

The Flintstones

Jefery Levy
Professor Maniquis
Marxist Criticism

Structurally, the episode of The Flintstones which I am going to discuss resembles both fairy tale and fable. In this cartoon episode, a wish is granted to the hero, Fred Flintstone, and as Fred Flintstone experiences the fantasy of his wish, he learns a contradictory, ideologically charged lesson, a lesson which attempts to validate both the individual's place in society, and the dominant ideology of that society itself.

Indeed, with close analysis of the significant form of this cartoon episode, it becomes apparent that this form produces, paradoxically, both an indictment and a validation of state-capitalist, bourgeois ideology, the dominant ideology of the historical period during which the cartoon was produced.

At the beginning of the cartoon we hear the usual theme song. The theme song is very important in that it describes the Flintstone family in a seemingly simple, but actually very complicated manner. In the song, we are told that the Flintstone

family is "a modern stone-age family." What are the implications of this paradoxical statement? In one sense, it creates an a-historical, time transcendent world; an attempt to negate the process of history in both past and future directions, emphasizing a constant, all-incorporative present. But, dialectically, this attempt is itself negated by the significant form of the cartoon, which places it at a definite historical point by revealing a highly specific ideological positioning, namely, that of bourgeois state-capitalism, the dominant ideology at the time the cartoon was produced. And, under the guise of subjective, individual liberation from the hegemony of bourgeois, state-capitalist ideology, the significant form of the cartoon actually contains and diverts this very struggle for individual liberation.

The story begins with Fred's boss, Mr Slate, the model bourgeois cog in the state-capitalist machine, sitting at a huge desk in his "executive office." Slate picks up a phone and speaks into it: "Get hold of the foreman and tell him that Flintstone is goldbricking again!"

In the rock quarry, Fred Flintstone, the model proletariat wage-laborer, is asleep atop the gigantic dinosaur which he "operates." Here is the first point of interest: in The Flintstones cartoon series, animals are transformed into machines, objects with a specific use and function. The living is turned into the mechanical. The implication of this dialectic is far reaching--in the world of The Flintstones, emphasis is

placed upon societal utilitarianism. It is not surprising, then, that this entire episode deals with Fred Flinstone's subjective realization of his usefulness and importance as "a valuable worker." But Fred must first be made to recognize his "usefulness," and re-direct his rebelliousness into his work.

When the hostile foreman blows a whistle in Fred's ears and wakes him up, Fred mumbles to himself: "That Slate, all he does is sit back and figure out ways to make me miserable." When Fred clocks out for his break, the manager tells him that he "clocked out forty five seconds too early." And as Fred rests at the water cooler during his break, Boss Slate turns on a giant television monitor in his office (which shows Fred resting at the water cooler), and screams out at Fred over a loudspeaker which is set at a brain-splitting volume: "No more goofing off, Flintstone, I'm watching your every move!"

Clearly, Fred is depicted as a frustrated worker, alienated by a hostile work environment, and filled with threatening, rebellious ~~needs~~ desires. When Fred arrives home after work and Dino the dog runs to greet him, Fred takes out his pent-up hostility on the dog, smashing the dog on the head. Barney, Fred's best friend, points out that "Dino was only sayin' how glad he was to see you home." Fred recognizes this and apologizes, wishing that he could be boss, and "sit back, give orders, and rake in the dough."

It is at this point which a character named Gazoo appears.

Gazoo is a small alien being from a very advanced civilization. He has been sent to earth to do "good deeds," which always consist of teaching Fred and Barney lessons on life, granting them wishes which ultimately lead them to individual "self-discovery" and "self-realization." Since Gazoo is from a super-advanced civilization, he is all-powerful and all-knowing, and the lessons which he teaches Fred and Barney are thus invested with an aura of fundamental truth.

So Gazoo grants Fred a wish--Fred is going to be "boss for a day."

At the beginning of this day, as Fred and Barney are driving to work (as they do everyday), Fred's "Buick" suddenly turns into a long black limousine. Seconds later, the limousine pulls to a stop and Fred kicks Barney out, saying, "I can't be seen driving with you." Barney says "yes, boss," and gets out of the limousine. Fred's sudden rise out of his class, visually symbolized by the transformation of the "Buick" into the limousine, immediately turns him into a bad person, who "can't be seen" with his closest friend.

At work, Fred takes revenge on all those who have been mean to him. For Fred, work is momentarily transformed into play--he is actually having fun. But then something happens. A little man marches into Fred's "executive office" and says: "I'm the chairman of the board of directors." Fred looks astonished, and the little man, noting Fred's bewilderment, says: "Your boss, stupid!" To this Fred replies: "You mean the boss has a boss...gee, I didn't know."

During the next few scenes we see the chairman making

Fred more miserable than he ever was before. By lunch time, Fred is starved. But the chairman comes in and tells Fred that he cannot have lunch in the executive dining room, that instead, they must tour the rock factory. While they are inspecting the factory, the chairman forces Fred to eat a single carrot for lunch. Fred's agony is multiplied as they pass by the "working men" (who are gorging themselves with hearty, red-meat lunches), and the chairman tells Fred that the "working men must eat healthy lunches" because "they are the backbone of production." During these scenes, Fred mumbles to himself things like "I never knew Slate had it so tough," and "Being a boss is tougher than I thought," marking the beginning of Fred's discovery of his true, natural place in society.

When Fred and the chairman arrive at the board-of-directors meeting, all of the executives are eating carrots for lunch. At the meeting, the board members discuss the fact that "wages have gone up and prices have gone down," and then ask Fred what his "report on production" is, to which Fred replies: "We produce rocks." The look on Fred's face tells us that by now Fred has realized that he is out of place; his alienation now is even greater than it was before his rise in social position.

Fred's alienation is brought to its zenith by the fact that when the whistle blows at the end of the working day, Fred is not allowed to go home. The chairman of the board tells Fred that it is "closing time for our valuable working men--you stay till your work is done and thats an order!"

On his way home, Fred's limousine turns back into a "Buick," and Fred, relieved, calls out to the heavens: "Gazoo, I'll never forget you for teaching me such a good lesson."

When Fred arrives happily at home, he tells his best friend Barney: "I've been goofin' off at work--but no more--today I found out what a lucky guy I really am." Thus Fred's initial rebellious desires have been contained by the very societal force which created them--through closure, the existing ideology is conserved.

This contradiction is further embodied in the significant, dialectical nature of the form and content of the cartoon. The content of the cartoon, not insignificantly using complex, adult oriented images of production, gives us a character's discovery of his real, useful place in society, a place which confirms his own individuality as a "valuable worker." The form, dialectically, tells us that the aforementioned content validates the essential bourgeois ideology at the historical point of the cartoon's production. Even in The Flintstones, form and content exist dialectically,

And for Fred Flintstone, being part of the work force, "a valuable working-man," heals the very alienation it is specified as causing.

Excellent!

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