & Talkie*, *Oscar & Tango* and my personal favourite *Smalto & Jonny*, the unlucky adventures of two hit men (a skinny smart boss and a fat idiotic auxiliary) who offer their dubious services for money. Pezzin is a master humorist, working simultaneously at many levels, from the ephemeral and untranslatable but irresistible lexical-level gags (the mafia

boss called Don Ferdinando Caciolaro) to gags visualising puns and proverbs (the fat bitch being knocked out by a large blow to the head administered with a *flower*—but made of cast iron) to general absurdities (the fat and hungry killer absent-mindedly eating an essential paper receipt after dipping it in his vermouth) and fantastic plots. His stories are incredibly dynamic. The freedom of ideas coming from having developed several series from scratch, without the constraints of a pre-existing character universe, makes it possible for him to transfer such exuberant dynamism in the Disney world, and this is the essence of his innovative contribution.

Another important quality of Pezzin (who, despite being now a full time comics writer, has an engineering degree) is his mastery at constructing fascinating plots based on technical ideas. I absolutely love *Zio Paperone contro "il progettista"* (*Uncle Scrooge vs "the designer"*, Pezzin/Rota, I TL 977-A, 1974), in which an extremely clever criminal designs infallible plans for elaborate burglaries which he then sells to common thieves who carry them out: I could never forget the brilliant scene of the Beagle Boys stopping a money van by spreading strong glue on the road and then robbing it wearing special shoes that shed a thin sole at each step. Also unforgettable is *Zio Paperone e l'acqua concentrata* (*Uncle Scrooge and concentrated water*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 1113-B, 1977), where Donald accidentally discovers a compound that shrinks water and makes it rubbery—so that you can eat a sandwich containing a few slices of red wine. The irresistible absurd humour that we previously highlighted is not absent either: hundreds of industrial spies form an orderly queue outside Scrooge's industrial complex in order to steal the chemical formula and one of the guys in dark glasses and overcoat turns to the one behind him telling him angrily to wait for his turn!

Pezzin is also one of the most credible and interesting writers when it comes to create stories involving computers: *Paperino e la casa elettronica* (*Donald Duck and the electronic home*, Pezzin/M. De Vita, I TL 1503-C, 1984), where Donald and Fethry Duck win a futuristic computer-controlled home, is a great masterpiece, with seats that weigh you when you sit down for a meal and serve you insipid vegetables instead of a nice serving of pasta if the computer thinks you are overweight. Other excellent stories explore the theme of computers threatening society, including *Zio Paperone e la rivoluzione elettronica* (*Uncle Scrooge and the electronic revolution*, Pezzin/M. De Vita, I TL 1438-A .. 1439-A, 1983), in which Scrooge computerises every activity in Duckburg and is then blackmailed by the Beagle Boys who crack the system and threaten to reveal private information held by the computer about all the citizens, and *Archimede e... l'illogica vittoria* (*Gyro Gearloose and the ...illogical victory*, Pezzin/Cavazzano, I TL 1106-A, 1977) in which Scrooge and Gyro build robots that look like humans and take over their most boring tasks such as walking the dog or going to school.

Pezzin is one of the greatest stars among the Italian Disney writers and I should resist the temptation to go on for pages and pages, which would be easy since his production has always been of consistently high quality, even during the dark ages of the early Eighties and late Nineties when the average quality of Italian stories has been pretty low. Before moving on, though, we should remember his co-authorship, with Bruno Concina, of the Italian time machine series of stories in which Mickey and Goofy are sent backwards in time by professors Zapotec and Marlin to solve various historical mysteries (the full story of the genesis of this series has been recently revealed in an interesting article by Marco Barlotti and Dario Ambrosini in issue 13 of *I Maestri Disney*). We should also remember his recent invention (1994) of the *C'era una volta... in America* (*Once upon a time... in America*) serial, mostly drawn by Massimo De Vita, showing Mickey and Goofy in the land and times of the American pioneers. And we shouldn't forget to mention his great parody of Star Wars, written with his wife Manuela Marinato, *Topolino e i signori della galassia: la guarnigione segreta* (*Mickey Mouse and the Lords of the galaxy: the secret garrison*, Pezzin/M. De Vita, I TL 1846-A .. 1849-A, 1991), together with its prelude *Topolino e i signori della galassia* (*Mickey Mouse and the Lords of the galaxy*, Pezzin/M. De Vita, I TL 1833-A .. 1834-D, 1991). This brilliant and beautifully illustrated cosmic saga centres, like De Vita's own *Spada di ghiaccio (ice sword)* "inaccurately-named trilogy" (to paraphrase Douglas Adams), on Goofy unwittingly being a spiritual Master (one of only 12 in the entire galaxy) of great wisdom: "a Master knows what he's doing even without knowing it".

A hint of De Vita

While we are at it, let's spend a few words on that outstanding cycle of stories by Massimo De Vita that promotes the gifted son of Disney founding father Pier Lorenzo from "just" being one of the top Italian Disney artists to also being a great, if not very prolific, complete author. It started as a three-instalment adventure published around Christmas time in 1982, *Topolino e la spada di ghiaccio (Mickey and the ice sword*, De Vita/De Vita, I TL 1411-B .. 1413-A). Mickey and Goofy get accidentally teleported to a Tolkien-like dimension of elves, knights, peasants and wizards and, not to disappoint their hosts in desperate need of help, Goofy gives in and pretends to be the invincible mythical hero they mistakenly believe has come to their rescue. In this alternate universe, where the only Disney continuity elements are Mickey and Goofy themselves, De Vita (in real life a keen explorer of faraway exotic locales) has more headroom to develop a fantastic and totally original story. A year later, for Christmas 1983, De Vita is again in that state of grace (he authored no other scripts in the meantime, though he drew many stories) and delivers a shining second chapter, the two-part *Topolino e il torneo dell'Argaar* (*Mickey and the Argaar tournament*, De Vita/De Vita, I TL 1464-B .. 1465-A). Finally, for Christmas 1984, he writes the closing story of the trilogy (again having written nothing else in between), *Topolino e il ritorno del principe delle nebbie* (*Mickey and the return of the Prince of Mists*, De Vita/De Vita, I TL 1517-A), where the evil Darth Vader style mask is finally destroyed and the dimensional vector (the special plate

and spoon that made teleporting possible) is left in Argaar, to somehow prevent Mickey and Goofy from having to come back again. In this series De Vita proves that he is one of the few Disney authors who really understands Goofy and can make the most of him, not just as Mickey's silly helper but as a complex and mature character who wins not because he's clever but because of his pure, absent-minded, almost poetic innocence—and that's the connection with the Pezzin space opera mentioned above, to which by the way De Vita lent his talented pencils, in case you hadn't noted the credits.

Massimo De Vita was asked many times to follow up the hugely successful trilogy with some more episodes, but he refused to. The Yellow Book quotes him as saying "I've been asked for more stories like these from the editorial office. But fantasy is now a bit overworked and I don't particularly feel like continuing." It took him almost ten years to give in: but the wait was worth it. In 1993 he finally produced *Topolino e la bella addormentata nel cosmo*, (*Mickey and the cosmic Sleeping Beauty*, De Vita & Michelini/De Vita, I TL 1936-A .. 1937-A). In keeping with his feeling that the fantasy genre had been already over-exploited, he added several witty and enjoyable (I would say Jacovitti-style) self-ironical references. For example, on hearing that the evil mask is still exerting a negative influence, Goofy "jumps up one level" and complains about the lack of new ideas from script writers; and when his party is stuck between an angry monster and an impossible lava pit, he complains to De Vita that the situation is too unfair, and that he should give him a chance to get out!

Paperinik, the diabolic avenger

Now let's come back for a moment to Guido Martina to discuss one of his most important creations, Paperinik. It was Elisa Penna, a Mondadori staffer, who in 1969 suggested that Donald's character might become more interesting if he had a double life like the established super-heroes, from Clark Kent to Peter Parker. Actually, the inspiration for Paperinik, as the name itself suggests, came more from the Italian comic Diabolik than from the American super-heroes. Diabolik, created in 1962 by Angela and Luciana Giussani, was a devilish, very clever and unstoppable techno-thief dressed in a black ninja-style outfit; he killed anybody who got in his way and could impersonate anyone thanks to special face masks of his own invention. His pocket-sized comic, a bit smaller than Topolino, had been a huge success and had sparked several imitators. Donald, derided and humiliated by everybody from his cousin Gladstone to his uncle Scrooge, could get his own back by secretly becoming an all-powerful avenger! He too, like Diabolik, could have lots of techno-gadgets, impersonate anyone with face masks and wear a name ending in -k. Based on these hints, Martina came up with the script for *Paperinik il diabolico vendicatore* (*Paperinik the diabolic avenger*, I-TL 706-A .. 707-A, 1969) which Giovan Battista Carpi, then in his best period, beautifully illustrated. Donald receives by mistake the key and deed to Villa Rosa, an old country house won by Gladstone; but when he notices the mistake, he decides to keep quiet about it. The house is dilapidated, but in it he discovers the secret diary of its previous owner Fantomius, a gentleman-thief who led a double life and stole from the rich as a revenge for being considered a lazybones. Inspired by this reading, Donald, who since the beginning of the story has been repeatedly abused and humiliated by Scrooge, by Gladstone and even by the little nephews, asks Gyro to install a number of James Bond style gadgets to his car and steals some face masks representing Gladstone, Scrooge etc (blatant Diabolik reference here, the masks being the true hallmark of Diabolik) that Gyro had just created. He then picks up the original Fantomius kit, including gadgets and costume, from Villa Rosa. When night falls he wears Fantomius's costume, christens himself "Paperinik" and embarks in his first vengeance, a techno-robbery against his hated uncle, the tyrannical Scrooge! Observe how the robbery is motivated by spite and revenge, not by greed: Paperinik wants to vindicate Donald, whom Scrooge called "a lazybones, who couldn't even steal a thing from a blind and paralytic deaf-mute" (this and many other heavy Martina expressions were sanitized down to insipid "politically correct" counterparts by the sad editors of the 1993 reprint). To do so Paperinik, who thanks to his techno-gadgets successfully defeats all of Scrooge's burglar alarm systems and security locks, can't be bothered to steal the sacks of money around Scrooge's bed: "anyone could steal those!"; instead, he goes for the much more exciting banknote-stuffed mattress: "What a hit, guys! Hah hah! Stealing Scrooge's own mattress while he's sleeping on it!".

The rest of the story twists in various ways that we won't retell here: the important point to make is that the Paperinik of the origins makes Donald into a genuinely *evil* figure—something that only a Martina, and certainly not a Cimino or a Scarpa, could have done convincingly. Paperinik, as the title of his first adventure eloquently says, is above all an avenger who wants to get his own back against the tyrannic Scrooge (and note also that this "bad" Scrooge that Donald is somewhat justified in rebelling against is actually a creation of Martina, not of Barks). This initial imprint, however, could not and does not last: within his first four or five stories, Paperinik becomes a well-intentioned guardian angel that protects the good guys (Donald, the nephews but also Scrooge) from the bad guys (Rockerduck, the Beagle Boys and random assorted criminals). And this isn't due to a change in author, either: Martina himself, who for several years is the only one writing Paperinik stories, quickly softens his tones, realising that Donald can't become an evil and vindicative character if he is to retain the sympathies of his readers, who by the way like Scrooge too. So, while in his second story *Paperinik alla riscossa* (*Paperinik counterattacks*, Martina/Scarpa, I TL 743-A .. 744-A, 1970) our hero still explicitly mentions Scrooge, his creditors and Gladstone as the enemies he means to fight, and while in his third story *Paperinik torna a colpire* (*Paperinik strikes again*, Martina/Scarpa, I TL 788-A .. 789-A, 1971) he again ridicules both Gladstone and Scrooge, by his fourth story *Il doppio trionfo di Paperinik* (*Paperinik's double triumph*, Martina/Massimo De Vita, I TL 822-A .. 823-A, 1971) he is already helping out Scrooge against Rockerduck. In fact, though Paperinik is

now sided with Scrooge, he still acts in Martina's unscrupulous way: since Rockerduck is ranked a better jewellery collector than Scrooge and Scrooge can't stand being second-rank, Paperinik steals Rockerduck's rarest piece (an Egyptian jewel in the shape of a scarab) and gives it to Scrooge to make him become the best collector! And when, as a consequence, Scrooge goes to jail for theft and Rockerduck (who was after all the legitimate owner of the item) gives a party, Paperinik again steals the scarab from Rockerduck and humiliates him publicly; and everyone booes poor Rockerduck without him having actually done anything bad! Martina here plays on the natural dislike the reader has for characters such as Rockerduck and Gladstone: Paperinik, a Nietzschean hero who can do anything he likes, is a winner because he impersonates the reader's aversion for Rockerduck and Gladstone. And, much as I look at these stories today and rationally think that this Paperinik shouldn't really be one's favourite kind of hero, I remember reading them as a kid and finding them brilliant, just because the guys I hated got a beating, but without me noticing that they had actually done nothing to deserve it!

From then on, as I said, Martina softens his tones and Paperinik becomes somewhat more fair: from "diabolico vendicatore" to "giustiziere mascherato", he now switches from delivering vengeance to dispensing justice. This period, approximately from 1971 to 1977, is Paperinik's best season. Always scripted by Martina, the stories are now drawn by Massimo De Vita, who by that time has already brought his beautiful smooth stroke to a clean and elegant perfection. De Vita's beautiful Paperinik will in practice become the gold standard: any Paperinik stories drawn by other authors will from then on feel not quite genuine. The masked duck's arsenal of gadgets grows and grows with every story, thanks to Gyro: from memory-erasing candies to night vision goggles, from spring loaded boots to in-ear sound amplifiers, from a secret lift in Donald's cupboard (taking him to his underground hideout) to a closed circuit television system that lets him see anything that happens in and around the house, from a jet powered belt allowing brief flights to a special two-colour pen that cuts and resolders metal bars. For one of these golden-age stories try for example *Paperinik e la scuola del krimen* (*Paperinik and the school of krimen*, I TL 835-A .. 836-A, 1971), where a gang of thieves abducts first Donald, then Scrooge and eventually the kids while looking for the loot accumulated by their old crime professor, now dead. The final fight in the old gymnasium, where Paperinik single-handedly defeats the five bandits, is indeed reminiscent of those good old James Bond movies in which the hero is attacked by bad guys from all sides and still manages to come out as the winner.

An interesting twist in Paperinik's career is the appearance of a female counterpart: in *Paperinika e il filo di Arianna* (*Paperinika and Ariadne's thread*, Martina/Cavazzano, I TL 906-C, 1973), a heavily feminist Daisy Duck takes her revenge on the male world by turning into Paperinika with the help of the inventions of a mature lady called Genialina Edy Son. Donald is seduced and abducted by the sexy Sirena Seducy (and you know that, if anyone can draw a sexy woman in a Disney comic, it is Giorgio Cavazzano!) who, in team with two rough criminals, wants to raid Scrooge's money bin. Paperinika goes to the rescue, heavily underlining Donald's double ineptness for failing in his duty as a guardian but particularly for letting himself be seduced by that unknown woman. The whole story is apparently a triumph for Daisy's feminist claims. However, when read more closely, it reveals little details that make you notice how much of it is in fact tongue in cheek, with Martina actually poking fun at those same feminist claims! Paperinika won't have much following in Italy: Martina will only use her a couple more times. But the Brazilian authors will pick her up and use her regularly in a series dedicated to shabby superheroes including, among others, a super version of Fethry Duck.

The rest of the Paperinik stories after the golden period is not particularly noteworthy. The best ones are generally still drawn by De Vita, but scripted now by Pezzin. Overall, *Topolino* carries around 70 Paperinik stories, about half of which written by Martina. In 1993 a new publication appears, titled *Paperinik e altri supereroi* (*Paperinik and other superheroes*), initially carrying almost chronological reprints of the early Paperinik stories, though sadly with the sanitizing edits referred to above. The "other superheroes" are mostly minor Super Goof stories, used as filler material to make the bimonthly last longer. After a while the supply of golden age Paperinik stories runs out and the publishers start adding a couple of new, original Paperinik stories in each issue of this comic that was originally only based on reprints. On the whole the quality is rather low, and the series is only worth for its first ten issues or so with the stories from the golden period. Giovan Battista Carpi, the recently deceased grand master who drew the very first Paperinik story in 1969 and then almost completely abandoned the character after that, comes back to the masked avenger almost thirty years later and beautifully illustrates a script by Fabio Michelini that makes explicit reference to that first historic adventure: *Paperinink e il ritorno a Villa Rosa* (*Paperinik and the return to Villa Rosa*, Michelini/Carpi, I TL 2129-1 .. 2130-6, 1996). Unfortunately, while the first instalment is brilliant, the conclusion of the story seems to be somewhat lacking.

It was 1996, though, that introduced the most radical innovation not only in Paperinik's history but also in the Italian Disney comic panorama taken as a whole. Everything was new, starting from the numbering scheme inspired by the superhero comics: the new comic *PK - Paperinik New Adventures* opened its publications with issue number 0, to indicate a pre-series trial period during which they'd check the market's response. The external format was new, again similar to the superhero comics, with a stapled back instead of the traditional squarebound paperback of all the other Italian Disney titles. The internal layout was also new, inspired by... you guessed it, the superhero comics, perhaps with echoes from the Japanese manga: panels within panels, vertical and horizontal panels all mixed up, each page a treasure hunt to figure out what panel to look at next. The colours were all electronically applied—bright and shiny. The language was new, all full of techno neologisms. But, more than

anything else, the characters were new, starting from Paperinik himself. In this first story, *Evroniani* (*Evronians*, Sisti/Lavoradori, I PKNA 0, 1996) Donald is hired by Scrooge as caretaker of the Ducklair Tower, a 150 storey futuristic skyscraper in the middle of Duckburg. The building was designed by Everett Ducklair, a multibillionaire that disappeared without trace. That night, Paperinik fights some villains but for the first time all his weapons fail: the bad guys come from another planet! Hmmm... Paperinik explores the secret areas of this mysterious building and finally becomes friends with an Artificial Intelligence program called Uno (One), the controlling program of the giant computer that runs the skyscraper. Uno gives Paperinik new weapons and becomes his partner. The bad guys are Evronians: they attack people to steal their emotions, which they use as a source of energy. Various other things happen, though the plot, like the layout, is a bit confused. This editorial experiment, in fact, breaks any established bit of Disney continuity. The duck that walks into the skyscraper is Donald (or Paperinik) only by name: very little else connects him to the conventional character that we know and love from Martina, Scarpa, Cimino & C. His world, too, is totally different: the nephews, Gyro, Daisy, Rockerduck, the Beagle Boys, and largely even Scrooge after this first adventure have all faded into oblivion. New characters have replaced them: from the staff of the local TV station (and most notably the nosy reporter Angus Fangus) to all the alien officers of various sizes and shapes. It is basically a totally different comic, with a different world populated by different characters and speaking a different visual language. An amazing performance of creativity by Alessandro Sisti and Ezio Sisto, who brainstormed over the initial plot (the experienced writer Sisti was then the one who did the scripts for most of the initial episodes). The interesting aspect of all this is the tiny link connecting the hero of this comic with the established Paperinik born in 1969: because of that link, *this* new comic is picked up and read, out of curiosity if nothing else, by Disney fans that never opened a superhero comic in their life. The superficial identification of this hero with the real Paperinik acts as an introduction, making them feel at home. And it must be said that the experiment is interesting. Once you realise and accept that you're not looking at Donald or Paperinik at all, but just at a completely different character that happens to have the same name, you can appreciate the comic on its own merits. It's imaginative, modern and technofriendly; its visual structure may make it a bit hard to read and follow for a traditional Disney reader, but those who persevere discover a wealth of new narrative ideas and a strong urge to tell a new kind of story. Even the editorials before and after the comic story try to be totally different, in search of a new ideal of "coolness": purposefully cryptic and robotic, often almost arrogant, they don't spare snappy answers to readers' questions. And they give lots of extra details (presented as secret computer files) such as the construction plans of the Ducklair Tower or of Paperinik's new futuristic car. It took several months for *Paperinik New Adventures*, or *PK* as it is usually called, to start rolling after its issue 0 (which was followed, in an imaginatively perverse numbering scheme, by 0/2, then 0/3 and finally 1); but soon it started going full steam and the entire comic was cloned and translated by Disney licensees in several other countries—the most trustworthy indication of its deserved success.

Rising stars

It's very difficult to close this article without feeling a sense of incompleteness for all the talented authors that have not been mentioned at all yet: from Bruno Sarda, who created the brilliant character of Indiana Pipps (known as Arizona Goof in the American translation), a licorice-hungry Disney incarnation of Indiana Jones, as well as the excellent movie parody *3 paperi e 1 bebè* (*Three ducks and a baby*, Sarda/M. De Vita, I TL 1730-A, 1989); to Massimo Marconi, who gave us the unique medieval adventure of *Topolino e la spada invincibile* (*Mickey Mouse and the invincible sword*, Marconi/Cavazzano, I TL 1728-B, 1989), as well as another unforgettable French movie parody, the sweetly romantic *Qui, Quo, Qua e il tempo delle mele* (*Huey, Dewey and Louie and the time of the apples*, Marconi/M. De Vita, I TL 1688-A, 1988). And how not to mention Jerry Siegel, the father of Superman, Italian Disney writer *ad honorem* who wrote more than 150 stories (of very variable quality, but with some true gems) for *Topolino* and *Almanacco*? And countless others; but one has to stop somewhere, if nothing else because of space constraints.

Before parting, though, I'd like to at least mention the work of some younger authors who have distinguished themselves from the high-volume, generic and almost industrialised Italian production of the late Nineties. Their Disney careers have only recently started, so we can look forward to many years of new stories from them.

Corrado Mastantuono is primarily an artist, and in fact one of the most gifted among the many that started as Cavazzano clones. In search of his own personal identity on the pencils side (he moved away from the elegant Cavazzano stroke of his origins, which however he mastered better than most; he is currently experimenting with a more angular and deformed style of rendering, but it is apparent that this is only part of an evolutionary phase, and anyway he has the skill and taste to produce excellent artwork), he recently tried his hand at writing his own stories, even creating a new secondary character, Bum Bum Ghigno, who so far featured in three well orchestrated adventures: *Paperino e la macchina della conoscenza* (*Donald Duck and the knowledge machine*, Mastantuono/Mastantuono, I TL 2172-1, 1997), *Paperino e Bum Bum pasticcieri pasticcioni* (*Donald and Bum Bum the messy confectioners*, Mastantuono/Mastantuono, I TL 2206-1, 1998) and *Paperino e il tesoro della palude nera* (*Donald Duck and the treasure of the black swamp*, Mastantuono/Mastantuono, I TL 2226-1, 1998).

Tito Faraci, writer, is one of the comparatively few young authors who feels comfortable with non-duck universes: in particular he is a great fan of the good old-fashioned Mickey Mouse by Gottfredson and, before starting writing his own scripts, he used to be in charge of selecting and commenting Gottfredson stories for the

reprints in *Topomistery*. But don't think for a moment that he is attempting to recreate the atmosphere of the Gottfredson strips in his own plots. He writes very distinctive Mickey-universe stories in which Mickey plays a minor role (if he appears at all) and where the real hero is instead someone like detective Casey, Peg Leg Pete or a new colleague of Casey he created, called Rock Sassi, introduced in *La lunga notte del commissario Manetta* (*The long night of chief Casey*, Faraci/Cavazzano, I TL 2147-1, 1997). His writing style is very modern, synthetic and elliptic: he shows you the prelude of an action and its conclusion, leaving you to imagine the development. His humour is paradoxical and debunking: over an argument on the difficulty of going in town inconspicuously without being spotted, Peg Leg Pete tells Mickey "What about yourself, with those satellite-dish ears!". In some of his first few scripts the rhythm and plot development still had to be perfected, but check for example *Manetta e l'indagine natalizia* (*Casey and the Christmas investigation*, Faraci/Cavazzano, I TL 2196-1, 1997) for an outstanding performance. Some of Faraci's best work is the creation of *Angus Tales*, a mini-series of secondary episodes about the life of inquisitive reporter Angus Fangus, that appeared in the back of *PK New Adventures* magazine, illustrated with fascinating watercolours by Silvia Ziche. Highly satirical, hopelessly pointless and inescapably funny, the series is graced by cameo appearances of the imaginary *Baldo l'allegro castoro* (*Baldo the happy beaver*) television cartoon.

Speaking of Silvia Ziche, she herself is perhaps the greatest concentrate of creative energy of this new generation of authors. With some previous experience of non-Disney work, she starts as an artist, shepherded by the ubiquitous grandmaster Cavazzano. Her stroke is very clean and spontaneous, very essential, almost childlike, certainly far from the Disney canon of the beautifully proportioned Scarpa and Carpi of the Sixties and yet incredibly expressive and emotional. Her characters are not elaborately drawn figures but little more than symbols standing for personalities that the reader already knows; yet, in the few strokes that she spends to render a face, she manages to immediately and very dynamically express every tonality of their inner feelings. After a few years illustrating other people's scripts, she becomes a complete Disney author in 1996 when her first solo story appears in Topolino—an outstanding bravura performance that still remains, to me, her best work to date, despite the other good stuff she produced. *Il papero del mistero* (*The duck of mystery*, Ziche/Ziche, I TL 2115-2 .. 2138-4) is an amazing 24-part self referential soap opera which makes fun of everything, from soap operas to soap opera watchers, from television advertisements to the way in which people respond to television advertisements, from cinema to Disney comics. Above all, it makes fun of itself: over and over again, the characters themselves and in particular Scrooge, the writer, director and first actor of the soap opera, admit that the plot is absolutely idiotic and pointless, and yet it keeps people riveted to their televisions to the point that they stop all the other activities to avoid missing a single minute of the soap when it's on. And, funnily enough, that's exactly what happened to me as a reader: when my subscription copy of *Topolino* arrived in my mailbox (with the usual two or three-week delay), instead of idly putting it on the coffee table to be opened and looked at later "when there is time", for 24 consecutive weeks I ripped the envelope open first thing in the morning, still in my pyjamas, and immediately flicked through the pages to find the next instalment of the *papero del mistero*, that I would read during breakfast, then leaving the comic on the coffee table and sometimes not reading the other stories for a month. The story itself was silly, but the sequence of instalments was riveting. As Zen would have it, "the journey is the reward". I found that story a witty masterpiece of creativity and fun.

Conclusion

This must be the end of our necessarily incomplete tour of Italian Disney comics, which I have tried to present in a slightly different way, by introducing you primarily to the *writers* who invented the stories rather than to the artists that rendered them into graphical creations. The latter ones have finally, at least in this last decade, attracted the attention of the critics and the public and they are receiving the credit they deserve: both the luxurious *Capolavori Disney* series by Comic Art and the popularly priced *I Maestri Disney* from the Walt Disney Company Italia, available from newsstands, do an excellent job of presenting the best works of the greatest authors of the Italian tradition, but unfortunately confine themselves to the *graphical* artists. While I am the first to rejoice that those excellent artists are finally brought to the attention of the public, I find this selection limiting, not to say unfair: while it's true that the immediate appeal of a story depends more on the drawings than on the plot, the really great stories are great primarily because of their narration, because they do *tell a nice story*.

So it's time for this other half of the great masters of Disney comics to also get the recognition they deserve, and I hope that this essay can be seen as a little contribution towards that, as my personal thank you to those great storytellers that gave me so many hours of pleasure with their creations.

Annotated Bibliography

The sources referenced below are in Italian unless otherwise stated. Sadly, many of them are also out of print and/or hard to track down, though you might have some luck at one of the big Italian comics conventions.

[Yellow] Luca BOSCHI, Leonardo GORI, Andrea SANI, *I Disney Italiani*, Granata Press, Bologna, 1990, ISBN 88-7248-000-0, 288 pg. By far the best and most complete book ever written on Italian Disney comics, by the most knowledgeable experts in the field. A second edition is in the plans. If you can only get one item from this bibliography, get this.

[Martina] Erik BALZARETTI, Gianni MILONE (eds), *Guido Martina: Topolino, Pecos Bill e il professore*, Edizioni Fumettoclub Torino, 1994, 36 pg. A limited-distribution little monograph with some interesting information on Martina and a

reprint of his first story, *Topolino e il cobra bianco*, that Disney never published again.

[Blue] Luca BOSCHI, Leonardo GORI, Andrea SANI, *Romano Scarpa: un cartoonist italiano fra animazione e fumetto*, Alessandro Distribuzioni, Bologna, 1988, 160 pg. The definitive reference on the Venetian master. Lots of unpublished sketches, script ideas and so on. Several insightful essays by the greatest Scarpa experts in the world. Highly recommended.

[Scarpa WWW] Frank STAJANO, *Romano Scarpa*, http://www.uk.research.att.com/~fms/disney/scarpa/, 1995 (in English). Also part of [DC WWW]. An introduction to Scarpa with a short essay illustrating Scarpa's graphical evolution based on the timeline of his Disney works.

[Rosa] Alberto BECATTINI, Leonardo GORI, Francesco STAJANO, *Don Rosa e il rinascimento disneyano*, Comic Art, Roma, 1997, 128 pg. The first and so far only full-length book entirely dedicated to Don Rosa. Four interviews, a full biography, several in-depth essays, lots of photographs and illustrations and various indices of anything related to Rosa. On the whole this has little to do with Italian comics, but in this book I have also written at length about some topics (such as continuity in Disney or the relationship between plot and artwork) that I hinted at in the present article.

[Cavazzano WWW] Frank STAJANO, *Giorgio Cavazzano*, http://www.uk.research.att.com/~fms/disney/cavazzano/, 1996 (in English). Also part of [DC WWW]. Reprinted verbatim as a chapter of the book [Cavazzano]. A detailed essay on the career of the most innovative Italian Disney artist and his evolution through several drawing styles.

[Cavazzano] Luca BOSCHI, Mauro BRUNI, Roberto IRACE (eds), *The art of Giorgio Cavazzano*, Lo Scarabeo, 1997, 128 pg (in Italian despite the title, except for my chapter [Cavazzano WWW]). The latest and best of several good books on the dynamic Venetian author. No other Cavazzano book is illustrated so richly and with so many little gems and unpublished sketches.

[If] Franco FOSSATI, *Disney made in Italy* in "IF" seconda serie # 1/2 and 3/4, Epierre, 1982. The fundamental indexing work of Franco Fossati, then editor in chief at *Topolino*, revealed for the first time the names of the authors behind the Italian stories. This index has been the foundation of all serious studies on Italian Disney comics ever since.

[DCD WWW] Harry FLUKS (ed), *The Disney Comics Database*, in [DC WWW] (in English). Now renamed to I.N.D.U.C.K.S. and with additional material at http://members.xoom.com/~bolderbast/ This gigantic project is indexing all the Disney Comics in the world with the help of the most dedicated and competent volunteers in the respective countries. Every aspect of the comics is taken into account: stories, creators, issues, characters, translations, reprints—the lot. By cross-checking the reprint information you may be able to find local translations for the stories quoted in this essay.

[DC WWW] Per STARBÄCK (ed), *The Disney Comics Pages*, http://www.update.uu.se/~starback/disney-comics/ (in English). The web's most important site for anything related to Disney Comics.

About the story references

It is the duty of the scientist to be accurate in citing references. In my case, as far as the stories are concerned, this duty is made much easier by the excellent indexing job started by the late Franco Fossati [If], without which an essay like this one would be missing its skeleton. I am proud of having given my little contribution to this project: with Marco Barlotti I converted Fossati's index into digital form (initially only for personal use) and then I contacted Fossati himself, shortly before his premature death in 1996, to ask him if we could update and distribute the digital version. He endorsed the project with great generosity and enthusiasm and now the regularly updated outcome of this conversion is integrated in the global Disney Comics Database managed by Harry Fluks [DCD WWW], which you are warmly invited to consult. The story references used in this essay quote the normalised story code as used in the DCD. The translations of story titles into English are my own and are as literal as possible: they are meant to give you a rough idea of what the story is about, but may be wildly different from the actual translated title in the edition you have, if one exists. The format used is: *Original Italian Title* (*literal translation of title*, writer/artist, code, year).

Acknowledgements

First of all I'd like to thank Roberto Dell'Agli, my friend as well as my cousin, who shares my passion for Disney comics and for the hilarious *Vernacoliere*. He once gave me a truckload of his comics and started me on collecting reprints instead of just *Topolino*, which is how I came to know most of the good old stuff from the Fifties and Sixties. A grateful thought also goes to Anna Coviello and her late husband Nicola, who gave me the first few *Topolino* on which I learnt to read. Then I'd like to thank my great friend Leonardo Gori, one of the world's most knowledgeable comics experts, particularly but by no means exclusively in the Disney field. The first chapter of the present essay owes him a special debt, since all I know about the "Prehistory" I learnt, one way or another, from Leonardo. He was also the one who first encouraged me to write up some of my own comics essays for publication. Doing the Rosa and Gottfredson books in close partnership with him was a wonderful experience. Then I'd like to remember Franco Fossati who started indexing the Italian comics in the Seventies and, as I said in the above note, gave us his enthusiastic approval for the project of a freeware digital conversion of his work. And finally I want to thank my teammates of the Disney

Comics Database, particularly Marco Barlotti (who started all this Fossati-Stajano-Barlotti conversion business and is now the principal maintainer of the Italian section of the DCD), Harry Fluks (the coordinator of the whole database project) and Per Starbäck (who started the disney-comics mailing list that brought us all together), without whose accurate cataloguing efforts it would have been a lot harder to do the preliminary research for this work.

About the author

Francesco (Frank) Stajano is a trilingual European who lives in Cambridge, England. He enjoys writing and building things. An electronic engineer by training, he works on futuristic computer systems as a research scientist at AT&T Laboratories Cambridge (formerly Olivetti-Oracle), inspired by his hero Gyro Gearloose, and recently also joined the Computer Security Group at the University of Cambridge. He created the Doom Honorific Titles in 1994. He has been reading Disney comics since his earliest youth. He has written several articles and essays on comics and co-authored two books, one on Don Rosa whom he visited and extensively interviewed at his Louisville home in 1996, and another on Floyd Gottfredson.