

May 1, 1991 (Vol. 6, no. 17)

Dear Colleague:

I was lining up for a cup of coffee at the Memorial Union when a man accosted me and introduced himself as a former student in one of my large classes. He then introduced me as "his teacher" to his daughter, Suzy, who looked about four years old. So I asked Suzy whether she too had a teacher. In reply, she raised her hand with three fingers sticking out. "Three!" the two adults exclaimed, impressed. Father and daughter left, but a minute later they returned. Well, Suzy wanted me to admire her teddy bear, which she was holding. We talked a bit. The child spoke with the typical gravity of her age. She and I carried on a Habermasian dialogue in the sense that we transcended the barriers of age, gender, and culture. We were able to do so, because we did not have our consciousness raised. That is, we were not aware of our differences, only of our common humanity and of our common interest in a bit of the world--a toy bear.

Alas, how easy it is to lose that sense of common humanity. I looked at a panoramic picture of the Kurdish refugees on the hillsides of Turkey. In the foreground was a little girl riding on the shoulder of her mother. Suddenly, my eyes were caught by a bit of decoration on the child's coverall--Donald Duck--and just as suddenly the people shown in the picture were no longer suffering in a distant country, but in Iowa. Mass starvation next door. But how fatuous and sad to think that it took Donald Duck to persuade me of our common humanity.

People are invisible unless art, even when it is only the minor art of Disney, reminds us of their blood-and-bone presence. (A definition of human beings is that for them only mediated experiences are real). I speak condescendingly of Disney's minor art and yet his cartoon characters and the world they live in have a mythic power that transcends cultural divisions. How else does one account for the fact that the first cold-weather Disneyland--in Tokyo (the capital of the most chauvinistic of cultures)--is a smashing success? Capitalist cunning? Maybe, but I am unwilling to give capitalists so much credit, nor ordinary people who flock to Disneylands so little.

Soldiers sometimes paint totemic pictures on their tanks. One officer raises his binoculars and finds an enemy tank in the distance. Just as he is about to order the cannons to blast off he sees Donald Duck painted on the enemy's vehicle... and hesitates.

Best wishes,

