

The audience in the wilderness: the Disney nature films.

From: Journal of Popular Film and Television | Date: 6/22/1996 | Author: King, Margaret J.



Walt Disney Co. has influenced filmmaking and public attitudes towards animals and the environment through its animated and live action nature films. Disney nature films characterize the ideal human-nature relationship through themes such as anthromorphism and the subjective presentation of animals and have popularized documentary and wilderness film genres. Disney films are also attributed for society's empathy towards animals and nature in general.

From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning.

- Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (vi)

We cannot remember too often that when we observe nature, and especially the ordering of nature, it is always ourselves alone we are observing.

- G. C. Lichtenberg, *Aphorisms* (1765)

Any time we saw an animal doing something with style or personality - say, a bear scratching its back - we were quick to capitalize on it.

- Disney writer (Schickel 287)

The relationship of Americans with nature has always been a point of national identity as well as the locus of mental and emotional confusion in the national mind. Nature presents a conundrum in cultural logic. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, a classic of American Studies, Roderick Nash tries to place American nature within the formation of a national self-concept, stressing a mass perplexity about our role in nature and nature's in our lives, first as settlers and then as urbanites. In *The Astonished Muse*, a classic of American popular culture, Reuel Denney extends Nash's quest into the realm of popular culture, noting that in film, "No one has paid greater attention to animals - first in cartoon form and later in natural form - than Walt Disney" (vi).

When Americans talk about nature today, it is as dwellers of the suburbs and cities. In the beginnings of our history as a nation and a culture, nature was a competitor, a harsh environment to be subdued. Once under control, it no longer posed a threat but an opportunity for aesthetic and recreational exploration. Thoreau's *Walden Pond* essays were written in what we today would recognize not as the wild, but as the suburbs. Thoreau wrote them within a close commute from his family's Concord home (where his laundry was done) and those of his urban friends such as the Alcotts, where he routinely dined, leaving to those on the frontiers of Ohio and Kentucky the genuine hardships and deprivations of living with untamed nature (Edel).

Thus America's urbane distancing from nature in the raw began almost coincidentally with the settling of the frontier to form an early nostalgia craze. Our reliance for nature's image and context shifted from first-hand experience to the novel, western-school painting, and nature photography, culminating with the film and television versions that were shaped, and continue to be influenced by, the Walt Disney Company's animated films and its live-action True-Life Adventure series of the late 1940s.

Walt Disney did not invent popular interest in nature. But he was the first to film nature drama for commercial release according to a set of formulas that capture and cultivate later-twentieth-century attitudes. Disney departed from the traditional Hollywood formula typified by Frank Buck's "Bring 'Em Back Alive" - a film series based on nature as an alien, threatening environment and animals as trophies. Disney productions' empathetic identification with animals laid the groundwork for the American eco-political climate from the 1960s onward.

The terms of nature drama were restaged by Disney. He refocused the travel-and-safari film tradition of animals as objects to be collected to that of animals as personalities or characters in their natural habitats living out their own stories. Playing out story lines - starting with the "ancient rites" of the Pribilof seal life-cycle in Seal Island (1948) - against the beauty of natural settings also "raised the bar" of audience expectations for other forms of nature exposition. The Disney nature film was a seminal influence on our modern distaste for zoo cages and aquarium tanks. Identification with animal "stars" created empathy with their situations, styles, cycles, and inventiveness. It also produced an affinity for their habitats, the untamed landscape itself. In this way nature was personalized so that animals had "rights," and their "homes" became private sanctuaries to be respected and protected as an extension of civil property rights. "Who can doubt that Disney films sensitized millions of viewers to this issue?" wrote Denney regarding the grassroots freeing of dolphins from Hawaiian aquaria into the Pacific (xvii).

Modern animal-exhibit design began to follow the "natural" pattern, like that of the open-air, barrier-free, Discovery Island nature reserve at Florida's Walt Disney World. It was a major perceptual shift from nature as human colony-playground to a "zone of care" deserving of stewardship. This shift of aesthetic delight, besides lending momentum to animal and environmental political action, also gave birth to the camera safari that is now the norm in world destinations such as Kenya and Costa Rica.

Humans are constantly scouting out cultural patterns within the wider kingdom of the animal and beyond - from the minerals and vegetables of Earth's surface, to undersea, to even outer space. The composite images from reported alien encounters are typical of the human instinct to seek out like companions; the aliens all have a familiar and universal look, down to eye shape and nonthreatening, childlike size. That same instinct drives us to perceive nature in human terms: how animals bond; how they "enjoy" family life and reproduce; how young animals grow up, become independent, learn their "trade," and develop survival skills. We set standards and judge - by our human template of "character" - animal intelligence, beauty and ugliness, virtue and vice, diligence and playfulness, suffering and reward, community and perdition, birth and death.

It is well to remember, however, that even in our "sensitized" state, humans are still the out-of-the-frame "star" of the narratives, as witness and controller. Humans, whether we identify with National Rifle Association hunters, Sierra Club advocates, or PETA activists, insist that the executive decision to protect or plunder, to separate or merge with nature's agenda, is ultimately ours, not nature's. Our tours into domains outside our cultural set (civilization) are conducted by our biological and environmental coding, which tells us to look for values and beliefs vital to ourselves - as exported "cultural logic." As Denney observes, "Animal figures in American life constitute one of the major assets for non-obtrusive research into American life and values" (vi).

Disney himself stated, "Our intent is not formal education in natural science. Our main purpose is to bring interesting and delightful entertainment to the theater" (qtd. in Jackson 186). In citing entertainment, he was pointing to the formal definition of the word: "to engage attention." The subjectivity of his films - for which he was

roundly criticized - was in fact the very quality that powered their disproportionate cultural leverage. Disney productions did far more to educate than they did to entertain, in the conventionally limited sense of the word. The larger-than-life influence of such films on our ideas about "natural" life suggests the need for a full-fledged inquiry into the real sources of our beliefs and why we hold them. This is especially true today, when our ideas about the true nature of the wilderness no longer come from direct experience.

More than anything else, Disney nature films (and their forerunners) pose the issue of defining the proper relationship between human and non-human life. What options are open, other than the exploiter/exploited model? In this relationship must be considered questions of hunting and husbandry, protection, conservation, stewardship, and the hierarchy of animal species. Animal rights, vegetarianism, "most favored species," fishing, gun control, wild versus domestic, human uniqueness, zookeeping, wilderness exploration, management, maintenance, and related quandaries have been emerging in the news of the past decades. Naturally the practice of hunting in itself has deep and historical significance for a nation whose origins - particularly in the Native American, colonial, and westward movement periods - depended so heavily on the assumption of human as predator. Traditions - native, domestic, imported, and international - are woven throughout.

Bambi (1942), as the animated precursor to the nature film, forces the viewer to an odd identification with animals and against Man the Hunter, while the first feature-length True-Life Adventure, *The Living Desert* (1953), shows the natural violence of animals as hunters, surviving as predators in an inhospitable landscape. Much of the early criticism of the Tree-Life nature series, including attempts at censorship, was that they did show nature in the raw, including detailed violence. (The live birth of a buffalo calf in *The Vanishing Prairie* [1954] caused the film to be banned by the New York Board of Censors.) Disney often was accused of playing up violent natural events, an interesting sidelight on the roots of our "current" debates about media violence.

The death of Bambi's mother is one of the most powerful moments in Disney cinemagraphic history. For many children, that killing (off-screen by a hunter's rifle shot) was their first vivid encounter with the reality of death and separation, ranking among the top collective early childhood traumas. Child psychologists of the era criticized Bambi for precisely that reason, a criticism that re-echoed four decades later when Simba's father was murdered (on screen) in Disney's *The Lion King* (1994).⁽¹⁾ Bambi was the top-grossing film of the 1940s (Sackett 36). Its popularity encouraged Disney to think in terms of live animals as a promising trend. The jacket of animators Johnston and Thomas's book on the making of Bambi defines it as "the century's most beloved and enduring nature film."

Disney's Live-Action Nature Films

As America's popular naturalist, Walt Disney expresses the human-nature relationship as a series of filmic themes: anthropomorphism, selective perception, mixed motifs of pet/wild animal, the child/dog team, the cuteness/violence dualism, and a heavily edited version of natural events and processes. This is nature, but a very special kind: not an ecosystem, but an ego-system - one viewed through a self-referential human lens: anthropomorphized, sentimentalized, and moralized. Critics of this approach called it sensationalizing and patronizing. Those who saw in this new breed of documentary an innovative and positive appreciation of nature called it subjective, approachable, and humanizing.

Much attention has been paid to the obvious humanization of animals in Disney animation. Bambi is perhaps the most famous for its realism, achieved through the Disney artists' studies of real animal models for locomotion and anatomy - studies that set the stage for live nature filming (Jackson 45). One of the studio's strongest artists, Ken Anderson, recalls, "Walt was always impatient with the restrictions of a cartoon. He strived for more and more realism, more naturalism, in the features" (qtd. in Watts 91). Less study has been done of the docudramas as a live-action genre pioneered by Disney studios. Schickel calls the nature films "one of the most difficult problems of critical evaluation in the entire Disney history" (289).

These films can be viewed as a concentration of the general public's longing for a mythic agrarian root system, a return to the spatial relationships of the early frontier - that is, the frontier blurred by nostalgia, minus the danger element - in an odd hybrid of the custodial and hunting ethics. Our billion-dollar collective obsession with pets as family members - half of all American pets received Christmas gifts in 1995 - is a link between humans and the wild. Disney's nature has been for Americans what Sumerian myths and Aesop's Fables were for Old World cultures. Their symbolism and plots are laden with tales of human civilization just as Disney's symbolic tales reflect particularly American forms, such as his almost Jeffersonian bonding to the land, especially in its uniquely American aspects.

The implications of film drama featuring animal rather than human stars hold the key to understanding not only the human/nature face-off as a cultural problem, but the power of film to temper, guide, and shape that relationship. Disney films, which reached millions of children and their parents in theaters and on television, as well as in the classroom, exerted a cultural influence far wider than Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or the Sierra Club. They taught Americans to think of nature in terms of "courageous" ants, "playboy" fiddler crabs, "industrious" bees, and even "successful" wild oats such as in *Secrets of Life* (1956).

There have been others who enjoyed cultural capital enough to promote the luxury of leaving nature to itself: Thomas Jefferson, James Audubon, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and present-day celebrities such as Brigitte Bardot, Mary Tyler Moore, John Denver, and Cleveland Amory. (Denver even proposed a state constitutional amendment to limit new residents in Colorado - shortly after he himself had moved in.) But Disney crossed class lines far more easily and often, so that the formation of a vast, nationally shared ecological ethic - propelled by the momentum of 78 million baby boomers - drew on a life force not often enjoyed by social-issue causes. As both art form and social document, the Disney nature film of the 1950s continues to exert power over the hearts and minds of American viewers.

Like other Disney film material, nature themes were incorporated into the early Disneyland theme park at its Adventureland, Frontierland, and Nature's Wonderland. These attractions were faithful, three-dimensional extensions of the Disney nature films. They featured a mix of live domestic animals and Audio-Animatronics "wild" animals set against constructed, landscaped, and carefully edited "natural" settings. They were an early form of virtual reality - a "movie" in which the audience could walk around, interact, and integrate their own stories. Not coincidentally, these full-scale dioramas served to carry forward and reinforce the nature films in theaters and on television, a typical case of Disney's talent for integrated marketing.

In this approach to recycling every film to every available venue, the nature titles also assumed a role as inventory for the original Disneyland television series on ABC, starting with *Seal Island* and *Nature's Half Acre* in the first two seasons (1954-56). In 1955 Disney introduced behind-the-scenes "making of" footage: *Behind the True-Life Camera: Olympic Elk* (1952).

Filtered through the Disney company's lens, nature has dominated and saturated the popular documentary genre from the time Disney himself reinvented it with *Seal Island* in 1948. The film was an act of faith on Disney's part. His closest colleagues, including his brother and financial manager Roy Disney, did not anticipate audience acclaim. According to several sources, Roy "agreed with the early exhibitors in seeing no future in the project. . . . [T]he morning after Disney won the Academy Award, he trotted around to his brother's office, opened the door, and flung the Academy Award at the wall above his head" (Schickel 285). Studio sources claim Walt actually delivered the Academy Award to his brother's office and jokingly suggested that Roy take it over to RKO, the distributors who saw no commercial value in Disney's True-Life Adventure concept, and hit them over the head with it. Not only did *Seal Island* win an Academy Award for the best two-reel short-subject documentary of the year, but the subsequent nature series won a total of nine awards in the 1940s and 1950s, the best-known titles being feature-length: *The Living Desert* (1953), *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954), and *White Wilderness* (1958). Other winners were *In Beaver Valley* (1950), *Nature's Half Acre* (1951), *Water Birds* (1952), and *Bear Country* (1953). Other series titles include *The Olympic Elk* (1952), *The African Lion* (1955), *Secrets of Life* (1956), *Mysteries of the Deep* (1959), and *Islands of the Sea* (1960).

The titles listed above were found to draw audiences, even to the extent that a nature short could stand in for a feature-length film on a cinema's double bill. The nature film's main cost was in time - they were far cheaper to produce, compared to the astronomical cost of animation, and quickly became the studio's cash cows for over a decade. *The Living Desert* and *The Vanishing Prairie* earned, respectively, 10 and 15 times their production costs (Maltin 276; Thomas 249).

The producers of those projects - including James Algar, Winston Hibler, Harry Tytle, Ken Peterson, and Ben Sharpsteen - came out of animation, where every frame is subordinated to one force: the storyline. To focus on nature as a primary subject - creating nature "stories" - was therefore a natural extension of the studio's creative process. As it found and pursued an unexplored subject for the commercial camera, the general-interest nature film was born (Finch 343).

Public response to Disney's True-Life Adventures was conditioned in part by trail-blazing, documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romantic naturalism. Flaherty's films (*Nanook of the North*, 1922; *Moana of the South Seas*, 1925; *Man of Aran*, 1934) feature situations that show how living things succeed in meeting the test of life in primitive settings - with emphasis on courage, endurance, and the Darwinian virtues of struggle and adaptation. While Disney applied such human standards to animal life, it was to comedy and melodrama that he owed the larger debt. He was always keenly on the lookout for humor, cuteness, and action (including violence) with his somewhat paternalistic and voyeuristic camera. The direction of Disney's approach can be gleaned from his telegram to photographer Al Milotte after viewing rushes of an early (unreleased) documentary on developing Alaska: "Too many mines. Too many roads. More animals. More Eskimos" (Schickel 289). The Eskimo reference is revealing. The success of the nature oeuvre inspired a related Disney series in the 1950s, *People and Places*, using the same crew and approach. These too, as expected from the True-Life record, reaped their share of awards. The first, an echo of *Nanook*, was *The Alaskan Eskimo* (1953), which won an Academy Award for best short subject.

Disney's influence on those who followed in the nature film genre was far reaching. There is no question that the large number of nature films and television series - now staples of cable television - have been visibly shaped by the Disney formula. Walt not only set the standard, but contributed to the popular taste for the documentary style, which saw dividends later in commercial theater, museum IMAX, specialized network, and instructional theater (classroom). Even what might be called the "animal-pornography" naturalism now on video - whose focus is on combat, pursuit, stalking, and to-the-death struggles - is an offshoot of Disney's extending of nature as a "field office" outreach of American culture. While it is difficult, as in all cultural interplay, to assess the full extent of the "Disney effect" on later nature filmmaking, certain elements stand out.

The use of such concepts as plot structure, anthropomorphism, animal biography, species hierarchy, and stock technical effects (such as stop motion and time lapse) are all predictable traits of subsequent nature series, both short- and long-lived ones: *Nature*, *Wild Kingdom*, *Wild America*, *Untamed World*, *Animal Safari*, *Jambo*, *Savage Kingdom*, *National Geographic Explorer*, and the Jacques Cousteau series. All are offshoots of the Disney formula, whose style, both in shooting and editing, continues to set the parameters for image, narrative, and mood. As Schickel noted in *The Disney Version* in 1968, "At this point all we know for certain is that Disney preempted the field in such a way that it will probably be a long time before anyone tries again and that if they do try, they will undoubtedly be tempted to imitate his proven formula" (291).

In the education sector, the National Geographic Society's television specials provide an answer to Schickel's question as to whether nature could actually be "good box office" without the medium of a popularizer such as Disney. These programs follow the entertainment/education mix ("edutainment") now so familiar in museum exhibits. The series features researchers and scholars, often world experts in their fields, and "objective" academic narratives as a stylistic distancer from the "Disnification" of nature, but it owes much to the Disney philosophy of viewing nature in a cultural context. The National Geographic Society's declared "respect for nature in our rapidly deteriorating environment," in addition to its emphasis on scientific and legislative approaches to the

"great chain of life," give a more distanced portrait of nature than Disney's homocentric stance. However, it was Disney's couching of nature as an extension of human values that inspired popular interest in nature as an entertainment subject - both filmic and physical. In *One Cosmic Instant*, John Livingston poses the conceptual environment as a cultural problem, not a scientific one:

If "human ecology" is ever to emerge as a definable body of knowledge or area of investigation, it is far more likely to emerge from the humanities than from any of the hard or soft sciences. Man is the cultural animal. Culture created the power structure over nature, and only in culture is the blueprint for its dismantlement. (217)

Emergent Themes

What themes emerge from an examination of the content of these films? First, and most obvious, Disney's nature, both fauna and flora, is anthropomorphized. The whole of human social organization, with its concerns and values, is superimposed on the world of nature. This is the high-profile characteristic and the primary basis for most critical appraisals of the Disney nature problem as one of unduly sentimentalizing plants and animals.

Beyond the core of *True-Life Adventures*, the Disney canon of live-action animal films abounds with titles that extend the anthropomorphic slant to the creation of animal "stars": *The Horse in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1968), *The Ugly Dachshund* (1966), *The Monkey's Uncle* (1965), *A Country Coyote Goes Hollywood* (1965), *Flash, the Teenage Otter* (1965), *The Hound that Thought He Was a Raccoon* (1960), and *The Pigeon that Worked a Miracle* (1958, TV). Animals that appear in Disney films are given names, often human ones. We are to assume, subconsciously, at least, that those names are concurrent with other natural processes. *Petri* (1957), for example, the "biography" of a squirrel (billed as "A True-Life Fantasy"), includes no human - no "Adam" - to confer the names. The *True-Life Fantasy* category was created to sidestep some of the issues of authenticity posed by the title "True-Life." What Disney "casts" in all his films, however, are animals with personality, first worked out in early animation and further developed in *Bambi* and *Song of the South* (1946). Even *The Incredible Journey* (1963), the live-action adventures of three pets traveling home together over hundreds of miles of country, could just as well feature three people, with destinies, idiosyncrasies, and goals that set each apart as "characters." But for the viewer, cats and dogs add something - the nature dimension.

Once the concept of animal "personality" has been established, it is almost impossible to separate nature-fiction films from real nature, thus this catalogue precis of *Secrets of Life* (1956), a *True-Life Adventure*:

This crowning achievement in the widely honored *True-Life Adventure* series invades the world of small creatures and plants on the earth and under the sea. The influence of the fiddler crabs - grim tribal duels of the bee world - heroic efforts of the self-planting grasses - the mad world of the Stickleback fish - are just a few of the closely guarded *Secrets of Life*. (*Secrets* 21)

The terms used to describe acts of nature are familiar. The penchant for anthropomorphism extends well beyond the animal realm, even to ascribing the most humanistic of traits - heroism - to grasses. The term "closely guarded secrets" implies the conscious choice making that is innate in deception. Throughout the films, moral judgment abounds with epithets such as "heartless [cowbird] mother," "devoted [buffalo] mother," "good provider [bear]," even "thrifty and frugal [bees]," and finally "kindly nature."

Musical cueing is a persuasive and more subtle technique in the humanization of nature. Ballet (for snake and tarantula combat) and tango (for tarantula courtship) music in *The Living Desert*, and "The Anvil Chorus" for battling bighorn sheep in *The Vanishing Prairie* set up an amused, wistful, even moralistic audience response. Schickel makes this critique:

There is no moral hierarchy among the species, and the business of "cueing" response through music, narrative

or film editing that leads to this sort of ranking by the spectator is reprehensible. Just as bad is the business of reducing to a joke a mating ritual, or a young bird's attempt to master flight, or a young animal's first experience of the hunt. None of these matters, to put it simply, is funny to the participants, and they would not seem funny to us if we were to observe them unedited, with our own eyes, in the field. (291)

Nature drama in the True-Life Adventure series offers a particularly clear distillation of Disney's attitude toward nature: Creatures are not only interesting for their oddities or for human qualities, but are entertaining because of their most criticized feature - human interest. As in tabloid news, nature is condensed and edited to present a compressed capsule version - the "headlines" - of ordinary animal life. The result is an impression of continuous high excitement, danger, and adventure. The tendency to tabloid naturalism always battled against the mandate toward "truth in filming" and against "false footage" in the series. As writer/director James Algar declared in a promotional booklet:

Factual honesty in essence as well as in detail is the distinguishing hallmark of the True-Life Adventure films. The theme of a Disney factual is usually elemental - often it is the fight for survival. The tempo of the telling must be leisurely. The tone must be respectful - no ridicule. No condescension, particularly when dealing with the wisdom of the ages and the tales of the master story-teller. (Maltin 19)

But film techniques in themselves exert inescapable effects on what is filmed. Time-lapse photography accelerates the growth and flowering of plants as it collapses animal life-times - especially those of short-lived insects - to the space of seconds. In spatial terms, the telephoto lens gives the audience an eagle's eye sensitivity to details a mile away; and in microscopic vision, Disney could "fill the screen with the shot of a beetle so small that fifty of its kind could hitch a ride on a honey bee's leg" (Schickel 286). For the theater audience, the sophistication of the camera is transparent, as is the editing process. Studios long ago grew accustomed to inquiries from the public about how they managed to train scorpions to perform to square-dance music.

The particular "voyeuristic" effects of compression and visual extension, when added to the practice of heavy editing (the ratio of raw to finished footage is about 30 to 1), exert their tabloid effect in the same way televised news programming focuses and tightens everyday events. The reality of the off-screen world is thereby forced into a kind of comparative banality. The regimen of unending patience and care necessary for a real-time view of the natural world is obscured. The filmmaker's vigil of watching and waiting and the enormous study and preparation involved in very isolated, far-between, hard-won moments of film - of total "down time" invested in, for example, waiting for a buffalo to give birth or an alligator egg to hatch - all are invisible in the finished footage, giving the false impression that in nature study, access to subjects is both readily available and exciting. Of course, the same truths of technique versus end product hold for other forms of documentary as well - for example, *Victory at Sea* (1959, and TV series) with its tightly edited combat sequences and musical cues, or *Roger and Me* (1989), with its condensed and shuffled time sequences.

We often encounter stylized versions of real things and events. But because the nature films feature natural realism, filmed in what appears to be real time by real observers without a discernible script, there is a strong audience presumption that the footage closely records the real thing out there in mountain, meadow, prairie, and pond. If our first introduction to the natural world is via "Disneyvision" - and for virtually all of us, it is - then we cannot help being disappointed by the real thing. Documentary is a dramatic form. Nature (let alone civilization) is hard put to compete with art.

Disney did not invent the humanization and resulting distortion of nature so much as he was able to reinterpret and restylize it. Perpetuating the distortions, or even abetting them, is another matter. An example is the time-honored case of the "lemming mass-suicide tale," which owes more to urban folklore than zoology. According to some unofficial reports, Disney cameramen working on *White Wilderness* (1958) were instructed not only to film the lemmings but, if necessary, to "throw them over the cliff by the bucketful" to create the spectacle of thousands throwing themselves into the ocean to drown. One reviewer took to task the "staged mass-suicide scene that

contradicts what scientists claim happens in real life" (qtd. in Jackson 87).

Although the lemming tale has a semiofficial status in our schools as a textbook note, there can be no proof positive of the "suicide" impulse of the creatures. During the mass migrations, many are victims of predators and may fall (not jump) from narrow ledges because of crowding. But there is no conclusive way of establishing any "for the good of the species" self-sacrifice motive. Like all storytelling, for which filmmaking is but a tool, facts are ever at the service of the plot, and facts carry little weight outside webs of meaning, whether we call them myths, stories, or theories. At the opposite end of the scale is the frenetic migration of the African wildebeest described as "completely without plan or purpose" in *The African Lion*.

Disney nature films may be interpreted at yet another level - the transcendental view of nature as a medium through which humankind can enjoy access to God's mysteries, or at least the "mysterious" aspects of the natural world. But although nature can be interpreted as a lens through which we achieve a sense of perspective on our role as beings in a larger divine plan, Disney's films also give us a sense of offering nature itself a higher plan based on human priorities. That is, animals are given importance and meaning as worthy of protection or persecution on a scale of human values. Thus spiders, vultures, snakes, and wolverines are cast as villains, while chipmunks, beavers, and prairie dogs are, if not heroes, attractive protagonists. Zoologists have long pointed out that while pandas are not particularly friendly or social creatures, people love them because their body shape, low center of gravity, seemingly clumsy movements, and facial markings making them appear to have large eyes, mimic the appealing attributes of a human baby. It is their appearance to human eyes that selects them as "favored species," along with bunnies, kittens, koalas, and lemurs. The nature films pick and rank their animal dramatis personae by the circle of life already inscribed by human cultural radar.

This entire animal kingdom has always been on view in Disney animations, especially in the transformation of talking creatures such as Jiminy Cricket (an insect that would normally appear horrific to human eyes). The dynamic set by such transformed animal icons did much to drive the Disney nature-focused films, whether *Tree-Life* or animated. It is as if civilization, to be viable, must be a ruling force that spans all life forms from vegetable to human. This hegemony has some far-reaching implications - of a wish for authority extended indefinitely through all life levels and proof of its potency, tightness, and general suitability to the universe at large. Looking at *The Jungle Book* (1967), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), or *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), we can see nature filmmaking as the extension of human culture across the spectrum of life, which, being human, we cannot imagine as anything other. (How, we ask, do wolves, who mate for life, ever get over the death of a "spouse"?)

This assumption of validity for human over nonhuman forms of life, and the moral ordering of species based on meaning to humans, can be seen as a brand of simplistic Darwinism as applied to nature, putting man in the supreme position in the Great Chain of Being. This species imperialism, made up of human aggression and ingenuity backed by the belief that we can and should "manage" nature, is nothing less than the basis for expansion of every civilization and human dominance of the earth. This dominance leaves some intriguing questions unanswered in the realm of "right rule" and species "diversity." Its schema can provide the answer to why we labor to save dolphins caught in tuna nets, while we think nothing of eating the tuna, and related questions and controversies of contemporary eco-politics.

The cuteness/violence duality is one of many ambivalences in the Disney philosophy, but also one of its most vital. The double image of nature as endearing and/or dangerous is operative in the minds of most Americans, who, however, tend to underestimate the dark side of the wilderness in the sense of "careless," or Tennyson's "red in tooth and claw." (A more contemporary citation is Senator William Fulbright's remarks to Congress about nature as "pitiless in a pitiless universe" [Respectfully 100.1106]). Our contemporary American (and clearly Disney-inspired) tendency to err on the side of cuteness can have consequences that range from the beneficial - the preservation of species - to the downright stupid: for example, a tourist couple cited by a Yellowstone Park ranger, who covered their son's face with honey for a bear to lick for a photo opportunity.

A further result of this ambiguity is an exaggerated sense of humans' ability to maneuver and survive in nature, which finds expression in two forms: the "pathetic fallacy" that attributes the intimacy and caring of human community to nature (bears are just like us, only bigger) and the perception of nature as a neutral or hapless system that cannot care for itself, needing human stewardship to survive. Such custody encompasses everything from selective breeding, genetic manipulation, and hybridization, through putting endangered animals on display, to the "save the (insert species of your choice)" initiatives.

Both attitudes are equally human-centered ego-systems, the first leading outside in, the second inside out. Both, however, lead to a dangerous underestimation of the raw outdoors in its ability to undo us. We have become distanced enough from our beginnings to forget that "nature" was the very reason we built communities (as animals themselves do) - for mutual protection from the pitiless red in tooth and claw.

It is not difficult to deduce that the proliferation of nature on film might lead to personal identification with natural situations on a cinematic level, and an extrapolation from the film version to the real thing. Nature, for virtually everyone, is a mental excursion as much as a physical one, and edited film makes it polished, artistic, and inviting (2) Filmic nature has all the ideal characteristics of civilized space: beauty, order, and charm. The ease and safety with which one is transported by camera to mountaintops, across deserts, into the densest rainforests, and deep undersea provide a sense of visual control, especially in the newer IMAX and Omnimax formats in science museums, where viewers are literally wrapped in image and sound.

This sense of total immersion, designed to draw us into nature, has an unanticipated effect. Its illusion of intimacy and hospitality translates into the mental logic that says one has already "been there," fostering a sense of physical and psychic control that does not actually match the "being there" of a cold mountain trail, rainy tropical trek, or even a field trip in semi-developed rural spaces. This is the axis of James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*, which portrays suburbanites whose impressions of nature have come to them largely through the media ("Movies and pictures of Indians on calendars gave me a general idea of what to do," 66). The characters' "rough ideas" create an overconfidence that leads to a series of tragedies. Films such as *City Slickers* (1991) present an upside. Their shorthand symbols of the outdoors play a rich counterpoint to the actual events of a dude ranch cattle drive - all, of course, within the medium of film itself. The current debates over gun control help demonstrate two realities in collision: For those who live and hunt in the outdoors, guns are tools; for those who live and work in cities, guns are weapons, and they see hunted animals (on the screen) as self.

Disney's "natural philosophy," based on the natural ways we create community rooted in culture - including anthropomorphism, expansionism, identification, and assignment of human motives and values - have tapped into and expanded our human tendency to look on animals as extensions of ourselves. Disney nature films have shaped our contemporary cultural outlook toward the frontier, the suburbs, and the "new nature" as an aesthetic frontier or "province of mind," a mentality themed to natural images and icons much like an Adventureland. The nature films enabled the growth of environmentalism by extending nature as part of our domain. Zero growth, conservation, and an animal-centered vision as promoted by groups like World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and PETA are possible only with the power of empathy.

Disney pioneered, engineered, and directed that empathy for animals with the techniques and approaches of cinematography and story telling, starting with animation in *Song of the South* and *Bambi*, then expanding to the "True-Life" *Seal Island* and *White Wilderness*. Given the pressure of the current ecological crisis mentality, these films will continue to wield the influence in their vision of life-form diversity, interplay, and interdependence. That is not to say that Disney's films and their offspring are naturalistically correct, but that they are "humanistically correct," projecting a vision and voice that speak with authority to our cultural eye and ear.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Dedicated to the memory of Reuel Denney (1913-1995), who set the focus on this problem for me.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the creation and effects of this scene, see *Bambi: The Story and the Film* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1990), by Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, two Bambi animators. See also Felix Salten, *Bambi* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1929).
2. The late Disney Company president Frank Wells spoke of "soft adventure," with reference to the mental and cultural effects of attractions (e.g., rides), as an essential factor in the theme park experience and a reason for the parks' success. Disney nature films offer a parallel experience.

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MARGARET J. KING is director of Cultural Studies and Analysis in Philadelphia. She writes about popular culture

and the popular arts as part of her research on the basic values and beliefs of American culture.

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