

The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation

David Whitley

THE IDEA OF NATURE IN DISNEY ANIMATION

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‘... Where is the voice of nature calling us? Back to a pre-modern age? Or forward to a saner future?’

Theodore Adorno

Introduction

Wild Sentiment: The Theme of Nature in Disney Animation

‘Disney’s films are a revolt against partitioning and legislating, against spiritual stagnation and greyness. But the revolt is lyrical. The revolt is a daydream.’

Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*

This book takes a fresh look at Disney animated films, seen from the particular perspective of their engagement with the theme of wild nature. This theme, I shall argue, was of central importance from the moment Disney first ventured fatefully into the form of the animated feature in 1937. Grafted onto the root-stem of fairy tale and linked predominantly to the plotline of maturation within romantic comedy, the theme of wild nature forms the very heartland of Disney’s animated features from their inception in *Snow White* through to recent films such as *Finding Nemo* and *Brother Bear*. Not all of Disney’s animated feature films focus centrally on wild creatures or natural environments, of course. Indeed this provides a useful principle of exclusion, enabling the films considered in detail in this study to be narrowed down to manageable proportions. But the theme is prevalent enough to make a claim for its centrality justifiable and even those films – outside the realm of this study – which feature domesticated animals or humans as their sole protagonists are often concerned with contrasts between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’ in their assessments of behaviour. Cruella De Vil is not the only figure in Disney whose characteristic brutality is made to contrast with animals (and animal lovers) who have an affinity with the natural world. In many of the most famous and best loved Disney films, however – such as *Snow White*, *Bambi*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Lion King* and *Finding Nemo* – wild nature figures directly and it is with these films that I shall be principally concerned.

It is not only the prevalence of wild nature as a theme within Disney animation that justifies the focus of this study, however. What nature means to us, the forms in which we perceive what we deem to be ‘natural’, the feelings and the ideas that we bring to bear on our relationship with the natural world, have all become of critical importance at the historical juncture we now live in. In studying some of the ways that these issues are embedded within Disney’s films, therefore, I am aware that I have also embarked on a venture that has involved educating and attuning myself in significant new ways. This has been an exciting project for me at a personal level because it has taken me beyond the reach of my previous understanding and left me feeling differently about a range of things I had previously taken for granted. I hope the reader of this book can share in something of that excitement.

Engagement Through Sentiment

Disney films are associated, above anything else, with the realm of feeling. These are films whose stock in trade is emotion, often construed in a negative mode within academic criticism as conservatively sentimental. Again and again, Disney animated features make a play for our feelings; inventing animals with exaggerated features that enhance their cuteness; creating characters out of stereotypes that are finessed by charm and humour; developing stock situations with a twist designed to engage the audience's feelings with renewed potency. Such deliberate attempts to court and cultivate sentiment are often taken to be signs of the inauthentic in Disney's aesthetic, a pandering to popular taste that mitigates against developing the art of animation in more probing, thoughtful or challenging forms. The astonishing commercial success of Disney animation over such a long period, the expansion of the Disney Company's corporate interests into a whole range of enterprises with global reach and the ensuing domination of the Disney brand in the realm of children's entertainment have encouraged such critical perspectives. But as this framework of critical ideas has begun to constitute a standard response to Disney within academic writing, it may be worth looking again, from a more open point of view, at some of the underlying assumptions, particularly in relation to how we understand the role of sentiment within popular art forms. This is a particularly important issue at our present historical conjuncture because so much of our mainstream political rhetoric on environmental issues in the West is directed towards rationalist goals of 'sustainability', designed to accommodate relatively minor changes in outlook and lifestyle to the underlying norms of economic growth and productivity, with technology being viewed as the principal resource that needs to be engaged to stave off global crisis. Yet others argue, with increasing urgency, that what is needed to face our current situation adequately is not simply an investment in new 'greener' technologies and small adjustments in our thinking about our patterns of consumption, but rather a whole revolution in sensibility and the value systems that underpin our lives (Bonnett 2004). What needs to change here is the way we feel about the world, the way we understand and relate to the other – non-human as well as human – organisms that share our sphere of existence, and the way we experience our identities as human beings in relation to the complex web of linked organic systems that intersect with our lives. This is not simply an intellectual exercise or an adjustment of attitude; the challenge is to integrate thought and feeling at a more profound level and in new ways.

If this is the real challenge that the environmental agenda of the twenty-first century has put before us, then the question arises as to what role art – which has always had a primary function in helping us both to focus and to integrate thoughts and feelings in relation to the most fundamental challenges of our existence – may play in shaping our awareness. Is it possible that popular art – which tends to simplify problematic issues and to rely on narrative patterns that focus interest on the personalities of the characters and the immediate impact of actions, rather than more reflective or complex modes of response – could have a role beyond the relatively straightforward transmission of social ideologies in affecting our consciousness? If we begin by countenancing this as a possibility, then the enhanced role of sentiment

within dramatic narratives such as Disney animation could provide audiences – and especially young audiences – with a cultural arena within which heightened emotions and humour, rather than operating as a barrier to thought and critical engagement, might offer a relatively safe sphere within which crucial issues could be rehearsed and even – in light forms – explored.

Evidence that this could be a fruitful hypothesis to bring to bear on the legacy of Disney animation in particular is provided by the impact of one of the earliest features produced by the company, *Bambi* (1942). In chapter three, which is devoted entirely to an analysis of this film, I argue that *Bambi* was innovative in realizing the potential of an archetypal plot – the idyllic realm of nature rendered vulnerable by human action – within a particular historical conjuncture. The populist idiom within which Disney developed this theme should not distract us from appreciating how the film engages audiences with key issues that had been developed within the ethos of conservationism, as this is distinctively embodied within North American traditions of thought. The care and artistic sensitivity that Disney animators brought to this project, including choices in the way the environment that the deer live in is represented, heighten the audience's attentiveness to detail in a way that allows the significance of the animals' lives to acquire multiple meanings. At one level, the story of a young deer's growth to adulthood, surviving the emotional impact of the death of its mother at an early age, can be understood straightforwardly as the classic Disney maturation plot, linked to the life cycle of the animal and offered to the reader through a mode of emotional identification that includes rampant anthropomorphizing. However, the realization of this plot, I argue, opens the story out to other meanings and connections. Particularly important in this regard is the way the imagery of *Bambi* connects with the idea of 'wilderness', as this has been developed by writers such as John Muir and Henry Thoreau and through traditions of landscape photography epitomized most fully in the work of Ansel Adams.

I explore these connections in detail in chapter three. What needs to be recognized at the outset though, is that the particular form in which the plot of *Bambi* is realized makes its sentimental strain double edged. On the one hand, the film's unabashed play for young viewers' emotions – rendering wild nature as disarmingly cute – may create a barrier, making it more difficult for viewers to understand and relate to a 'real' nature that has not been so carefully manicured and stage managed as spectacle. The choreographed interactions between animal 'friends' of different species, the wide-eyed enhancement of facial features designed to appeal to human ideals of attractiveness and the elimination of natural predators to create a world of idyllic innocence all combine to produce a sentimental viewpoint that is difficult to reconcile with full respect for the integrity and otherness of the natural world. On the other hand, the emotional identification that these features in part facilitate undoubtedly enables a powerful empathy to be built up between the viewer and an archetypal image of nature as a form to which we are connected and owe allegiance. In this latter sense, the sentimental devices serve a larger aim, as they might do within any other art form with unrealistic conventions that the audience accepts. If the sweeteners can be swallowed without gagging moreover (a difficulty more likely to be experienced by older viewers), other aspects come into play, which temper the saccharine laced aesthetic and attune the viewer more profoundly to significant

features of wild nature also displayed in more serious art forms. Again, these aspects are reviewed more fully in chapter three, but they include the lavish attention paid to sensuous detail by the animators that imparts a lyrical quality to the film, consonant with the attentive reverence shown towards every feature of the natural environment by Muir, Thoreau and Ansel Adams.

Historical Contexts

The capacity of the sentiment engendered within Disney animations to point in different directions is further complicated by the way audiences' sensibilities may be shaped by the historical contingencies of their time. The historical moment at which *Bambi* was first released, for instance, just after America's entry into World War II in the aftermath of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, was particularly significant. *Bambi* was received with rather lukewarm ambivalence and did comparatively poorly at the box office on its initial run. One might speculate that the particular ambience of the peaceful, innocent, natural world evoked in *Bambi* was an impediment for audiences at this moment in time, when the national sensibility was being orientated to harnessing aggression in response to a larger threat worldwide and to mobilizing for war. It was only during the 1950s, when it was re-released several times, that the film started to hit a nerve of environmental conscience with audiences and became one of the most popular of all Disney's animated features.

The example of *Bambi* suggests at least two notions that are of great importance for this study. First, although the plotline may be relatively simple, the artistic choices made in its realization are related to ideas and figurative traditions in more complex ways that can shape viewers' perceptions and responses, though not necessarily in single minded or stable forms. This multiplicity – and changing nature – of possible responses informs my second point. Henry Giroux has argued that 'Disney inscribes itself in a commanding way on the lives of children and powerfully shapes the way America's cultural landscape is imagined' (2004: 168). This is a strong argument; but the shaping of a 'cultural landscape' is an interactive process, rather than the imposition of a singular template, and the interaction that takes place is both between the film and the ideas/images that inform the creative process of its making and between the completed film and successive generations of viewers. One could argue that the 'cultural landscape' that was shaped within *Bambi* at the moment of its completion represented a rather conservative version of key ideas in the environmental philosophy of the time, mapped onto the archetype of a vulnerable, innocent paradise. The seedbed which the film's images laid down for viewers in the mid- to late 1950s, however, was arguably rather different. Those who saw the film as children in this period were exposed to more radical critiques of environmental practices (widely available from the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 onwards) as they came to maturity as young adults. The imagery and emotional power of *Bambi* clearly connected with these more radical critiques for a significant number of these viewers, who went on to become environmental activists. The emotional power of *Bambi* can thus operate in different directions, a point that remains in evidence to this day when, as a counterpoint to its radicalizing

legacy, the film's title is often invoked as a derogatory shorthand denoting attitudes of sentimental indulgence towards animal protection.

The Force of Realism

The degree – and form – in which the emotive power of animated films may be realized is influenced by another factor that is particularly distinctive to the Disney aesthetic and has become a contentious issue as animation finally begins to receive the attention it deserves within film studies. This factor is the quality of realism with which animated film may be imbued. Many of the most important figures who extolled the virtues of the animated medium in the early years of its development felt that animation was liberating and exciting precisely because it could move beyond the aesthetic constraints of realism. The great Russian film innovator Sergei Eisenstein, who was a lifelong admirer of Disney's work, developed a new concept of 'plasmaticness' to encompass animated film's capacity to reshape reality on its own terms and, implicitly, to critique the mechanical constraints of a machine age, turning its own industrial mode of production to ultimately liberating ends (1988: 21). As Disney moved from the more anarchic terrain of the cartoon short into his distinctive development of the animated feature, however, the company embraced a much more realistic aesthetic. Huge technical and artistic resources were brought to bear on enhancing the capacity of animated film to approximate to the real world in terms of the impression created by movement and surface detail, albeit whilst retaining the licence to interpolate fantasy sequences and devices. Since Disney was to retain a dominant world position within the realm of the animated feature for the next sixty years, this aesthetic shift was obviously of enormous significance and has provoked a range of critical responses amongst theorists and historians of the medium. Michael Barrier epitomizes the hostile view of the new Disney aesthetic when he writes that: 'Once it had been established that a story was a fairy tale or an animal fable, "fact" dominated, in the form of a very subtle but ultimately parasitic animation, separated from live action only by a leavening of caricature' (1999: 4). Other writers, such as Paul Wells, have taken up more ambivalent positions, recognizing that while Disney 'fixed an aesthetic style that was intrinsically bound up with conservatism, consensus and conciliation' (2002a: 23), modernist elements in the aesthetic also retained the capacity to subvert this tendency and allow more open readings engaged with contemporary agendas.

This issue is of particular importance for the present study because the criticisms levelled at Disney in relation to the way the theme of nature is developed and represented appear to come from opposite, and sometimes contradictory, directions. On the one hand, as we have seen, the dominance of realism is held to inhibit the development of more radical formal strategies that might make the viewer question their relation to what is 'natural' in the world. On the other hand, many of the writers who have focused on the theme of nature within Disney animation have taken the films to task for not being realistic enough. Murphy (1995), Lutts (1992) and Schickel (1986) all criticize Disney animated features on the grounds, ultimately, that they create false, sanitized and sweetened images of nature. In the analysis of films that follows I have been keenly aware of this debate but I have tried to avoid falling into line with either of

its polarized extremes. I have attempted throughout to be responsive to the particular qualities of films in more flexible ways, trying to avoid what I perceive to be the pitfalls of either an overly judgemental formalism or setting too naïve a standard for realistic authenticity. What I have sought to do instead is to take seriously what I perceive to be major areas of thematic concern within each of the films that I analyse, relating these to ‘real’ social practices, philosophical ideas and cultural anxieties that seem particularly relevant and enlightening. In shaping judgements that emerge from making these connections to the ‘real world’ however, I have tried to keep in focus the particular strategies – the devices, forms and conventions of art, if you like – deployed by these films in embodying their themes. If this critical practice seems unexceptionable (and unexceptional) to some, then I should say that the agendas that have shaped criticism over the past thirty years seem to me to have made it particularly difficult to keep these elements co-ordinated with each other.

One of the problems with applying ‘realism’ as a blanket term in the analysis of Disney films is that the concept actually encompasses a multiplicity of representational practices. It can be too blunt edged a tool to catch the finer distinctions it is necessary to register in order to distinguish changes in the relationship between artistic forms and ideas accurately. Hence, although there are certainly continuities – and indeed formulaic elements – discernible within Disney animation from an early stage, subtle variations, applied in different contexts, can exert a major effect on the way films are perceived. Consider, for instance, the example of *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo*, each of whose depictions of natural environments was recognized as pushing towards new heights of realism within the animated medium in the period when they were first released. Yet the realistic aesthetic in these films actually serves quite distinct purposes, as I argue later in the book. Within *Bambi* the realism is aligned to a conservationist ethos, which is itself changing and under pressure in various respects, while the variations in texture and naturalistic detail work to sensitize the viewer to a particularized forest environment, experienced from the animals’ viewpoint. Although superficially similar (in an updated version, with state-of-the-art computer generated images, rather than the innovative use of multi-plane cameras that characterizes *Bambi*), the hyper-realism of *Finding Nemo* is much less grounded in the local. The film presents the strange beauty of its underwater setting with what one reviewer described as the ‘eye-popping’ sensuousness of an exotic spectacle, while the fish’s epic journey across the oceans meshes animal migration patterns with the global reach of contemporary tourism. The eponymous Nemo is displaced from his native habitat and transported hundreds of miles to an aquarium in Sydney as a trophy resulting from a dentist’s recreational scuba diving trip, while his clown fish father has to follow in the slipstream of migrating turtles to find his lost offspring. The connection between contemporary tourism and the depredation of local environments is not signalled to the viewer with the same moral force as is the hunters’ destructive incursion into the pristine forest in *Bambi* however, and the realism of *Finding Nemo* is wedded to a far more post-modern ethos, wide reaching and thought provoking but ambiguous in its effects.

Generic Codes and the Theme of Nature

It is not only the quality of realism that structures viewers' responses to the thematic concerns of animated films however. The way the conventions of particular genres are deployed is clearly as significant as the effect secured by any overarching adherence to principles of realism. Paul Wells has argued that animated films generally are especially protean and more difficult to define in relation to the way they use generic codes than are their live action equivalents (2002b: 45). Although the protean forms within which genres are adapted in animated films may pose problems for analysis, there is no doubt that the generic codes play a fundamental, if subliminal, role in articulating human understandings of and relationships to the natural world in Disney's films. Disney's single most impressive achievement in the history of animated film was arguably to demonstrate the commercial and artistic viability of the animated feature. The transition from short cartoon to feature length animation was not simply a question of expansion in terms of running time however. In order to develop themes and plotlines with the capacity to enthrall audiences over more substantial periods, new elements had to be brought in to extend the range of the gags and quick-fire comedy that had been the essence of the cartoon short. In a sense, a whole new kind of narrative had to be evolved, with a different focus and set of thematic concerns to those that had prevailed previously.

From the point of view of this study, it is worth recognizing to begin with that the expanded form allowed much greater scope for the depiction of natural environments. The iconic figures who took the lead in many of the earlier shorts – most notably Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck – may have been anthropomorphized animals, but the environments within which they were depicted as interacting, as well as their characteristic gestures, were overwhelmingly human. Donald Duck does not spend significant periods in the cartoons in which he features swimming around ponds and neither does Mickey Mouse engage in activities that have any real bearing on mice. By contrast, right from its inception, the more expansive form of the animated feature grounded itself within environments that were recognizably part of wild nature. Snow White spends barely five minutes within the ambience of the castle environment in the establishing scene at the start of Disney's first animated feature film, before she is swept off into the heart of the forest. She remains in this archetypal, Arcadian setting for the rest of the film till, in the closing seconds, she rides off with her Prince towards a fairy-tale castle that was to become one of Disney's stock motifs. Of the feature animations that followed in the 1940s, only *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) manage to resist the allure of wild nature. The wild animals in *Dumbo* are caged and have almost completely accommodated themselves to the discipline of the circus environment, even though the comic devices are imbued with a lyricism that hints at the grace of wild nature at times. The other full length animations – *Fantasia* (1940), and most notably *Bambi* (1942) – have extensive passages featuring wild environments however, and the natural images within these films cover a wide range of different forms and functions. A number of these functions are developed further in the mixed live action/animated feature *Song of the South* (1946), with its lively interpolations of the Brer Rabbit stories, and in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), the second of the fairy tale adaptations to reprise the territory opened up by *Snow White* in the

late 1930s. Even in *Cinderella* (1950), where the action appears to be focused more exclusively within a domestic environment, the depiction of an extensive animal subculture serves not only to support the heroine but also to subvert the authority of a repressive, self-regarding human culture that is seen as significantly cut off from the realm of nature.

We will look at a number of these films in more depth in due course. What needs to be noted from the outset though, is that these films' settings within natural environments do not serve a merely decorative function. In establishing the territory of the expanded new form, Disney also hit upon a distinctive, central area of thematic concern. Underlying the impressive variety of genre and plot with which Disney experimented in the early features, lay a recurrent preoccupation with a key question – 'What is the meaning of home?' – that is crucial to the process of children's growing up and finding a place in the world. However, it is not accidental that the issue of discovering – or remaking – a place that feels like home should so often involve establishing a satisfying and interdependent relationship with nature, and it is here that the genre of pastoral, particularly, comes into play in a number of Disney's early feature films.

In this respect *Snow White* is almost paradigmatic. Expelled from the false realm of hate and petty jealousy that is the domain of the wicked Queen, Snow White takes up residence in the forest. Her task here is to refashion a dwelling on her own terms, one that reflects the purity and simple truth of her own being. To achieve this goal she must accept the help of a small army of creatures whose natural home is the forest. To be sure, the role of the animal helper in facilitating the central protagonist's progress is traditional within fairy and folk tales, and Disney makes extended use of this device here. But Disney's massive expansion of the role of the animal helper – both in terms of the sheer number of different creatures involved and of the creative energy invested in depicting their activities – allows this traditional narrative function to acquire the weight of a fundamental value of central importance to the story. The participation of the animals in Snow White's home-making becomes not just a sign that this activity is natural, and therefore good, but also, and beyond this, the very model for an ideal interdependent relationship between human beings and nature, conceived in playful, comedic form.

To open up a substantial new set of thematic concerns in this way requires not only expansion in terms of content but also an extended repertoire of formal devices – adapted so as to express these new concerns – and, in the early features, the Disney animators drew most extensively on the generic codes of pastoral to fulfil this function. *Snow White*, in particular, turns again and again to popularized adaptations of the pastoral mode in configuring the relationship of the heroine to a natural environment that both surrounds and, in a sense, defines her. This relationship is complex – more so than might appear on initial viewing – and I explore the implications of this at some length in chapter one. But it is not just within Disney's first animated feature that the pastoral mode plays such a crucial role. In varied ways, as I go on to argue, pastoral is central to understanding the significance of nature within all of Disney's fairy tale adaptations, as well as in *Bambi*, aspects of *Fantasia*, and, in a different mode, *Song of the South*.