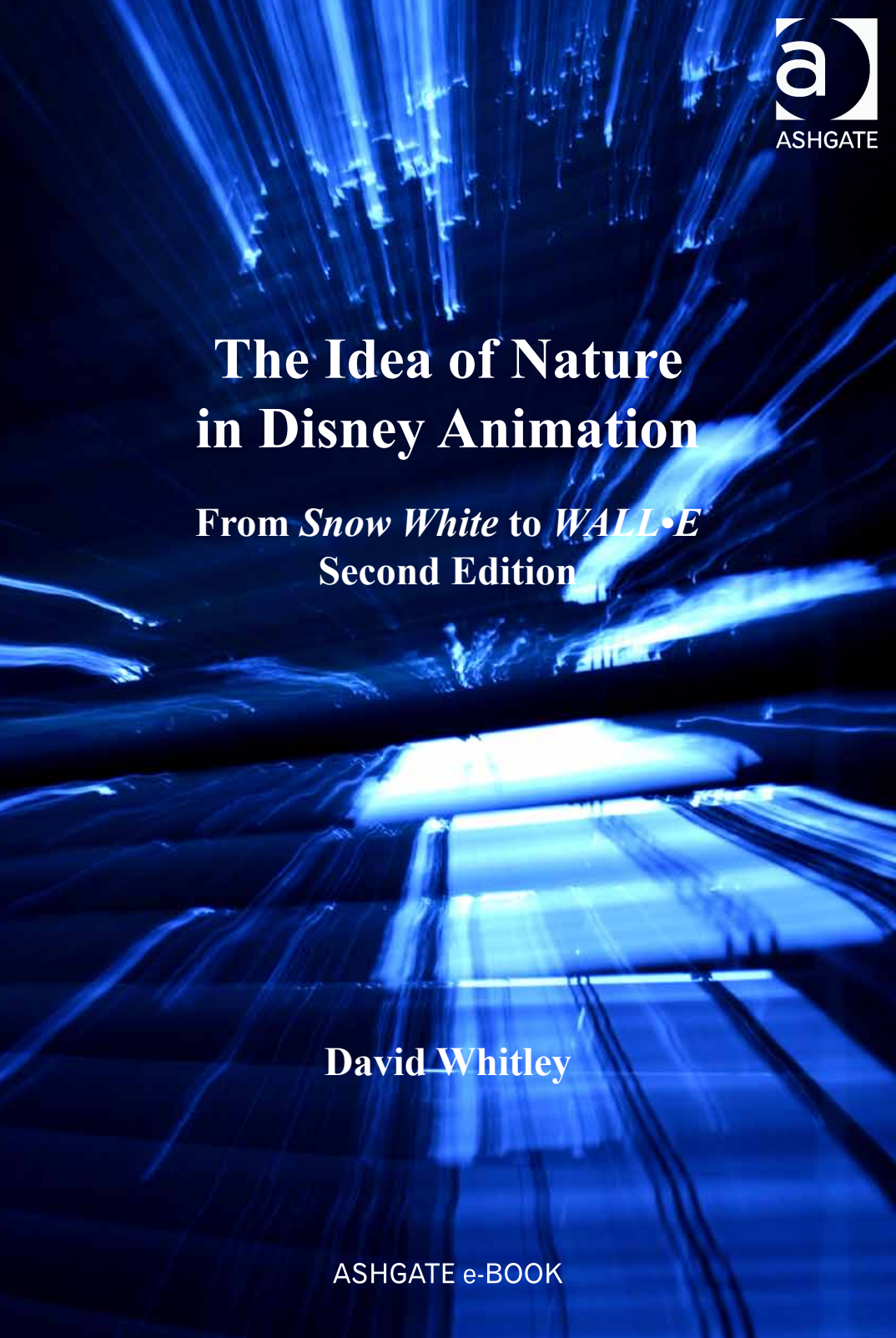

The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation

From *Snow White* to *WALL•E*
Second Edition

David Whitley

ASHGATE e-BOOK

THE IDEA OF NATURE IN DISNEY ANIMATION: FROM *SNOW WHITE* TO *WALL•E*

In the second edition of *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, David Whitley updates his 2008 book to reflect recent developments in Disney and Disney-Pixar animation such as the apocalyptic tale of earth's failed ecosystem, *WALL•E*. As Whitley has shown, and Disney's newest films continue to demonstrate, the messages animated films convey about the natural world are of crucial importance to their child viewers. Beginning with *Snow White*, Whitley examines a wide range of Disney's feature animations, in which images of wild nature are central to the narrative. He challenges the notion that the sentimentality of the Disney aesthetic, an oft-criticized aspect of such films as *Bambi*, *The Jungle Book*, *Pocahontas*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Finding Nemo*, necessarily prevents audiences from developing a critical awareness of contested environmental issues. On the contrary, even as the films communicate the central ideologies of the times in which they were produced, they also express the ambiguities and tensions that underlie these dominant values. In distinguishing among the effects produced by each film and revealing the diverse ways in which images of nature are mediated, Whitley urges us towards a more complex interpretation of the classic Disney canon and makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role popular art plays in shaping the emotions and ideas that are central to contemporary experience.

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From *Snow White* to *WALL•E*

Second Edition

DAVID WHITLEY
University of Cambridge, UK

ASHGATE

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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

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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.

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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 3, 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 3. 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 3, 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 analyze, 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 enthral 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). 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 1. 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*.

The Significance of Pastoral

Why then are pastoral devices so important within early Disney features? And what aspects of the pastoral mode are drawn on, in particular, to extend and reconfigure the narrative material of these films? We must turn briefly now to examine some of

the key assumptions and conventions of pastoral in its historical contexts to begin to answer these questions.

The pastoral mode places human beings in an ideal relationship to the natural world, whether this be wild nature or nature cropped by domesticated animals such as goats and sheep (Gifford, 1999: 1–2). Pastoral can include the labour that nature exacts from men and women, as the price they must pay for living on the land, and can promote awareness of some of the harsher exigencies of a simple existence close to the earth, especially as expressed through the change of seasons. Such hardship is never allowed to dominate however; the keynote of pastoral is an expression of innate sympathy between all living things, at times evoked lyrically and often associated with human sexual love in idealized forms. Within the sub-genre of the eclogue, which Virgil popularized, the pastoral mode became more expansive, encompassing agriculture as well as sheep herding, and offering exemplary accounts of farming life complete with practical detail. The availability of this detailed sense of environment enabled elements of the pastoral genre to be invoked within later writing where natural life was depicted from perspectives less centred on human agency. As narrative and lyric expositions of wild nature became popular from the Romantic period onwards and close observation of the natural world became important within the new sciences, so adapted forms of the pastoral mode came into play alongside its more rustic, or courtly, predecessors. But the essence of the pastoral mode has always been in some sense a retreat or escape: from the hypocrisies and over-sophistication of urban life; from the stresses perceived within contemporary civilization; from injustice and oppression experienced in the arbitrary exercise of power.

The perception that the pastoral genre encapsulates an urge to escape or retreat has left it vulnerable to the charge that it is unrealistic, or even mystifies the real bases of human relationships in ways that are aligned to the interests of those in power. Such viewpoints have given rise to counter-forms – sometimes termed anti-pastoral – which set themselves off against conventional idealizations of country life. Writing in these modes derives integrity and authority from its hard-nosed exposure of the real conditions of rural existence. Crabbe's eighteenth-century exposé of the destruction of rural communities through enclosure in *The Village* and Thomas Hardy's unsparing depiction of the gruelling work undertaken by farm labourers in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* are prime examples of this alternative mode of writing.

Within recent literary criticism the kinds of perceptions available in the anti-pastoral mode have been brought to bear on the pastoral tradition with increasing stringency. In *The Country and the City*, for instance, one of the most trenchant and influential analyses to emerge from this milieu, Raymond Williams subtly – though at times bitingly – reflects on the gap between literary idealizations and their real social base. Of one of the foremost exponents of the pastoral form in the Elizabethan period, Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, he observes sharply, 'It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral, was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants' (Williams, 1975: 33). In a parallel way, Georgian poetry, which was written largely in pastoral forms during the years leading up to and including World War 1, has appeared weak and evasive to subsequent generations of readers.

The extent to which the Georgian poets ignored contemporary realities to focus on rural idealizations made them seem almost wilfully oblivious to events whose scale and savageness would alter perceptions of what humanity could do to nature forever.

The Georgian poets' allegiance to pastoral as a weak form of denial, a prettifying of stark realities, might well have sounded the death knell for this kind of writing in the twentieth century, at least in Britain. John Barrell and John Bull certainly saw it this way when then they asserted rather polemically, in an introduction to *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, that the history of the pastoral tradition after John Clare was 'the history of its slow death' (1974: 3). In fact, however, although some older conventions may have become otiose, the pastoral impulse has shown extraordinary vitality and versatility in the hands of major writers and artists. One has only to think of the very different ways in which the pastoral mode has been given clear eyed definition and purpose by twentieth-century poets such as Thomas Hardy, Sorley Maclean, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney to see that, at least taken in its broadest sense, it is anything but dead.

In part this is perhaps because Ezra Pound's prescription that twentieth-century writers should 'make it new' has allowed experimentation and movement away from a set of literary conventions to which strict adherence would undoubtedly have been stifling. Disney's own appropriations of pastoral modes and conceits can perhaps best be seen in this context. But the survival of pastoral in a predominantly urban age is also because its modes of representation can be developed in such different directions, at times simultaneously. Though the central urge to recover a harmonious and sympathetic relationship with nature may be inevitably nostalgic in an advanced post-industrial society, the quality of engagement with the world that this impulse engenders is often more ambiguously positioned. For the detailed evocation of a natural environment may carry implicit strains of social criticism within it. The representation of an ideal form of human relationships within nature, far from being simply nostalgic, may become an oblique way of making a stand against the prevailing order of things, a mode of resistance. Pastoral, in a contemporary context, may direct our collective imaginations towards what is in danger of being lost, but which also forms part of our full humanity. It is in this sense that pastoral connects with the project of Disney's early work for, as Paul Wells has remarked, 'The ideological imperative in Disney's "Silly Symphonies" and early features may be understood as populist utopianism, accentuating the positive, the aspirational and the rural, in the face of an advancing modern world' (2002a: 23).

It may well be that the form in which this potential for both escapist idealization and implicit critique has been developed varies markedly in its Old and New World incarnations. Lawrence Buell, for instance, has argued influentially that the dual nature of the pastoral mode has been developed distinctively by American writers, who have realized its potential both for critically differentiating American sensibilities from their European antecedents and for promoting a new *mythos*, a radical innocence that insists on respect for what is both primitive and primal within the natural world. This radical innocence, it is also implied, is a core element in American identity, enshrined within characteristic forms of American experience, the constitution and the nation's founding ideals. Hence, Buell asserts,

> Duality was built into American pastoral from the start, for it was conceived as a dream both hostile to the standing order of civilization (decadent Europe, later hypercivilizing America) yet at the same time a model for the civilization in the process of being built. So American pastoral was always both counter-institutional and institutionally sponsored. (1989: 20)

The possibility of a form's being both 'counter-institutional and institutionally sponsored' seems a useful perspective for exploring some of the contradictory elements at work within Disney's representations of nature. But we should perhaps first try to identify more precisely what this means in the context of the – largely literary – traditions within which Buell locates the paradoxical orientation of American pastoral.

The key to understanding this duality lies in its association with another central term in American nature writing; 'wilderness'. One of Thoreau's journal entries for January 1844 provides a useful illustration of how the idea of the wild acquired a central force as a term for evaluating social experience, as well as in perceiving nature as a core value with its own, independent identity. In the journal, Thoreau focuses on the behaviour of a fox that attracts him because he discerns in it 'a different order of things to that which reigns in the village' (Knott, 2002: 54). John Knott's commentary on this passage offers a vivid insight into the creative tensions this perception engenders within Thoreau's sensibility:

> In the Journal one can see Thoreau learning to turn his sense of difference against conventional modes of living and thinking. His perception of the free and elusive ways of the fox triggers a critique of the village mindset in which the fox becomes reduced to vermin, to be controlled by bounties, and is reduced to an example of "proverbial cunning". By observing the fox's actual behavior, praising its wildness, and engaging it in a form of play Thoreau distinguishes himself from the village world while at the same time recognizing that he cannot truly enter the world of the fox. (ibid.)

In the passage under consideration, it is an appreciation of the fox's 'wildness', a sense of its inherent difference, that enables Thoreau to make a critical move away from the mindset of his neighbours. The apprehension of wildness as both a quality that is 'out there', in nature, and a corresponding inner mode of being, within humans, is entirely characteristic of Thoreau. This wildness is often also associated with 'wilderness' in the American pastoral tradition however, and the word acquires a distinctive inflection through this association. For wilderness – almost by definition – is something deemed to be apart from the ordinary domain of the human; its specialness as a region is inherent in its remoteness. Wilderness is a product of separation: the boundary of civilization but also, within American pastoral, the very ground of our redemption. 'Wilderness is the preservation of the world' wrote Thoreau, famously. But in that wilderness, in the strict sense of a remote region untouched by human intervention, does not exist in most of Europe or densely populated England, access to such space must perforce involve a journey, while the imaginative spur offered by proximity to such regions remains distinctively an American experience. Wilderness as a concept does not have the same associations in Australia, Asia or the rest of the world. In terms of American pastoral then, not

only does the value placed on the idea of wilderness take on a critical edge in relation to normative attitudes within society but also makes the quest for a connection with wild nature part of a larger drive to re-assimilate the primitive (indeed the primal) into contemporary experience. It is for this reason that the trope of learning from the North American Indians is common within American pastoral generally and utterly central to Thoreau's writing.

It may seem that we have now strayed a long way from the world of Disney, and the animated adaptations of the fairy tale that became his trademark. Yet, if we take *Snow White* to be a model, whose key elements later fairy-tale animations revisit in different forms, then a case can be made for seeing Disney's most successful adapted genre as related to many of the central concerns of American pastoral. For Snow White, like Thoreau, undertakes a journey of self-discovery into the wilderness, learning to become more self-reliant in the process. Like Thoreau too, she has a particular affinity for the forest, even though there are aspects of the forest that initially feel alien to her and elicit terror. Despite his deep love of trees – and the pine in particular – Thoreau also acknowledged an alien and fearful aspect to his experiences there. 'What is most striking in the Maine wilderness, is the continuousness of the forest', he wrote in *Ktaadn*. He goes on to explain that

> It is even more grim and wild than you had anticipated, a damp and intricate wilderness, in the spring everywhere wet and miry. The aspect of the country indeed is universally stern and savage, excepting the distant views of the forest from the hills, and the lake prospects, which are mild and civilizing in a degree. (2004: 80)

We will return later to the image of the 'wet and miry', which operates as an important transitional zone in the early stages of Snow White's journey, and which exercised a profound imaginative attraction for Thoreau all his life. However it is worth noting here that, although there is no precise equivalent in *Snow White* for the role played by the North American Indian in Thoreau's journeys, both the dwarves and the forest animals have analogous functions in that the innocence they represent is, to an extent, both primitive and uncivilized.

The tone and ambience of Disney's *Snow White* are, of course, very different from anything found in Thoreau's writing, not only because it is realized through the medium of the animated cartoon but also because its mode is that of sentimental comedy. Perhaps even more importantly, Disney has significantly revised the thematic preoccupations of the pastoral mode incorporated into the narrative, reviewing them from the perspective of an adolescent girl. The masculine prerogatives of the pastoral tradition have been feminized and, in Disney, the realm of the domestic is allowed to predominate.

Key Phases in Disney Animation

As it happens, this preoccupation with nature in relation to the sphere of the domestic also marks a major distinction between films I shall be reviewing at different historical phases in this book. These phases can be distinguished as the period presided over by Walt Disney himself (1937–1966) and the period when

Michael Eisner was corporate head and exerted a decisive influence on policy in relation to the company's animated feature productions (1984–2005). The animated features produced in between these two eras are of much less interest with respect to the themes explored in this book (and are arguably of less artistic quality). This historical division is also useful in that it enables contrasts and continuities to be explored between cultural contexts that have changed substantially. I have used this division to structure the argument of the first six chapters but I am aware that, as the focus moves towards the twenty-first century, such a straightforward contrast becomes less useful to sustain. This is partly because Michael Eisner resigned from his post as CEO of the Walt Disney Company in 2005, so that the films produced after this can hardly be characterized as belonging to a putative 'Eisner era'. But it is also because, from 1995 onwards, Pixar really began to seize the creative initiative from the more traditional wing of Disney animation and took feature animation into some strikingly different territories. For the purposes of this book I have chosen to position Pixar films as part of the Disney tradition, although I am aware that the company remains autonomous in terms of its creative organization with, in many ways, a very distinctive aesthetic. There is though, I would argue, sufficient continuity in terms of the perspectives I am exploring in this book to justify the approach I am outlining here. The makers of *Finding Nemo*, after all, saw *Bambi* as a touchstone for what they were trying to achieve in terms of visual texture and emotion (Cotta Vaz, 2003: 21). From 2006 onwards, when Disney formally bought Pixar and John Lasseter was given overall responsibility for all animation projects in both companies, a high degree of continuing cross influence would seem to have been assured. The additional last chapter and conclusion of the updated edition of this book therefore move beyond both the 'Eisner era' and the previous categories I had developed for analysis, to explore significant new directions.

Although they have each come under considerable critical scrutiny in recent years, it is clear that both Walt Disney and Michael Eisner saw themselves as having a sustained and strong commitment to wild nature and the environment, whatever line one takes on gaps between professed ideals and corporate practices. The nature of this commitment was different however, and found expression in fundamentally altered historical circumstances, whose characteristics I have tried to delineate in the relevant chapters. Walt Disney's image of himself was founded especially on the formative years of his childhood spent in the small-town farming community of Marceline, where his interest in graphic arts had its inception in early attempts to draw the domestic and wild animals that he grew up alongside (Eliot 1995: 7–8). The relationship with wild nature that predominates in Disney's animated films is folksy and homespun. Where it focuses on female protagonists, its imagery draws on contemporary ideologies that associated women with both the realm of the natural and with domestic work. Eisner's roots, by contrast, were urban and cosmopolitan. He was brought up in a wealthy family living on Park Avenue in Manhattan. Eisner was strongly committed to environmental ideals when he took over at Disney. He co-founded the Environmental Media Association at the end of the 1980s to promote awareness of environmental issues within the Hollywood film industry generally (Ingram 2000: 20). But he did so in a more overtly politicized and self-conscious era, and was aware of a need to update the idiom within which Disney animations

expressed their themes and concerns. Whilst retaining an element of the family-orientated innocence of the old Disney, the new films consciously cultivated the sassy rather than the homespun and began to show some awareness of the new political agendas focused around race, feminism and environmentalism. The tone and consciousness of the films presided over by Eisner, in what is sometimes termed the 'Disney revival', are thus substantially changed.

Although the division between the periods of Disney and Eisner animated features provides a useful axis for analysis however, the structure of this book does not follow this historical division in a straightforward manner. This is because I consider that three rather different types of animated films engaged with the theme of wild nature were created during the Disney era and that later films are best construed as developments, or revisions, of these three founding categories. Rather than following a straightforward historical path through all the relevant Disney animated features from *Snow White* (1937) to *Brother Bear* (2003) and more recent films therefore, I have followed developments separately within each of the three types of film that I discriminate as operating within fundamentally different agendas. Each type is allocated a different section in the book and the contrast between the perspectives offered by films from the Disney and Eisner eras respectively is explored in a separate chapter within each section. In this way I hope that the analysis retains a focus on historical developments linked to changing cultural contexts, whilst also giving full weight to the different forms within which the concerns that are at the centre of this study were developed. What follows then is a brief justification of the sections into which I have divided the analysis.

Fairy Tale Adaptations

In a sense, this category of Disney animations needs little justification since fairy tale adaptations are of such central importance within the Disney canon and clearly constitute a distinct genre. The relationship of the animated fairy tale adaptation to the theme of wild nature requires more careful elucidation however. Although rural settings, animal helpers and the motif of sympathy between nature and the principal protagonists are all common elements in traditional versions of fairy tales, there was no necessity for Disney to extend the significance of these features when adapting classic tales. Arguably indeed, wild nature figures in relatively minor ways in the literary fairy tale *Pinocchio* (animated by Disney after *Snow White* in 1940) and is not of central importance as a theme within more recent, non-Disney, animation drawing extensively on fairy-tale material, such as the *Shrek* films. Disney's decision to bring his versions of the fairy tale so richly into association with the theme of wild nature is therefore distinctive and is developed further, though in rather different forms, in the two major adaptations of the Eisner period, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Fairy tales work through archetypes and, at their best, produce apparently simple narratives with rich symbolic associations. My analysis of Disney's fairy tale adaptations explores some of the further symbolic associations drawn into the animated film when such brief narratives are extended, dramatized and embodied in graphic form. Although the distanced, otherworldliness of the fairy tale would seem to deal

in universals, I suggest that the symbolic associations of Disney's films also touch on more specific cultural anxieties and longings connected to perceptions of nature from their time. Rituals concerned with dirt and cleaning and imagery connecting nature with the domestic space of the home are particularly important in this respect. While the cultural work of the films of the Disney era tends towards making wild nature safe however, as it is made to perform in harmony with domestic rituals, films from the Eisner period appear to dramatize a symbolic rift between the realms of the human and the natural. The later films eventually reconcile this rift in potentially complex ways. Chapters 1 and 2 explore some of the implications of these patterns, relating their significance to shifts in cultural perceptions of the meaning of nature – and of female roles in particular – between these respective periods.

The North American Wilderness

This category is based on setting, rather than genre, and is invoked to explore some of the ways in which Disney animation has engaged with one of the central topics in North American environmental writing: the meaning and implications of 'wilderness'. Only one animated film from the Disney era, *Bambi*, falls into this category, though this is perhaps the single most important film engaged with the themes covered by this book. Although Disney did not return to the territory explored within *Bambi* in the animated medium, one might suggest that he continued to pursue the themes evoked here in live action and especially within the wildlife documentaries that were so successful during the 1950s. *Bambi*'s focus is on natural history, rather than human history, though the incursion of hunters into the idyllic forest setting halfway through the film suggests that it is preoccupied with the relationship between wilderness and humans in an archetypal form. This focus is removed from any specific historical context however, since the hunters' presence is never represented directly. This dehistoricized approach – combined with the absence of American Indians from the landscape – is significant in a number of ways. In particular, it allows the film to connect with North American traditions of thought and iconography in the representation of wilderness, in forms that suggest interesting ambiguities and occlusions.

When the idea of wilderness was returned to in the Eisner era, it was embedded within a full, if romantically mythologized, historical context in the story of the Indian princess Pocahontas. The historicized approach taken in *Pocahontas* appears to be self-consciously revisionist, particularly in its attempt to bring a sympathetic version of North American Indian culture and history centre stage, even though the project as a whole is fraught with contradictions. Chapter 4 explores the implications of some of these contradictions, clarifying these particularly through a close comparison with DreamWorks' *Spirit*, which also tries to explore the meaning of wilderness in a quasi-historical context. It is interesting that the latest Disney film that falls into this category, *Brother Bear*, fights shy of the difficulties posed for a children's film in confronting the politics of landscape, setting its sentimental fable in prehistory (as defined from a white settlers' perspective) in a mythologized version of Inuit culture towards the end of the last Ice Age.

Tropical Environments

Again this category is defined by setting rather than by genre, although there are some generic resemblances between the films discussed in this section. The principal films explored under this category are *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Lion King* (1994), *Tarzan* (1999) and *Finding Nemo* (2003). Of these, only *The Jungle Book* was conceived and largely produced during the Disney era and even this film might be thought of as transitional, exploring new territory within the Disney animation tradition that was to prove increasingly fruitful as a creative arena in the period at the end of the century when globalization had become fully developed.

The setting of these films within the tropics provides them with the allure of the exotic. Although care may be taken to imbue the environments depicted with recognizable and distinctive qualities – *The Jungle Book*'s atmosphere is evocative of the tropical paintings of Le Douanier Rousseau, the palette of *The Lion King* carefully chosen to suggest the colours and light of Africa, and so on – the ultimate aim is not to create the impression of a realistic landscape. The exotic distancing effect created by tropical settings instead creates a kind of dreamscape where, to an even greater extent than in other kinds of Disney animation, fantasies and deep-seated cultural longings can be projected and worked through. Hence, rather than being structured around the patterns of a quasi-realistic natural history, as in *Bambi*, these films tend to take up the quest for a harmonious natural world, within which humans can be fully integrated, in the form of popularized myths. The most potent of these myths is that of the feral child, brought up to be at home in the natural world but then seeking accommodation with his biological human identity. The narratives of both *The Jungle Book* and *Tarzan* are founded upon this myth. But the driving force behind the plots of these films more generally is that of restoration – of a proper order within the natural world in *The Lion King*, of the family reconciled to both the dangers and pleasures of its home environment on the reef in *Finding Nemo* – and the plot of restoration involves working through competing ideas about the natural world as well as elements of human psychology.

It is in this latter sense – scenarios that allow contrasting ideas to be playfully contested within the more traditional format of character based, comic adventure – that these films are particularly rich in relation to the themes explored in this book. The narratives of these films tend to be structured around a journey and it is striking how many focus on buddy relationships – Mowgli with Bagheera and Baloo in *The Jungle Book*, Dora and Marlin in *Finding Nemo* – that allow competing attitudes and ideas to be bounced off each other particularly effectively. Although the plots effect closure, the effect of this dialectical interplay of ideas often leaves the films more open ended in terms of interpretation and response than might at first appear. Like the films examined in other categories within this book, but perhaps more clearly because set off in forms of debate, these comic dramas allow audiences to rehearse some of the most important desires and anxieties of our contemporary culture in forms that offer both consolation and the release of laughter. Though they may be partially escapist, such films – at their best – also have the potential for putting us in touch with issues, in playful forms and, I argue, can allow audiences to think as well as feel.

PART 1
Fairy Tale Adaptations

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Chapter 1

Domesticating Nature: *Snow White* and Fairy Tale Adaptation

> 'Children show no trace of the arrogance which urges civilized men to draw a hard and fast line between their own nature and that of other animals.'
>
> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*

Disney's first animated feature was a landmark film, distinguished both for the richness of its engagement with the forms of wild nature and for the sheer quality of its graphic art. In expanding the Grimm brothers' spare little narrative of *Snow-drop* into an 80-minute feature, Disney poured nature into his animation cells with such profusion, grace and visual delight that the film sets a benchmark against which subsequent achievements may be judged. The story of Snow White is simple enough in outline. The Disney film seems to play down the role of motherhood, which had been such a powerful ingredient in earlier versions of the fairy tale plot. Disney's version begins with the stepmother queen already established and dominant over Snow White, who appears to have been relegated uncomplainingly to the position of scullery maid in the lower reaches of the castle. Unlike in *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*, the young girl and her mother substitute are not portrayed as having any direct interaction at the start of the film. Thereafter the story unfolds along familiar lines: the stepmother's order to have Snow White murdered at the edge of the forest; Snow White's escape, eventually finding sanctuary in a forest cottage with the seven dwarves; the witch/stepmother's apparently successful attempt to kill her with a poisoned apple; and the young prince arousing her from death-sleep in the glass coffin before taking her as his bride. A number of details have been changed from the Grimm brothers' version but the most striking single feature of the film's realization springs from the way in which Snow White is persistently shown surrounded by animals, plants and flowers. From the opening scene in which her movements scrubbing the steps at the castle entrance are subtly echoed by the gestures of attendant white doves, through her courtship by the young prince, gracefully framed with arched branches and hanging tendrils of blossom, to the multiple scenes depicting the sympathetic attention and practical help from her animal friends in the forest, Snow White's association with the natural world dominates the imagery of the film and this aspect accounts for much of the emotional appeal. To be sure, the pretext for Snow White's association with nature can be found in the folk tale form itself, where animal helpers feature persistently as guides or magical aids to protagonists whose resilience and good-heartedness are eventually rewarded in the plots. But in the traditional tale such associations are developed in a schematic or functional way. Disney, by contrast, allows the basic motif of the animal helper to be elaborated so extensively that it becomes the heart of the film. In the process the theme of sympathetic

nature, which in traditional tales is a narrative function, becomes transformed into a whole mode of being. The effect is a heightening of those feelings of both being in sympathy with and working within nature that are at the centre of the pastoral mode. As in traditional pastoral, the medium that gives lyric shape to these interwoven strands of sympathy is song. Snow White's song with the animals in the forest clearing, in which musical phrases are picked up and uttered in alternating patterns by the girl and birds, is at the centre of the film, but the keynote songs at the wishing well and at the house while the animals are working also consolidate and extend these core associations.

Although the core values of *Snow White* are enshrined in a modernized pastoral vision of sympathetic nature however, those values are contested in the film. If we ask what ideas of nature are projected in the film, especially from a child's point of view, then we are struck immediately by the strength of its contrasts. The film is constructed around a very clear set of oppositions, inspired, no doubt, by its fairy tale origins, but constituting, in effect, a dual, or even polarized, arrangement of qualities in the natural world. These oppositions are organized, of course, around the key figures of Snow White and the Witch/Stepmother. Whereas Snow White is surrounded by a multitude of sympathetic, charming and peaceful animals, the Queen is accompanied by a single raven, which we assume is her 'familiar' in her witch role. Where Snow White is depicted mainly in an outside environment with plants, trees, flowers and blossom (Disney had developed his inspiration for Snow White in drawings for the figure of Persephone, goddess of spring, who was the subject for one of the *Silly Symphonies* in 1934), the Queen is shown mainly in enclosed rooms within the castle – beautifully designed but sterile, devoid of live plants or flowers (Finch, 1995: 136). Where Snow White's identifying colour is white, associated with light and purity, the Queen's is black, associated with night and death. Snow White's positive attitude towards all things is clearly an enhancement of life and its natural energies. But when the Queen is shown outside her castle, even the landscape is different: it is more rocky and barren, living trees are sparse, and we are aware of the dead tree trunks and of strewn branches that appear to be rotting back into the ground. The only animals that manifest themselves in this region are vultures, whose ecological function is the swift processing of dead bodies; just as, we assume, the rats in the lower reaches of the Queen's castle have picked clean the bodies whose skeletal remains proliferate there.

Some of these oppositions are subtle, but many are stark and it is not difficult to categorize them in a schematic form that emphasizes the structural principle of duality: Images of nature associated with:

Snow White	Queen
Sympathetic	Terrifying
Helpful	Destructive
Pure	Corrupt/poisonous
Charming	Alienating
Ordered	Chaotic
Life enhancing	Death seeking
Growth	Decay
Light	Dark

Yet these stark oppositions do not tell the whole story. Some writers have seen links, as well as strong contrasts, between the figures of Snow White and the Queen. Joyce Thomas, for instance, writing about the Grimms' version of the story, asserts that the Queen is 'the dark shadow of Snow White'. Drawing on a Jungian theory of archetypes, she suggests that 'the shadow represents the personality's dark aspects and inferiorities which have an emotional, autonomous, and obsessive or possessive quality' that is experienced as 'a projection onto another … a replica of one's own unknown face' (1989: 73). The shared characteristics of a beauty defined by black hair and red lips, and the competitive battleground within which the Queen construes this shared identity, certainly support a reading in which one figure may be seen as a dark projection of the other. Readings of the *Snow White* story that draw on this kind of insight have generally been developed psychologically. In particular, the Queen's role as a mother figure is drawn into sharp and sometimes illuminating focus in a number of recent feminist interpretations. But it is possible to read such archetypal 'doubling' in other ways too. Here, I would like to suggest that it may take us further in understanding the starkly polarized views of nature that are projected in the film.

The key episode which encourages viewers towards a perception of polarized views of nature as 'shadowing', rather than as simply opposing, each other is undoubtedly the terrifying journey that Snow White undergoes as her initiation into the forest. As Snow White runs away from the glade in which the huntsman reneges, at the last moment, on the Queen's command to murder the innocent girl, the film rapidly leeches all the colours of its vernal landscape to immerse us in spectral darkness. This darkness is, of course, the Queen's domain and the experience of the film's new nightmarish mode constitutes a kind of dramatic paradox; it is as though, in fleeing from the Queen, Snow White is not only entering more deeply into the Queen's world but has actually internalized its qualities as paranoid terror. In the Grimm brothers' version of the story, the forest Snow White must traverse is a place of fear; yet the reader is reassured that Snow White is ultimately safe and the forest never loses its objective reality. 'Then poor Snow-drop wandered along through the wood in great fear; and the wild beasts roared about her, but none did her any harm' (Grimm, 1977: vol. 1, 130). Within the Disney film, Snow White becomes lost, not just in the forest itself but in her own subjective imagination. Every feature of the natural world that Snow White now perceives is transformed into something alien and threatening. An owl's eyes stare out of the undergrowth at her in predatory alarm: the eyes of other forest dwellers multiply around her like an inescapable, moving tableau of unseen assailants; even the branches seem to grasp at her, their bony, finger-like structures reminiscent of the evil Queen's hands when she later transforms herself into the shape of an old hag. The natural forms that Snow White perceives with such alarm in this phantasmagoric vision are a dark version of her delightful forest friends, the animals and birds, as we perceive when light from another clearing finally floods through to reveal their normal aspect. But while she is in this state Snow White's 'nature' is not just linked to the Queen's: it is subsumed by it.

It is interesting in this respect that Snow White's recovery of her normal vision is preceded by an episode in which she falls and is temporarily immersed in water. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade has suggested that:

> Immersion is the equivalent, at the human level, of death at the cosmic level, of the Cataclysm (the Flood) which periodically dissolves the world into primeval ocean. Breaking up all forms, doing away with the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth. Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores – even if only for a moment – the integrity of the dawn of things. (quoted in Douglas, 1984: 161)

Snow White's recovery from subservience to her 'shadow' appears to occur spontaneously, but symbolic associations undoubtedly enrich our perception of this process. Certainly, the easy intimacy of her relationships with the animals when she emerges into the light of the forest glade could be construed as recovering 'the integrity of the dawn of things', a dream that has been repeated in different forms in nearly all cultures. If immersion is the human 'equivalent of death at the cosmic level', moreover, it suggests that Snow White must pass through the symbolic domain of the Queen in order to regain both her purity and her separation from the Queen's realm of morbidity. The liminal role played by the water in marking Snow White's progress is also interesting in another respect. For the film clearly depicts the pool as an area of swamp within the forest, with rotting stumps and aquatic vegetation round its dark margins. Swampland has long been recognized to have particular significance within the overall ecology of the forest and swamps certainly held an intense fascination for Thoreau throughout his lifetime. Thoreau's feelings on entering a swamp, as he declares in his essay 'Walking', were akin to those generated by 'a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*' (Knott, 2002: 55). Thoreau often fantasized about literally immersing himself in the swamp. As Knott goes on to observe, the biological richness of the swamp enables it to become a place where Thoreau 'can "recreate" himself because its teeming vitality suggests the possibility of a vibrant life that Thoreau understood as spiritually as well as physically invigorating, outside the dull and ordered world of the village' (ibid.). In the Disney film the swamp, although initially a site of terror and revulsion, acts as a transitional zone leading Snow White also to 'recreate' the forest in her perceptions – ultimately as a kind of sanctuary. Interestingly, the swamp episode paves the way for Snow White's engagement with the 'teeming life' that fills the forest glade once she has emerged from the water.

If one of the functions fulfilled by Snow White's immersion ritual is to enable a fuller separation from her shadow image of the Queen, however, we should recognize that this separation may not be complete, for the film bears the hallmarks of other kinds of 'shadowing' in the sequences that continue after Snow White's recovery of her more independent self. The owl's eyes, for instance, which confront Snow White with such hallucinogenic terror at the start of the dark forest sequence, proliferate in more benign form in the supposedly safe house of the dwarves. The dwarves' house, though apparently simple and rustic in design, is decorated on nearly every exposed beam and piece of wooden furniture with intricate carvings that largely take the form of forest creatures. Of all the motifs in the dwarves' cottage however, it is the image of the owl's eyes that is repeated most prolifically; the motif occurs at the end of every one of the wooden stair boards, leading up to the dwarves' bedroom, and at many other points on exposed beams, furniture and the fire surround. It is curious that this figure should have attracted Disney's animators so persistently that it becomes a virtual leitmotif within the profusion of loving

detail they bestowed on the heroine's foster home environment. For, detached from the bird's body, this owl mask becomes both attractive and disturbing, reminiscent both of the isolated, inhuman eyes staring terrifyingly from the blank darkness of the forest and of their more appealing embodiment, revealed in the benignly solicitous image of the friendly bird that appears in the forest glade scene afterwards. One suspects a rather wonderful piece of unconscious artistry on the part of the animators here, who have responded to the deeper resonances in the story's internal dynamics with great subtlety.

The issue of whether there is some connectedness between the seemingly polarized views of nature that structure *Snow White* is of more than merely formal interest. What is at stake here is a judgement as to whether the symbolic structure of the film affirms one of the master narratives of western modernity – humanity struggling to control nature in an attempt to transcend the natural processes of decay, toxicity, disease and ultimately even death – or whether, even in sentimental form, the film offers glimpses of a more holistic view of the natural world, where such processes may be experienced as integrated within a fuller, more complex ontology. Leo Marx's blunt distinction between two kinds of pastoralism within American culture – 'one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex' – (1964: 5) might, indeed, need to be qualified here. Marx suggests that popular forms of sentimental pastoral are essentially of a lower order than their more fully achieved literary counterparts. Sentimental pastoral deals in stereotypes, he opines; it cannot challenge conventional ways of seeing and responding to the world because it is too simplistic to engage audiences at a deeper, more imaginative level. But is this always or necessarily the case? Although Disney's *Snow White* is clearly both popular and sentimental, its imagery suggests a more layered and ambiguous consciousness, engaged with archetypes that express inherent contradictions rather than the linear straightforwardness of stereotypes, where good is clearly separated from evil at all levels. As such, I would argue, the film lays claim to embodying elements of the more 'imaginative and complex' experience, taken by Marx to be the hallmark of a modern pastoral mode that is socially engaged and emotionally challenging. In terms of the views of nature it encapsulates then, Disney's first feature may, largely through its imagery, push a 'popular and sentimental' mode towards realizing a more 'imaginative and complex' vision. But to test the degree to which this may be so, we need to examine more carefully some of the critical objections that have been raised, at times quite stringently, towards the film.

Three main areas of Disney's *Snow White* have received critical, and at times intensely pejorative, attention in recent years. Firstly the figure of the evil queen, which began a process of being made more 'un-natural' as early as 1819, when the Grimm brothers replaced the biological mother of earlier versions with an estranged stepmother (Zipes, 1988; Warner, 1995), has been taken as expressing patriarchal viewpoints in increasingly intensified forms. The stereotypical roles that are used to dramatize conflict in Disney's film, it is argued, potently reproduce those limited and distorted images within patriarchal discourse that position women as either innocent angels or destructive demons. As Maria Tatar puts it, 'what makes Disney's *Snow White* difficult to applaud as an example of a liberating fairy tale is precisely the way in which it works too hard to efface any trace of maternal goodwill and to construct an image of feminine evil overpowering in its cinematic depth' (1992: 232). In a parallel mode, the image of

goodness represented through Snow White as a character is often invoked as embodying the opposite extreme. Snow White's 'saccharine sweetness' is taken to disarm young viewers from perceiving her role as exemplar of a stifling mid-century ideal of female conformity. Building on the latter perspective, a third strand of critique holds the film accountable for a sentimental appropriation of the natural world in its elaboration of the spare narrative lines of the fairy tale upon which it is based. This appropriation, it is argued, while designed to delight and entertain young viewers, is anything but innocent in terms of the implied attitudes that are inculcated. This last view is expressed in determined fashion in a recent essay by Patrick Murphy, who suggests *Snow White* is an example of the way 'that Disney animation consistently displays static, absolute depictions of both nature and women, rather than just one or the other' (1995: 120). Jack Zipes is, if anything, even more categorical when he argues that in all Disney's early films based on fairy tales (*Snow White* 1937, *Cinderella* 1950, *Sleeping Beauty* 1959)

> … evil is always associated with female nature out of control … The ultimate message of all three films is that, if you are industrious, pure of heart, and keep your faith in a male god, you will be rewarded. … Wild nature can be tamed, and the depiction of nature in the films reveals to what extent *man* can arrange everything in harmonious order and in agreeable pastel colors to create the perfect American idyll. (1988: 44–5)

The 'taming of wild nature' is thus taken to be co-extensive, in such critiques, with the way plots work to suppress or eliminate the power of female figures. These figures – like the forces of nature that need to be contained – are also construed as fierce, wild or dangerously out of control.

The cultural and ideological work that Disney films perform acquires a particular potency, in terms of this kind of argument, because it takes place primarily within the confines of the home environment where it is viewed as part of a process of domestication. This is especially apparent in *Snow White* where the heroine, as Byrne and McQuillan point out,

> like the rabbits, squirrels and birds, achieves her domestic transformation through her reliance on the body itself. She domesticates the wild animals in the wood through her singing, transforms the neglected cottage with the help of the newly domesticated animals, who use their bodies to perform household tasks in ways that labour-saving machines of 1950s America would achieve. … Snow White even manages to domesticate death itself with a kiss. (1999: 62)

Yet, if one looks at the way the process of domestication is configured in detail, it turns out to be neither as absolute nor as univalent as such an analysis might suggest. Snow White's relationship with the animals, for instance, is founded on a flow of sympathy and a recognition of equivalence in their respective positions; but this does not eliminate a crucial sense of difference between the human heroine and the creatures who surround her being registered as well. As is the case in the later *Bambi* (1942), for instance, the animators depict an unusually large number of different animal species within *Snow White*. Identifiable species that throng to meet the heroine in the forest clearing include deer, rabbit, raccoon, skunk, squirrel, terrapin, owl and bluebird. The respective habitats of these different animals are also

clearly indicated, from the semi-aquatic pond domain of the terrapin, through the earth burrows of the rabbits and the dwellings in lower parts of the trees of small mammals, to the fully airborne birds. The degree of both biodiversity and species differentiation that are represented here is unusual within the relatively low mimetic form of animated story. Even today, this aspect is striking and remains distinctive. Also distinctive, indeed possibly unique within the Disney canon, is the restraint that is placed on a fully developed anthropomorphism, imposed by not allowing the animals to speak. Mute animals retain a greater potential for their species integrity – in particular their otherness from human beings – to be retained. This potential is, as we shall see, exploited with more self-conscious political awareness by later animated filmmakers such as Hayao Miyazaki and in DreamWorks' *Spirit*, but it is present in more limited forms in Disney's earliest feature. Disney's *Snow White* is also notable for the effort that has been made to capture a realistic sense of movement for each of the species depicted. Although this extension of realistic movement to the realm of animals does not go as far as in *Bambi*, made a few years later, enough is done to configure differentiated movement of the animals in *Snow White* for a distinctive sense of species being to be conveyed clearly. In themselves, each of these aspects may seem like small details. Taken together though, I would argue, these represent strategies whose collective force imbues the natural world depicted with a sense of integrity and separateness from the human that is at least partially respected. In terms of children's early learning this would seem to link potentially to perspectives such as the Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess puts forward when he states that a 'joyful experience of nature is partially dependent upon a conscious or unconscious development of a sensitivity for qualities' (1989: 51). Snow White herself seems to acknowledge some intrinsic sense of otherness or difference in her appeal to the animals for some dwelling that might be suitable for her overnight: '… I do need a place to sleep at night. I can't sleep in the ground like you [to the rabbits], or in a tree the way you do [to squirrels], and I'm sure no nest could possibly be big enough for me'. The animals' nodding approval of each of these assertions implies a general acceptance of such difference as a kind of 'truth universally acknowledged'. If the form of the dwarves' cottage where Snow White takes refuge – with its thatched roof and low doorway, arched like the entrance to a burrow – expresses continuity with the forms and materials of nature, then it also marks a boundary, a different space within which cultural forms predominate.

Criticisms of *Snow White* often make the assumption that it is in the space within the house that the process of domestication of 'wild nature', as represented by the animals, is most evident and becomes completed. Once inside the cottage, Snow White 'teaches' the animals to clean, wash up, dust cobwebs and clear away dishes, and to do so with joy – expressed most fulsomely by the keynote song 'Whistle While You Work'. In the process, Snow White magically enthrals them, it is implied, to the servitude of housework (a servitude which, incidentally, also identifies 'nature' with the role of women in terms of labour within the home). But, as in the initial presentation of the animals, this image of domestication is not really complete or absolute and the sequence as a whole – long recognized as being endowed with exceptional 'creative élan' (Tatar, 1992) – is subtle enough to bear the weight of more than one reading. In part this is because the animators remain highly sensitive to the issue of boundaries,

both within the cottage and between the building and the outside world. Rather than collapsing these boundaries, once 'animal nature' has entered in and taken up its domestic tasks, the boundaries are used to make subtle discriminations. For instance, when the dwarves return to their cottage, the animals flee the domestic space they had inhabited with such a profound sense of belonging that they were even depicted as tenderly joining Snow White in the relaxed abandonment of sleep. On the dwarves' return they immediately go back to the space of the wild, however. While their fairy tale function as Snow White's 'helpers' is retained, the animals' nervous sensitivity to the boundary between the cottage and their own 'natural' domain outside remains in place, whenever anyone other than Snow White is present. Hence the birds only attack the Queen when she is outside and first tries to offer Snow White the poisoned apple. But when Snow White is duped by feigned illness into bringing the disguised Queen inside, the animals respect the boundary, looking on helplessly until the moment it becomes clear that Snow White will eat the poisoned offering, when they set off like lightning to secure assistance from the dwarves.

Just as the initial meeting with the animals, then, retains a respect for the variety and difference of natural forms of life that is, I have argued, more than simply tokenistic, so also the 'domestication' of the animals in the cottage is signified as incomplete. 'Wildness' is the animals' default position in the film, subtly indicated through the animators' use of space, boundaries and natural movement in their depiction of the animals' bodies. It might be argued that these more subtle indicators are effectively overpowered by the sheer weight of visual rhetoric brought to bear on the central conceit of this episode – the animals' propensity for housework developed with such alacrity under Snow White's gentle tutelage. But even here a more complex response is possible, qualifying the initial impression of a thoroughgoing annexation of wild nature to the rituals of domestic work. The key to a more complex understanding of the way this scene works lies in the delight it consistently engenders, even among sophisticated adult viewers who are resistant to its more sentimental blandishments. Maria Tatar has remarked on the way 'Reviews of the film underscore the way in which the housekeeping sequence … seems to have captured the imagination of viewers. The episode is repeatedly singled out as the film's highpoint …' (1992: 234). As in the earlier episode however, the delight engendered by this sequence is founded not on a collapse of the difference between the wild and the domestic, but on the defamiliarizing effects brought about by retaining a sense of the wild in the depiction of domestic tasks, that are then perceived strangely, afresh. The estrangement that so delights us here is realized through the close attention to detail. The sensuous apprehension of the animals' bodies within this squalid human environment is enhanced by our sense of their movements. The swirling and flicking of tails that might be observed in the wild, the manipulation of small objects with potential food or nest building interest by legs, beaks or paws, and the fantastic agility of squirrels are all recontextualized – with a panache that seems to relish its proximity to the absurd – as household chores. The effect is not only to unfurl a (no doubt ideologically charged) banner whose message is that housework is both pleasurable and natural for young women; it is also to experience that work in new ways, defamiliarized by the incursion of wild nature into the household domain. The evidence that a sense of wildness is reconfigured

rather than (literally!) wiped out in this process comes especially from the humour that is such a strong feature here. Consider, for instance, the incident that initiates the animals washing up. As one creature manipulates a plate into position facing a young deer's head, the deer's tongue comes out to lick the plate, lovingly removing from its surface what we imagine to be encrusted food and dirt left by the dwarves. It is the same gesture that a deer would use to clean its newborn fawn's body in the wild, of course, and the joke works because it brings the loving, physical intimacy of wild nature to bear on a context where higher standards of hygiene are normally expected within contemporary human culture. Snow White tactfully redirects the animals towards the use of water in the sink, but the point is beautifully made: it is the perceived disjuncture between wild nature and domestic ritual, as much as the artfully contrived conformity, that accounts for the appeal of this central episode.

If it is the interplay between elements of the wild and human culture that stands at the heart of Disney's depiction of nature in *Snow White* then, we are perhaps now in a position to pose a larger question as to what the significance and function of the fantasy that fuels this interplay may be. For, even if the arguments advanced so far for a more complex and dialectal engagement with wild nature are persuasive, it remains true that the narrative coordinates such effects around a central idea of nature as responsive to human needs rather than, in any sustained way, as independent. Why has this image of nature become so important within the modern world and what is significant about the way this theme is handled within Disney's films? Some clues that may take us a little further in answering these questions may be found in Marina Warner's analysis of the emergence of cuddly animal toys within the culture of modern childhood. Warner writes:

> Just as the rise of the teddy bear matches the decline of real bears in the wild, so soft toys today have taken the shape of rare wild species. Some of these are not very furry in their natural state: stuffed killer whales, cheetahs, gorillas, snails, spiders, snakes – and of course dinosaurs – are made in the most invitingly deep pile plush. They act as a kind of totem, associating the human being with the animal's imagined capacities and value. Anthropomorphism traduces the creatures themselves; their loveableness sentimentally exaggerated, just as, formerly, their viciousness crowded out empirical observation. (1995: 306)

I have argued that part of the distinctiveness (and perhaps even originality) of Disney's *Snow White* is that its predominant anthropomorphic spirit does not wholly 'traduce the animals themselves'. And indeed there are elements of 'empirical observation' in the much-vaunted realism Disney's features bring to the animated film tradition. We will look at the latter aspect more fully in the next section, when we examine *Bambi.* But it does seem likely that, even within Disney's first feature, animal forms may act partly as totemic devices, soliciting the power of nature for young humans at a time when, as more and more species face possible extinction, we sense that the power of animals within the real natural world is diminishing. What then, is the underlying function of such 'totemic devices'? Warner's analysis continues:

> The distinction between humans and beasts is yearningly cancelled: soft toys wear clothes and perform human tasks, even by going deep sea diving. By giving a toy in the shape of a wild animal, the giver encourages the goodness of the wild in human nature, male and female.

> For mankind is still the issue; Keith Thomas comments '(such) fantasies enshrine the values by which society as a whole cannot afford to live.' Tapping the power of the animal no longer seems charged with danger, let alone evil, but rather a necessary part of healing. (ibid.)

In encouraging the 'goodness of the wild in human nature' then, Warner suggests, the social ritual of giving soft, animal toys may become 'a necessary part of healing'. What is 'healed' through such acts is the separation from wild nature inherent within western (and increasingly global) living. It is this separation, philosophers such as Naess and Heidegger have argued, that divides us from a full sense of our humanity. And so we re-invent the primary conditions of such separation emotionally, in fantasies that satisfy our desire 'yearningly' to cancel the distinction between ourselves and beasts.

To what extent may these larger speculations be relevant to the underlying pattern of meanings available, not only in the apparently simple act of giving soft toys, but also in the more complex symbolic structure of the fantasy that is developed within *Snow White*? It is certainly possible to see the Disney version of the fairy tale as developing, much more fully than in traditional renditions, 'the goodness of the wild in human nature'. This 'goodness' is secured within Disney, as we have seen, through identification with the figure of Snow White and her wild animal entourage. But there are also more specific forms in which the separation between wild and human is worked on in the film and perhaps 'healed' through the enactment of ritual. To test this idea further we need to return to the space of the dwarves' cottage to see whether some deeper significance may be implicit in the interaction between the human and the natural that is dramatized there. It is worth noting first, as other writers have done (Zipes, 1988), that the Disney script changes the conditions that prompt the work taking place in the cottage. In the Grimm brothers' version of the story, for instance, Snow White finds the inside of the cottage in a state of order that would satisfy even the most house-proud of visitors:

> Everything was spruce and neat in the cottage: on the table was spread a white cloth, and there were seven little plates with seven little loaves, and seven little glasses with wine in them; and knives and forks laid in order. (Grimm, 1977: 130)

Disney transforms this exemplary bourgeois, domestic space into what is frankly a disordered mess. To even see inside the cottage initially, Snow White must first wipe a layer of dirt from the window: inside unwashed dishes, clothes and utensils lie around in heaps, while every surface is festooned with cobwebs and covered in dust. As the shocked heroine observes, the broom has never been used. The effect of this drastic change to the image of the home environment is often analyzed as heightening the gendered implications of Snow White's housekeeping role, emphasizing how much the male dwarves' domestic arrangements need sorting out by a willing and energetic female. But there is another aspect to the image Disney chooses that may be equally significant. For the dimension of the dwarves' living arrangements that Snow White chooses to focus on primarily is dirt and 'dirt', as anthropologists remind us, is, in its various forms, of fundamental significance within most human cultures. Mary Douglas, for instance, poses the question of how 'dirt, which is normally destructive, sometimes becomes creative' (1984: 159). Her analysis of tribal ritual suggests that the power inherent within dirt resides in the 'danger which is risked by boundary

transgression. … Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inherent in the cosmos. Ritual which can harness these for good is harnessing power indeed' (ibid.). In Douglas's study, those 'powers inherent in the cosmos' – represented through the boundary blurring power of dirt – are primarily associated with death. In certain rituals such powers can be harnessed for collective good, however, by individuals immersing themselves in the dirt that is normally avoided or fastidiously swept away. Within a tribe who are normally 'not tolerant of filth and highly pollution conscious' for instance,

> … the central act in the ritual of mourning is actively to welcome filth. They sweep rubbish onto the mourners. The rubbish is the rubbish of death, it is dirt … a voluntary embrace of the symbols of death is a kind of prophylactic against the effects of death … If anyone held the idea that death and suffering are not an integral part of nature, the delusion is corrected …. (ibid.: 177–8)

Snow White's seemingly implacable cheerfulness and sweetness of nature might be taken as a precise emotional equivalent of the 'idea that death and suffering are not an integral part of nature'. It is this innocence that makes her vulnerable to the evil Queen's predation, indeed. When Snow White comes out of her traumatic experience of the forest she even blames herself for having temporarily given way to such dark perceptions. 'You don't know what I've been through', she tells the forest animals, 'and all because I was afraid. I'm so ashamed!' But the film as a whole makes claims on us that are larger than its heroine's consciousness and it is worth pursuing the idea of dirt a little further before deciding whether Douglas's construction of its significance is wholly irrelevant.

It is worth noting at the start just how much weight the film gives to the discernment and expulsion of dirt from the home environment. The 'housework' sequence of the animals cleaning the cottage lasts approximately five minutes. After the dwarves have returned home Snow White, by now in full matriarchal flow, insists that they wash the dirt from their bodies before being allowed to sit down for dinner. This sequence lasts about eight minutes, far too long for its contribution to the narrative development of the film (indeed, in my judgement, this is an artistic flaw which would have benefited from some judicious editing). But the unwarranted time allocated to this episode is testimony in itself to the importance the filmmakers felt this key theme had within the movie as a whole. In total, about a sixth of this eighty-minute film is taken up with the depiction of cleaning activities that barely advance the plot at all. What is this all about? The theme is especially important, in part because Disney films in general have been attacked for offering children a sanitized image, not just of a domestic environment, but beyond this, in Richard Schickel's memorable phrase, of 'the whole wide world … scrubbed clean' (1986: 53).

The housekeeping sequence would appear, at first sight, to point in precisely the opposite direction to the ritual Mary Douglas describes and analyses. Although the movements are choreographed, the upbeat, spontaneous, inventive and joyful energy that runs through the sequence suggests lightness rather than formality, play rather than ritual. It is an idealized image of unalienated labour – work fully integrated with the pleasure principle rather than the death instinct. Disney's playful image of

cleaning seems to replicate, in this respect, idealized visions of such work projected by early leaders of the domestic science movement. Lynne Vallone, for instance, has suggested that Catherine Beecher, founder of the movement in the United States, devised, in her imaginary description of young girls working together in the washing room, a sentimental image of female labour, 'painting it in neo-republican pastels that elevate washing to all that is enjoyable and artful' (1994: 263). Beecher's evocation of this scene, with its emphasis on pleasurable interaction, movement and singing, appears remarkably similar in tone to the laundering and housecleaning scenes in *Snow White*: 'some thirty or forty merry girls, superintended by a motherly lady, chatting and singing, washing and stretching, while every convenience is at hand, and everything around is clean and comfortable' (ibid.: 264). The mess and dirt, which is ritually embraced by the tribes-people described by Douglas, is here dispelled, along with any negative symbolic associations, by the activity depicted in Beecher's ideal seminary, just as it is within Snow White's cottage.

The film version does allow some distinctions to be developed in its depiction of this process. Whereas Snow White, as a human, protects herself from direct contact with the dirt, as far as possible, while working on it (she alone uses the broom and keeps the duster at arms length, with her head turned away, as it is shaken out), the animals do indeed 'embrace the dirt', through direct contact with their bodies. As Snow White conducts her review of the different forms of detritus and mess left around the cottage, almost the first animal we see is a chipmunk whose body becomes caught up, almost enshrouded, in one of the cobwebs Snow White is busy itemizing. Where Snow White sweeps dirt with her broom, the animals use their tails, and while she minimizes contact by expelling dirt through the window at arm's length, the animals' attempts to imitate her do not prevent their breathing substantial amounts of dust in and then sneezing. It is indicated moreover, that the animals' natural mode of cleaning involves taking a certain amount of dirt inside their bodies, as the young deer and chipmunks' first attempts to wash the dishes involve licking them clean. In almost every instance the animals' engagement with dirt is depicted as direct, physical, through their bodies.

It is hard to know how much to make of this since, unlike the tribes-people's ritual, no collectively sanctioned meaning would normally be attributed to the activities described above and, indeed, most viewers are unlikely consciously even to notice the distinctions identified here. However there is no doubt that, in terms of ideas of human relations to nature, this imagery is linked to major developments within contemporary experience. The period between the 1930s and 1950s saw the emergence of an idea of the home environment, within American society especially, as not just relatively clean and ordered but actually sterilized. Standards of hygiene which, around the beginning of the century, had begun to be recognized as necessary for the successful treatment of disease within hospital environments, began to be imported into the home. The impetus behind this change was largely generated by the chemical industry's desire to create an outlet for a greatly extended range of products designed to attack, not just the grime that was obvious and could be seen, but also the spectre of unseen presences that had now been identified and categorized within the new science of microbiology (Hoy, 1995: 104–8). Housewives' energies were redirected from a goal of general tidiness towards a war on germs and bacteria

that required a full array of the latest technologically evolved products for success to be achieved. As a result the home environment was increasingly reconceived, within advertising and related discourses of the period, as a kind of battleground in which bottles, sprays, gels and caustic agents were the necessary weapons to destroy, within domestic space, all trace of those unseen, thronging, microscopic life forms found throughout the natural world outside. Spending on cleaning products in the United States went up eightfold in a mere twenty-year period leading up to the 1930s, escalating from an estimated six million dollars in 1909 to 46 million dollars in 1929 (Scanlon, 1995: 73). When central heating and (in the United States) air-conditioning came in as standard home requirements later, the notion of a domestic environment fully sealed off from the natural world outside achieved its apotheosis.

We are now in a position to return to the issue of whether and to what degree the structured fantasy Disney offers viewers may be seen as attempting to 'heal' the separation from nature that is so integral to modern human existence. Social processes promoting the ideal of a sterilized, hermetically sealed home environment have, with increasing force from early in the twentieth century, clearly tended to exacerbate that separation. But in *Snow White*, at least, an image fraught with contradictions is projected. On the one hand the home (nostalgically construed in a quaint, rustic setting) is seen, under Snow White's motherly influence, as regularly opening itself up to the benign incursion of surrounding nature. In this fantasy, instead of the mid-century housewife being engaged in incessant struggle with bacteria and microbes, larger, cuter life forms – in the shape of animals – are envisaged as actually assisting in the daily routines of cleaning and cooking. This compensatory fantasy does not entirely suppress social anxieties which associate dirt – via micro-organisms – much more potently with disease and, potentially, death however. For the film keeps returning to the site of this anxiety and is absorbed, far in excess of the requirements of its narrative, with configuring the work of cleaning. Here too the message is mixed. While the labour of cleaning is directed towards expelling dirt from the home, this entails full physical engagement with dirt, even partial absorption of waste matter, on the part of the animals. Within some primitive societies, the ritual enactment of such willed and direct engagement with dirt leads, as we have seen, to the recovery of a more holistic experience of natural processes and a positive response to death. Within Disney's film the roles of human adult and animals appear to be more differentiated. One might speculate that, as viewers, children are invited to identify more fully with the figures of the animals; the animals, after all, like the dwarves, are treated like children by Snow White as she inculcates within them a new discipline of cleaning. Insofar as the child viewer is identified with the animals then, the film offers them a space within which they can imagine and vicariously experience a version of that fuller, more physical, human existence that rituals encompassing dirt have made available in other contexts. This fuller existence involves an understanding of death as part of the natural order and the acceptance of an interdependent relationship with wild nature (albeit figured largely as cute animals within Disney). It is interesting, in this respect, that the animals in the film are also (unlike Snow White) instinctually in touch with the threat of death as manifested by the Queen's disguised presence. They shy away from the Queen and try to alert Snow White to the danger while she remains unconscious of the threat posed.

Yet the more integrated version of being that is embodied within the animals' behaviour has limits inscribed within it. The figure with whom children may also identify, Snow White, appears to be both childlike and adult. Within the rather specialized mode of the fairy tale, she represents many of the core values of adult society and acts as a sentimentally idealized role model, especially for girls. Hence her unfussy, but more fastidious, attitude towards dirt may be taken to be instructive. She is what children will grow into. Children (via animals and dwarves) are implicitly being trained in a particular regime of cleanliness that, in the real world, will be translated into living environments increasingly sealed off from the forces of the wild.

The ending to the film of *Snow White* is, in this respect, especially interesting. Terry Eagleton has commented that, within the kinds of rituals Mary Douglas describes, 'There is something sacred about collective meanings, as well as about the disruption of them'. He speculates that, in modern as well as more traditional societies, collective identity is stronger and healthier if ways can be found to face 'unflinchingly' what is feared as marginalized, rejected 'otherness'. Such forces can then be 'carried back into social life in a movement of renewal' (2003: 290). It is noteworthy, within *Snow White*, how much emphasis is given to the collective in the activities that give dramatic shape to the rituals of managing and eradicating dirt. The animals, for instance, are configured as a spontaneous and joyful army, whose small units are each dedicated to the particular cleaning task assigned to them. Moreover, much of the comedy within the dwarves' washing scene is focused around bringing the recalcitrant figure of Grumpy into line with the new collective enthusiasm for personal hygiene. The social energy directed towards shifting dirt from the domestic environment generally in the film clearly points towards the establishment of a sense of shared, communal values. Yet the ending of the film, though it may be a fulfilment of romantic determinants in the plot, is, equally clearly, a separation from the forest community of the dwarves' cottage and from the communal values represented there. Almost as soon as Snow White has been brought back to life she is led away from the forest by her young prince. As the couple move away, so an image representing the imagined ideal of their future life together emerges in front of them, a romantic (archetypal Disney) castle, floating amongst pink and golden clouds on the near horizon. Clearly the image is designed to be an attractive fulfilment of romantic desire; but in insisting on so abrupt, and iconographically absolute, a separation from the forest and the communal life that has so defined it, the film suggests a fault line or rupture within its the dominant values. The ideal of romantic, heterosexual, adult love does not appear to be able to coexist with a fantasy in which the gap between nature and humanity is magically healed. The isolated pair now move off into a realm whose soaring towers and buttresses appear to be remote from both the ordinary and the natural worlds. Almost for the first time in the film, the imagery severs any connection with nature. The film abandons the domain of the collective for a rose-tinted image of a transcendent new order, just as it abandons the realm of the natural for the sterile (and stereotypical) dream of that castle in the sky. Arcadia has gone and the romantic ideal that supplants it – for all its shimmering otherworldliness – appears less rich, less fully human and less creatively integrated with the natural forms that surround it.

Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was a land-mark film in so many ways that it must have made the animated fairy tale, initially, a difficult genre to revisit

without raising the spectre of invidious comparison. Certainly, in the extraordinarily creative five-year period following the release of *Snow White* in 1937, Disney experimented boldly with a variety of genres. This period still represents, for many critics, the golden age of classic Disney animation. The sheer variety of these projects – ranging in concept from animal stories like *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1942) to the hugely innovative *Fantasia* (1940) – was as impressive as their artistic quality. Of these films *Pinocchio* (1940) comes closest to the fairy tale format, but even this is really more a literary variant. When Disney eventually returned to the realm of the traditional fairy tale in the 1950s therefore, it was perhaps inevitable that the results would appear derivative in comparison to the groundbreaking achievements of the past.

The two classic fairy tales that the Disney studios produced in the 1950s are nevertheless worth reviewing here more briefly. The films reveal limitations imposed on the links to wild nature that were forged in *Snow White*, whilst also extending the potential of the *Snow White* project in some relatively minor ways. A more radical, exploratory development of the traditional fairy tale's potential for engagement with themes of wild nature did not take place till the Disney 'revival' in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We will examine these more recent developments in detail in the next chapter.

Steven Watts has argued persuasively that the projects with which Disney was engaged in the 1950s were highly attuned to a changing post-war culture within which a new sense of American identity needed to be forged. The key values that Disney productions had espoused had always been a populist amalgam of dynamic individualism and the nostalgic conservatism of the small-town community. In the Cold War years of the 1950s, Disney began to harden these core values in a form that would both shake off the perceived threat of communism and assert the primacy of the American way of life for a new age. As Watts puts it,

> With communism offering a dramatic rendering of social reform and historical evolution, Americans felt compelled to mount a countervailing crusade to identify a distinct vision of the good society. The Cold War inspired explicit attempts to explain the nature of the American people, American history, the American character, and the bedrock values that supported the whole. Walt Disney engaged his enterprise to grapple with these broad issues and emerged as a key figure in the process of national self-definition. (2001: 287).

In responding to the exigencies of the new era, Watts argues, Disney had to adapt the more inclusive version of the 'libertarian populist' values that had been shaped by the experience of the Depression era to form a more limited and defensive posture. While continuing to offer 'a sentimental celebration of common American people', Disney's 'images of hard-working, God-fearing, community-building citizens increasingly were inspired by a homogenized vision of the WASP folk whose values he enshrined and prospects he proclaimed' (ibid.: 288).

Nature – and especially wild nature – played a crucial role in forging the imagery that supported this renewed definition of American identity. After the, perhaps unexpected, critical and commercial success of *Seal Island* in 1948, Disney invested heavily in a series of nature documentaries which he called *True-Life Adventures*. Filmed in a variety of wild landscapes throughout the 1950s, the documentaries became some of the studio's most popular productions. These films, however, may have had a deeper level of attraction than the potent mix of environmentally

concerned education and rampantly anthropomorphizing sentiment that they offered on the surface. Watts argues that contemporary responses to the documentaries 'suggested that nature did not really appear here on its own terms. Instead it was a kind of cultural canvas upon which Disney and the audience painted an array of Cold War concerns and values' (ibid.: 305). Watts goes on to present an intriguing analysis of a contemporary review of *Beaver Valley* (1950), where enthusiastic approval of the hard-working animal's life is construed as affirming 'social competition as a natural process that enabled the best to emerge – an unspoken rejection of the hovering Communist spectre of artificial government direction and centralized planning'. Even more tellingly however, Watts suggests that these narratives engage viewers through their 'subtle domestication of nature':

> However much these documentaries underscored the struggle for survival, they also depicted a taming of natural forces that appealed to an American audience becoming increasingly suburbanised and family-oriented. Morality was presented as a curious exponent in the survival-of-the-fittest equation, particularly a domestic morality that seemed to enlist wild creatures as loyal members of the suburban homeowners association, the PTA, and the community improvement council (ibid.).

Disney then, was using the supposedly objective format of the natural history documentary to embed a historically determined set of cultural and political concerns firmly within the domestic context of the family.

I have quoted Watts at some length here because his argument is both stimulating in its own right and has a particularly strong resonance for the animated films I want to examine now. Disney's *Cinderella* was first released in 1950, at the beginning of the period we have been discussing, and it brings together the themes which Watts identifies – survival in a competitive environment, industriousness and domesticity – in a distinctive new form. At the very heart of the values which the film projects onto its fairy tale narrative, I would argue, is an especially thoroughgoing version of the domestication of wild nature. The figure of Cinderella herself – like a number of other fairy tale heroines – has long been represented as having strong affiliations with animals and nature. In the Chinese version of the Cinderella story, whose provenance is known to go back over a thousand years, the heroine's animal helper takes the unlikely form of a fish (Warner, 1995: 202). Closer to home, in the Grimm version of the tale that is one of the sources for Disney's film, the heroine has recourse to a hazel tree that embodies the spirit of her dead mother. In this version the beleaguered heroine is gifted with the finery she requires to attend the prince's ball by a bird of unspecified origin. But although there is nothing unusual about the Cinderella figure being tagged with a particularly close association to different kinds of wildlife, the Disney version develops this association in distinctive ways.

Almost from the opening scene of the main story – where we are introduced to Cinderella being tenderly awoken by a pair of birds dressed in shoes and headscarves, who proceed to assist her in the final stages of bed-making – we are confronted with an image of wild nature thoroughly annexed to the daily rhythms and rituals of domestic life. Cinderella has been reduced to a life of demeaning subservience within the household's dominant human regime. But she is the central, authoritative figure in the organization of a half hidden domestic realm that is largely constituted by vibrant

forms of animal life. Cinderella takes charge of a whole range of dependent animals, whose presence is barely acknowledged by the other members of her oppressive family, yet who each contribute to the life of the household in different, at times conflicting, ways. Not only does Cinderella feed the courtyard chickens, try to calm the embattled rivalry between cat and dog, and gracefully host the fleeting incursion of (not very) wild birds to her domestic circle; Gulliver like, she also plays the role of benign mother-cum-protector to a growing family of mice, whose thronging presence at every level of the domestic environment evinces an ebullient energy singularly missing within the back-biting, competitive circle of the dominant humans.

This twin focus on animals and the domestic labour associated with food and cleaning can also be found in Disney's *Snow White*, of course, and many of the most prominent features of both *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* are clearly derivative of the earlier film. Where *Cinderella* differs, however, is in the degree to which the wild aspects of animal identity are subsumed within the realm of the domestic. This is not simply a matter of animals being dressed in clothes as well as taking on human behavioural characteristics, including a diminutive kind of chirpy speech. The visual style of *Cinderella* owes more to Beatrix Potter than *Snow White*, taking unashamed pleasure in togging tiny creatures up in twee outfits in the Victorian manner. But Potter's animals combined human clothes with vestiges of their wild animal instincts as well as, often, their real animal fates. No one doubts the reality of the pie on Mr McGregor's table that Peter Rabbit, like his father, may end up in. By contrast, the rotund blob of fur that passes for a cat in *Cinderella* may be convincingly spiteful, but its corpulent lack of agility makes it barely a match for even the stupidest of the mouse clan and its feline powers are easily defeated by the collective élan of the mouse group. The animals represented in *Cinderella* are almost entirely domestic or farmyard in provenance and any trace of wilder energies that remain within them are wholly directed towards comedy operating within a strong comfort zone or towards domestic tasks that support the heroine. Robin Allan has described Disney's idealized figure of Cinderella as that of a 'dutiful heroine who must stay at home and do all the housework, an example of Hollywood's reflection of post-war society's wish that American women should return to their pre-war domestic subservience' (1999: 210). One effect of reconfiguring all natural life within the film wholly within the domestic sphere is to naturalize this version of the female role and to make it all encompassing. Perhaps in consequence, Disney's *Cinderella* betrays none of the interest that was evident at times in *Snow White* in recognizing the otherness of animals and the qualities characteristic of particular species. When, in the Grimm brothers' version of the story, the heroine Ashputtel calls for animal assistance with the seemingly hopeless task of picking tiny peas out of the ashes, she differentiates the birds by their exact species names:

> Hither, hither through the sky,
> Turtle-doves and linnets fly!
> Blackbird, thrush and chaffinch gay,
> Hither, hither, haste away!
> One and all come help me quick,
> Haste ye, haste ye – pick, pick, pick! (1977: vol. 2, 37)

Not only are individual species recognized in this refrain but, in addition, the particular nature of the domestic task with which the heroine requires assistance is singularly well adapted to the bird's facility at pecking up small items of food. 'Pick, pick, pick!' is the very business of bird life and it hardly needs Ashputtel's exhortation to encourage them. In Disney's *Cinderella*, by contrast, the generic birds and the mice are set to work on pillow smoothing and dressmaking respectively, tasks for which their animal talents would appear completely ill fitted.

It might appear from the above that *Cinderella* has departed from the pastoral conventions which, I have argued, were deployed in Disney's *Snow White* to extend the range of connections with the natural world that the traditional fairy tale makes available. Domesticity would appear to be the very antithesis of the pastoral idyll that seeks accommodation with wild nature. In fact, however, it is still possible to see Disney's *Cinderella* also as a rather specialized form of pastoral. Within the confines of her domestic environment, Cinderella's role is akin to that of the lovelorn shepherdess, managing her somewhat incongruous flocks of chickens and mice, which she protects from their natural predator, the cat. From this perspective the metamorphosis of animal and plant forms into Cinderella's carriage for the ball makes sense as a kind of witty pastoral conceit and it is interesting that this plot device occurs in Perrault but is omitted in the Grimm's version, which was tailored for more bourgeois tastes. Pastoral, in the seventeenth century, was directed largely towards the sensibilities of courtly audiences. Within Disney's second fairy tale adaptation from the 1950s however, the pastoral motifs are developed in more conventional style. When Princess Aurora, the sixteen-year-old heroine of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), sings of love's dreams to the birds and animals of the forest, she unwittingly takes her place in a line of innocent rustics with a noble pedigree that goes back to the renaissance and to classical writers beyond. There is even a hint, in the birds' counterpoint responses to the princess's sweet refrains, of the image Spenser drew on for his *Epithalamium*, in which 'all the woods may answer and your echo ring'.

Sleeping Beauty is generally richer in imagery relating to wild nature than is *Cinderella*, though both films lack the complexity of response and feeling that can be found in *Snow White*. Aurora's credentials as a child of nature are established early on in *Sleeping Beauty* with a flurry of classical signifiers. Her name means dawn, of course, and the opening song implies that she is invested with an aura of perpetual springtime. Moreover, her surrogate parents, the three good fairies who bring Aurora up in the forest in a vain attempt to elude the death spell that has been cast on her by the wicked queen, are called Flora, Fauna and Merryweather. One would be hard pressed indeed, in an era of climate change, to put together a more felicitous trio of natural signifiers than this. The plant association implied by Flora's guardianship is pressed a little further and perhaps taken slightly more seriously in the film. At one point Flora proposes that the fairies should use their magic to change Aurora into a flower so she can avoid the fate intended for her by the aptly named Queen Maleficent. When the obvious point is made, that flowers enjoy only a brief lifespan, Flora has second thoughts, however. This, in context, constitutes a fairly frivolous aside, though it does carry a distant echo of the biblical commonplace 'All life is but hay', which provided a stimulus for rather deeper reflection and moralizing for writers, artists and preachers throughout early modern Europe. Within Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* the

practical objections raised to the scheme of floral metamorphosis do not prevent the fairies renaming their princess 'Briar Rose', when they reach the forest, to hide her true identity. Aurora becomes flower in name, if not in body, and the longstanding metaphorical connections between the rose and sexual love allow the twisted sea of thorns, that Maleficent later throws around the castle to prevent the Prince gaining access to his 'rose', to acquire added significance as a barrier to erotic fulfilment.

Perhaps the most imaginative configuration of vegetation imagery within the film, however, takes place within the architecture of the rustic cottage where the fairies attempt to conceal their royal charge. The cottage, with its thatched roof, oak beams and the proliferation of flower motifs covering nearly every exposed surface, is in many ways simply a reprise of the dwarves' dwelling in *Snow White*. Plant figures have replaced the carved owls and rabbits from the earlier film. More strikingly and subtly, however, the viewer gradually becomes aware that the apparently damaged thatch on the cottage's roof masks the fact that the building is integrated within the huge trunk of a living tree. It is hard to know how much to make of this image, which is so subtly designed that many viewers may miss it first time around, although the great circular blocks that compose the staircase and the exposed wooden surfaces that retain their bark covering inside the cottage provide clues to the building's highly unusual design. The cottage, almost subconsciously, evokes an integral connection with the living strength of the great tree, whose structural symbiosis with the human dwelling it encloses is so total that it passes virtually unnoticed. This is a brilliant visual device, even though it is rather isolated within the iconography of the whole film, so that only a small part of its potential is effectively realized.

More typically in *Sleeping Beauty*, animal and plant figures take up an essentially marginal role as charming or comic adjuncts to the human drama. The use of animals as props for staging human emotion can be seen most clearly in the scene where Briar Rose, meets her prince for the first time. The heroine begins this set piece repeating a haunting musical phrase, with variations that are picked up and reiterated as birdsong; the alternating performance becomes a kind of wordless duet, in which the human voice leads and nature sympathetically responds. The theme of sympathy is developed further as the heroine, now in full song, articulates the traditional lover's complaint: every natural creature in the forest, apart from her, appears to have a partner. Taking their cue from this complaint, the animals gather round solicitously while Aurora's serenade to an imaginary lover, 'Once upon a dream', is performed and the prince's arrival is delayed by comic impediments. The animals then act as go-betweens, stealing the prince's boots, cloak and hat, so that he will be drawn towards the heroine to recover them, and taking the prince's place in an interlude where they use his stolen clothes as props in a comic dance ensemble that both burlesques and prefigures the real lovers' embrace. The forest backdrop to this scene has a still beauty reminiscent of the Duc de Berry's *Très Riches Heures* and the landscapes of the Italian primitives – 'I wanted stylised, simplified Gothic' said the artistic director Eyvind Earle (Allan, 1999: 233) – while the animals' burlesque of human roles generally shows an inventive charm that avoids the full blast of potential mawkishness. But the animals' role is completely defined by their acting as agents or surrogates for human desire. When the lithe movement of fur and feather inside the prince's clothing, and the absurdly solemn, lugubrious face of the caped owl reveal themselves during the

dance, they create awareness not so much of the animals' essential difference as of an aching gap between the reality of Aurora's current human isolation and romantic desire encrypted in dreams. The pathos of the heroine's situation is diffused, in this instance, through comedy but it is clear that the anthropomorphized animals stand in for a human relationship: they represent a temporary form of consolation, an emotional stop-gap, rather than being meaningful in any substantial way in their own right. When the prince arrives, the animals retreat to a background role as audience. There are no gaps within this version of pastoral within which nature can display a presence even partially independent of human agency.

Chapter 2

Healing the Rift: Human and Animal Nature in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*

'The lessons we learn from the wild become the etiquette of freedom.'
Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*

When Disney eventually returned to the format of the traditional fairy tale, thirty years after the first release of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959, the cultural climate had changed substantially. By this time the legacy of Cold War anxieties, though whipped up again for a brief period by the Reagan administration in the mid-1980s, was in its final death throes. Hollywood had by now embraced a version of post-feminist values that made the apotheosis of subordinate domestic virtues that had been expressed with such insouciant ease in the character of Cinderella look very dated indeed. As Marina Warner put it, Disney was by now addressing 'an audience of mothers who grew up with Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem and had daughters who listened to Madonna and Sinead O'Connor' (1995: 313). Moreover the techno-capitalist drive to control nature and to exact ever greater productivity from the land, which had inspired optimism in the early 1950s as intensive use of chemical pesticides and fertiliser appeared to produce a cornucopia of enhanced yields, looked like a distinctly tarnished dream by the late 1980s. The corollary of this dream in mid-century, particularly for women, had been an image of nature harnessed to idealized forms of domestic fulfilment. After all, the produce of the land was destined largely for the home, where it became an index of progress towards universal plenty. Meanwhile, within the agrochemical industry, a domestic spin-off of these developments in farming had been a host of products designed to boost control of natural organisms in the house, fostering a dream of perfect cleanliness. By the end of the 1980s, on the other hand, the image of nature as everywhere receding – like the rain forests and endangered species – or irreparably damaged was becoming increasingly widespread. What audiences were now in touch with was a sense of rupture, rather than connection, with nature. A new set of narratives had begun to emerge that either articulated this sense of rupture in dark tones of apocalyptic violence (as in bleak futuristic dramas such as *Mad Max*, *Blade Runner* and the *Terminator* series) or offered compensatory fantasies within which the rift between humanity and nature could be healed. In this very different cultural climate, the ancient theme of nature, which Disney's earlier versions of the fairy tale had embraced in particular forms, needed to be adapted, if it was to connect with changed sensibilities.

Disney's first attempt at reviving the fairy tale format, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), was the harbinger of a renewed wave of creativity in Disney feature animations, which

had become rather staid and lacklustre in the years since Walt Disney's death in 1966. *The Little Mermaid* established the viability of a different kind of heroine for the medium of animation. Ariel, though still a saucer-eyed beauty of sylph-like proportions, takes on aspects of the feminist mantle by challenging the law of the father in less than demure style. The central theme structuring the new film's narrative is the separation of the mermaid Ariel's realm of the water (largely associated with nature) from the realm of the earth (controlled by human culture). The two realms are brought together through a version of the traditional love story, in which the father's edict forbidding Ariel access to the land above operates as an impediment that must be overcome for romantic fulfilment to be achieved. Since this impediment operates across the boundary between human culture and a mythic–natural world, *The Little Mermaid* could be read as playing out a longing for some form of resolution to the nature–culture divide. The terms within which this resolution is imagined, however, required a very substantial revision of the classic form of the animated fairy tale that had defined so much of what was essentially 'Disney' in the earlier period.

One of the most fundamental changes enacted within the film's watery environment is a shift away from an image of the heroine as anchored – and indeed as in some ways defined – by a fixed sense of place. The role of heroines within earlier films required that they should make a 'home' in the world, in a way that brought nature into play as a central, defining feature. The performance of homemaking, seen as a process that annexes the energies of wild nature to the domestic environment, was embodied in what was to become a definitive mode, as we have seen, in Disney's first fairy tale adaptation, *Snow White*. *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* can be seen as later variations of this archetype: Cinderella forming a domestic subculture with the household creatures to which she is affiliated in Disney's version of the story and Sleeping Beauty reprising *Snow White*'s theme of finding sanctuary within an idyllic forest home. By contrast, in *The Little Mermaid* Ariel, although still accompanied by traditional animal helpers in the form of fish, crab and seagull, is a restless creature whose 'natural' home under the waves is fluid – literally – and who lacks any real domestic base as a centre for her activities.

The environment that Ariel is perceived as moving within does not appear to offer any distinctive personal space – such as earlier fairy tale heroines had in their bedrooms or idyllic forest dwellings – that roots or defines her identity. When we see Ariel interacting with her family – in the scene when her sisters acknowledge her new, lovesick behaviour, for instance, or in the opening celebrations for their father, King Triton – the interactions are staged in remarkably open space. The backdrop for these scenes provides a marine equivalent to the grandeur of court, certainly, but the natural amphitheatre within which the action takes place is not cut off from the ebb and flow of the encompassing ocean. The undersea environment, indeed, is characterized by its openness generally, while the enclosed areas – the Sea Witch's cave, the shipwreck where Ariel acquires artefacts from the human world and the cavern where she stores her trophies – are forbidden spaces, the domains of unfulfilled desire. In part, this general lack of protective barriers signals the hybrid nature of Ariel's identity – part human, part fish. Like Mowgli, in *The Jungle Book*, who also feels himself to be an animal of an indeterminate kind, Ariel has no more need of a home in which to dwell than does a fish in the open sea. But Ariel is open

to new experiences, as well as to her environment, and a different dimension of the heroine's identity is manifested here – a dissatisfied sense of rootlessness, which is also evident in Disney's subsequent fairy tale adaptation *Beauty and the Beast*. Within both films, there is a decisive move away from defining the heroine through the work she does in her 'home' and from seeing the role of nature as harnessed to, and essentially in harmony with, this labour.

The more protean – and less homebound – role assigned to Disney's new fairy tale heroines has an obvious function in relation to audiences attuned to the agendas of feminism. The heroine is now enabled to fulfil an aspirational role – beyond the domestic environment – that is more in sympathy with contemporary mores and social practices. Both Ariel and Belle, in *Beauty and the Beast*, are characterized as 'wanting so much more' from life than the traditional female roles ascribed by their respective families appear to offer them. Less obviously though, the new role for the female lead allows the rift between human aspiration and what is perceived to be natural to be explored imaginatively.

The division between the natural and the human manifests itself in *The Little Mermaid* through a prohibition, backed up with violent (if ultimately ineffective) intensity by Ariel's father King Triton, which forbids the half human denizens of the marine underworld from mixing with their earthbound human counterparts above. Since the realm of the sea is marked by a much stronger affinity with the natural than is the human world above (evidenced most decisively in the fact that the mermaids and mermen do no work to transform natural resources into commodities and artefacts), this prohibition effectively defines a boundary separating the human and natural that enables a number of key themes to be playfully worked through.

One of the most important of these is the theme of consumption – especially of food. Disney's *Little Mermaid* opens with a scene onboard ship, where Prince Eric's guardian Louis signals his lack of affinity with the natural realm of the sea in the most graphic manner, by unceremoniously vomiting over the side. Prior to this moment though, we have seen a net – brimful with flapping fish – hauled up over the stern. And, when the green tinged Louis is allowed sufficient remission from his seasickness to express rational scepticism about the sailors' belief in mermaids, he is assaulted with a fish in the most vigorous of counterarguments by an offended seaman. A fish is not the easiest of expressive tools to brandish in making an argumentative point however, and, unsurprisingly, the writhing creature eventually slips from the overexcited sailor's hand to return to its own realm in the ocean's depths. The animators endow the fish's downward movement, once it has returned to its own element, with an undulating lyric grace, while the camera pauses, as the fish recovers initially, to register the creature's feelings of relief in being free. The viewer is thus encouraged to empathize with the fish and to cast an estranged eye on the normal human practice of exploiting the ocean's potential as a food resource. This is a small point initially, but it opens up a rich territory in the film, a line of running gags focused on the propensity of Ariel's ocean friends to be viewed as food items once they have ventured into the human world on land. Ariel's reluctant guardian-cum-mentor Sebastian the crab – a delightfully ludicrous, Calypso influenced, court composer for King Triton – is the butt of most of these gags, as he is pursued around Prince Eric's kitchen and dining areas by an increasingly exasperated cook, brandishing a terrifying array of lethal knives

and choppers. The gags incorporate some of the anarchic energy of the early cinema (where fast-paced, slapstick violence was a key ingredient in comedy) and act as an effective counterpoint to what Marina Warner has described as the 'sugary luscious graphics' that characterize the romantic plot especially (1995: 404).

Some commentators have argued that the undersea denizens' potential fate as tasty consumables exposes patriarchal and colonialist assumptions that are deeply embedded in the structure of film. Patrick Murphy, for instance, suggests that Ariel's marriage to Prince Eric is the culmination of her loss of power, a loss that is prefigured by giving up her voice to pursue the possibility of romance in the first place. Assimilation into the (masculine) human world entails, Murphy suggests, the suppression of qualities associated with the natural realm of the ocean, which is held to stand for marginalized and subordinated cultures generally. Ariel is thus made subject to 'denaturalization' as well as 'deculturation', and this process is rendered palatable since the 'escapist character of the film omits any possibility of a problem arising if Ariel's former friend Flounder shows up on the dinner table one evening' (1995: 133). Yet this seems to me to be a misreading of the film that fails to understand how its preoccupations are played out within comedy. For, though there are certainly elements of hierarchy in the way the human and ocean realms are configured, a part of the film's rhetoric works towards persuading us that these parallel worlds are comparable and equivalent. The two worlds are marked by different qualities certainly, but the distinctive features of each act as an implied commentary upon each other, rather than expressing oppression in any direct form.

This aspect is developed most fully by the lyrics of Mencken's and Ashman's songs, which contribute so much towards both the meaning and emotional charge carried by the film. The signature song 'Under the sea', for instance, attempts to counterbalance Ariel's starry-eyed idealization of the human world above with a celebration of the diverse richness of the ocean from which she longs to escape. Although the film ultimately vindicates Ariel's romantic longings, Sebastian's assertion that 'the human world is a mess' and that 'life under the sea is better than anything they got up there' has considerable bite and appeal for the audience. The crab's defence of his sub-marine world is supported by the vibrancy of his Calypso song, the colourful choreographing of the sea creatures' musical accompaniments and the intelligent charm of Ashman's lyrics, which draw, lightly and humorously, on traditional associations with the Golden Age, when humans did not work and lived in harmony with nature. To push this association into service as evidence that the film is projecting the processes inherent within colonial power (the lazy, fun loving Caribbean ocean dwellers subject to oppression by their white superiors above) seems to me to produce a strained reading. The film works with a lighter touch than this. The lyrics, however, do emphasize the risk to sea creatures of being eaten when they enter the world above – 'guess who goin' to be on a plate' interjects Sebastian, caustically. The purpose of this caustic aside, though, is to sound a cautionary note for Ariel. Sebastian's warning of the possible fate awaiting sea creatures when they are lured onto land replicates the traditional wisdom of Aesop's fable of the 'Town and Country Mouse', where the attractions of a more sophisticated life for the country mouse disguise its inherent dangers. Whilst warning Ariel of equivalent

dangers in the human world above, Sebastian also asserts the positive vitality that characterizes their shared life 'under the sea'.

It is in this context that we need to see the juxtaposition of images with which the film concludes. The main thrust of the film's narrative drive has been towards erasing differences and barriers between the mythic–natural zone of the ocean and the earth-bound realm of human culture. Ariel longs to be part of the human world even before she meets Prince Eric and she learns that the only way she can be incorporated into this world is by losing the fish half of her body (that marks her affiliation to the mythic–natural realm) and gaining legs. The price for this erasure of her former identity is the possibility of permanent entrapment underwater however. King Triton's envious, usurping sister – the Sea Witch, Ursula – exacts a penalty clause for her service of transforming Ariel into human form: Ariel will become part of the Witch's collection of humans reduced to grotesque, underwater polyps, if she fails to get her Prince within the designated three days.

This gruesome possibility allows a more emotionally satisfying ending to the film to be developed, since it checks the impulse towards straightforward sentimental closure and allows a dark alternative to be rehearsed as its mirror image. An aspiration that challenges boundaries between the human and the natural order of things has often been imagined as risking a grotesque outcome. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a perhaps the prime example of this conjunction. It would have been easy for Disney's film to finish by simply avoiding this possibility, having Ariel seal her clinching kiss with the Prince just before time was called (as happens effectively in *Beauty and the Beast*) and escaping the Sea Witch's penalty clause of enslavement as a bizarre, homunculus polyp. Instead time runs out at the critical moment. Viewers experience the heroine being dragged back down into the depths of her own watery realm and her alternative fate is luridly enacted before her father's self sacrifice can release her. The grotesque alternative is thus fully encompassed (or as fully as the genre of sentimental comedy will allow).

This double dénouement is particularly apt because Ursula, whose performance is splendidly conceived in the style of drag queen burlesque, is in many respects – like the Queen in *Snow White* – a dark, shadow version of the heroine. Thus the film emphasizes ways in which Ariel and Ursula must both perform, in quite self-conscious ways, versions of female role play in order to achieve their goals (Sells, 1995). The challenge Ariel is set in performing sufficiently alluringly to capture the Prince's heart (through body language alone, since she cannot speak) is matched in burlesque form by Ursula's drag queen performance. Ostensibly this is directed towards 'helping' distraught couples, the Sea Witch coming on like a high camp agony aunt, though in fact her puppet theatre version of ministering to love-lorn suitors is staged as a thinly veiled showcase for Ursula's own self-serving powers. The Sea Witch could thus be seen as embodying a perverse form of Ariel's innocent desire and ambition – directed towards self-aggrandizement rather than loving union.

The ending then requires that this shadow image of the heroine be exorcized. Ursula's magnificently pneumatic body expands to gargantuan proportions on the screen – like a giant blow up toy – before being punctured, deflated to an airy nothing, by the phallic prow of Prince Eric's ship. The effect is satisfyingly cathartic – as well as hilarious in its kitsch exuberance – the plastic monstrosity of Ursula's spectacularly

inflated swan song emphasizing her complete estrangement from the realm of the natural. The closing image thus allows a darker side to the sentimental urge towards mythic union with nature to be fully exercised before it is dispelled.

This sentimental urge is checked and balanced in other forms too. Most notably – even after the witch has been dispatched and harmony restored – there is a significant coda in which Sebastian the crab continues to be pursued, with compulsive zeal, by the hatchet-bearing chef. This ending works to counteract the more effusive, clichéd elements of romance in the film, the return to comic violence keeping a dynamic tension between the realms of the human and natural clearly in focus. The human world is envisaged as embracing the natural not only in an act of love but through its ongoing need for consumption. The conventional harmony of comedic closure is thus counterpointed by an uneasy sense of issues unresolved.

The image of marine crustaceans may represent this sense of unease particularly effectively, since they tend to retain their outward appearance much longer than most other life forms in the process of preparation and consumption by humans and since they are often either cooked or eaten whilst they are still alive. Woody Allen plays on the unease this generates brilliantly in *Annie Hall*, in the scene where his sensitivity over plunging live lobsters into boiling water results in hysterical anarchy. The creatures escape, crawling with insouciant determination towards various corners of the kitchen, as Allen's attempts to impress his girlfriend collapse in a display of unmanly fastidiousness and incompetence. In a world where the majority of our food, especially food derived from animals, arrives in shops so processed and packaged that its origins are barely discernible, such squeamishness is perhaps inevitable. But comic enactment of the violence performed in the preparation of food items is also potentially illuminating, since it forces us to experience more directly our own role as predators, which contemporary culture systematically disguises and mystifies. Along this fault line lie many of the contradictions and anxieties underlying our attempts to forge a new dominant identity for ourselves as custodians of the natural world (or 'stewards', in the self-consciously anachronistic argot that is currently fashionable), rather than its destroyers. The imagery of *The Little Mermaid* touches on some of these anxieties in a light way, placing them in the context of a larger mythic narrative about human relations with nature. In terms of sentiment, the romantic plot certainly dominates, but the comedic elements inflect the film in more complex ways with the texture of conflicting stories we currently tell ourselves about our place in nature.

Disney's next fairy tale offering, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) was a more consistently probing and accomplished film, developing a rich set of connections and contrasts across the divide between the natural and the human. The film, like the fairy tale on which it is based, uses the sense of a feared otherness in the figure of 'the beast' to explore a range of dichotomies which, though they appear to be grounded in an image of an older society, have a strong contemporary resonance. Unlike in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, where a secluded, if vulnerable, rustic retreat provides an idealized base for the narrative, *Beauty and the Beast* views the country setting of the heroine's small provincial hometown as distinctly limiting. Indeed, the small-town setting offers a perspective on rural life that is more critique than celebration. As in Thomas Hardy's later fiction, the values of the provincial rural community are construed as under pressure; the dominant representative of those values, the

heroine's muscular suitor Gaston, is a warped caricature of macho ideals, while the community as a whole is almost as suspicious of outsiders it perceives as different as it is alienated from the Beast and all he represents.

The film as a whole thus marks a move away from the nostalgic idealization of small-town middle America that had animated so much of the classic Disney *oeuvre* prior to the late 1980s. This shift in values is facilitated by setting the film in a pastiche of *ancien régime* France, a setting which makes the heroine's desire to escape the narrow-minded restrictions of her home environment analogous to the journey towards freedom from oppressive traditions within the Old World that is so central to America's founding mythos. No doubt, the move away from small-town values is partly designed to appeal to the urban, media led sensibilities of a new streetwise generation of young viewers. But the film's decisive distancing from Disney traditions of rural nostalgia also allows some sharper perceptions of how 'otherness' can mould identities to come into play. It is this latter characteristic that shapes the way attitudes towards nature are expressed.

The theme of 'otherness' is announced in the film's opening musical number, where Belle reflects uncomfortably on her position as an outsider, dissatisfied with the roles available to her in her home community and yearning for 'so much more'. This theme is intensified as the film moves towards its dramatic climax, with Gaston exploiting the fears and prejudices of his fellow citizens, whom he urges on to 'kill the Beast'. Gaston's demagogic exhortation, expressed in a surging, hate filled anthem, unites the whole village in a song with strong Fascist undertones, focusing fear explicitly in relation to difference. The Beast is defined as a 'monster' that the village must expunge, while the journey towards expurgating this monstrous threat is construed heroically, in defiance of the dark terrors with which the forest region is imbued. Belle is made feisty enough to challenge the assumptions of this discourse with telling directness. 'You're the Monster, Gaston', she tells her pumped up, treacherous suitor. But before this, she is portrayed in a number of scenes that involve perceptions of otherness of more subtle, ambiguous and probing kinds. It is worth examining these scenes in some detail, because they have much to tell us about the way human relationships with nature are enacted in the film.

By way of a prelude however, I should like to pause for a moment to consider an apparently trivial detail – the heroine's hairstyle. The cut and look of Belle's hair conforms well enough, in general terms, to conventions of feminine beauty current in the 1990s. If it lacks the salon gloss, flick and swish of the more glamorously modelled Pocahontas who succeeded her, Belle's hair nevertheless has enough luxuriance, style and vitality to make her designated position as the 'most beautiful girl in town' credible. One detail works against the general impression of immaculate, if unfussy, grooming however. Belle's appearance is marked throughout the film by a recalcitrant forelock which, despite all the heroine's periodic attempts at restraint through brushing back, insists on its right to hang loose. This visual tag is no doubt there to imply a particular quality in the heroine's character: that she cares less for convention than following her own course perhaps; or it might be seen as the expression of a resistant vitality in her own inner nature that refuses to be constrained by social grooming. But, without wishing to push the significance of a small detail too far, I think the wayward hair also bears on how the 'natural' is

perceived and valued in the rhetoric of the film in somewhat more extended ways. There is a long tradition, for instance, in which the incursion of minor disorder is validated – indeed invested with both erotic charge and aesthetic significance – precisely because it energizes art and culture with an element of disarray linked to ideas of what is natural. Robert Herrick gives this notion one of its most persuasive embodiments in a fine seventeenth-century poem entitled 'Delight in Disorder'. The poem begins:

> A sweet disorder in the dress
> Kindles in clothes a wantonness:

Herrick completes his brief inventory of female clothing, caught at moments when fashionable decorum is ruffled by the transitory flux of disorder, with these concluding couplets:

> A winning wave (deserving note)
> In the tempestuous petticoat:
> A careless shoestring, in whose tie
> I see a wild civility:
> Do more bewitch me, than when Art
> Is too precise in every part.

The poem's energy and feeling are summarized most perfectly in the epithet 'wild civility'. The phrase – a masterpiece of oxymoronic succinctness – suggests that civilization is at its best and most attractive when it includes an aspect of nature's wildness. In its historical context, the implied critique of an art that is 'too precise' embodies a Cavalier aesthetic, tilting against the self-righteous fastidiousness associated with Puritan sensibilities. However, I would like to suggest that the notion of 'wild civility' also has a more general application and may provide some insight into the way Belle is positioned within Disney's film. Jack Zipes has reminded us that the story of 'Beauty and the Beast' is a prime example of the process whereby, in the eighteenth century, writers began to embellish fairy tale plots with morals 'that emphasized a patriarchal code of *civilité* to the detriment of women' (1990: 124). The most influential version of the 'Beauty and the Beast' story, published by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1756, used the fairy tale format as a vehicle 'for indoctrinating and enlightening children about the virtues of good manners, good breeding and good behaviour' (Tatar, 1999: 26). But this parable of 'civility', though it gave a definitive cast to many of the most important elements of the plot, did not exhaust the tale's potential meanings. Nor did it succeed in constraining the idea of wildness embodied within the figure of the Beast to a bit part role in the grander narrative of the civilizing process. For later writers certainly, the story of a beautiful young woman accepting, and even learning to love, an initially fearsome beast was not just an exemplary narrative demonstrating how the wild – including the wild within us – can be tamed and civilized. By the twentieth century at least, it had also become a story of the interdependence of wildness and civilization, the two terms, yoked by violence together as Dr Johnson would say, acquiring a different and larger significance. Belle's recalcitrant forelock, seen from this point

of view, becomes the sign of a wild, unrestrained nature already immanent within the heroine, a wildness that will both match and complement the beast's savagery when she meets him. Wild nature will retain a role within the realm of the civilized in this version of the story, in other words, rather than being transformed beyond all recognition or simply repressed.

This idealistic reading, admittedly, requires some qualification when applied wholesale to Disney's film. Belle's advocacy of the Beast in the later stages of the film focuses insistently on his gentleness and vulnerability, seemingly denying both the savagery and threat of his wild nature. In the scenes immediately prior to Belle's departure from his castle moreover, the Beast appears more and more frequently in an upright human posture, his body clothed in the formal attire of the aristocracy, his voice modulated to a new keynote of tenderness. It is only a short step from this, the rhetoric of the film would seem to imply, to the full metamorphosis of the Beast into the body of a handsome prince that occurs in the closing scene. On this reading, the parable of Belle's relationship to the Beast would seem simply to encompass a new version of Disney's traditional theme of domesticating wild nature. In fact, however, the idea of wildness is never wholly subordinated to the film's updated version of *civilité*, a version which itself incorporates many of the contradictions inherent in the codes of masculinity circulating in a post-feminist age. It seems more useful to me to see elements of the film as still sustaining a dialogue between the apparently antithetical terms yoked together in 'wild civility'. I hope to demonstrate this more fully, by turning now to some of the key scenes in which the relationship between human and animal nature is explored.

It is interesting that *Beauty and the Beast*'s clearest expression of human attitudes towards nature is conveyed negatively, through its satire on outmoded forms of masculinity. This satire contains, as Marina Warner has observed, 'some of the film's cleverest and funniest lyrics' (1995: 316), exposing all Gaston's assumptions of masculine superiority remorselessly as mere conceit and crassness. The extent to which Gaston's role as exemplar of virile accomplishment is accepted within his community and the admiration he appears to command from those around him indicate that the satire here is directed against social values, rather than individual foibles, however. And it is Gaston's exploits as a hunter that mark him out, *par excellence*, as the supreme exponent of his community's masculine ideals. Unlike in *Bambi*, where hunting is also invoked as a key symptom of false or destructive human values, it is not initially through sympathy with wild creatures that the audience's critical engagement is established however. Instead, the act of blasting small, feathered creatures out of the sky is presented in a form that strips it of all allure or sporting challenge, while Gaston's hunting trophies, which protrude grotesquely from every aspect of the town's interior décor, clearly constitute a mode of vulgar excess. The exuberant display of bad taste which this welter of stuffed animals showcases not only debunks the value Gaston ascribes to his 'mastery' of the world around him; more slyly, it also suggests a world in which dead nature, grotesquely transformed into soft furnishings and wall decoration, has been thoroughly commodified. Though he appears to bristle with energy and self-confidence, all Gaston's activity is directed towards turning the life forms around him into things. Even his marriage proposal to Belle makes it abundantly clear that what is on offer is an empty role, conceived

entirely on his terms: Gaston's wife will be another trophy, a tribute to his relentless appetite for conquest.

Opposing viewpoints to Gaston's thoroughgoing exploitation of the natural world tend to be expressed subtly and obliquely in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle is not represented with a sympathetic animal entourage in tow, like Snow White and Cinderella, nor does she indulge in choral interplay with innocent forest creatures, in the manner of Sleeping Beauty. She is relaxed around animals but betrays little special interest in them; they are simply part of her world and she treats them in the same congenial, if initially slightly self-absorbed, manner that she accords to most of the human residents in her immediate environment. There is a scene early in the film where Belle sits down at a fountain in the centre of the town square and is promptly surrounded by a flock of sheep. Since the song she is singing in this sequence is a kind of complaint, expressing regret that she does not seem to be able to fit in with the rest of her community, there is potential for the scene to be developed in a similar manner to *Sleeping Beauty*, where the animals offer temporary solace to the heroine as she laments her isolation. Instead, however, the action is allowed to counterpoint the song comically, the sheep at first nuzzling up to Belle and appearing to display an interest in her, only for this to be dissolved as their interest shifts to potential food items and they attempt to eat a page from her book. Although there is a kind of mock-dialogue, or at least interplay, between Belle and the sheep here, each remains attached primarily to the distinctive interests of their species – reading and digesting as much organic matter as possible respectively. The comedy resides in the way these differences are manoeuvred; the sentimental trope of potential sympathy between species is invoked initially only to be over-ridden by the sheep's indiscriminate feeding habit. The resistance to sentiment displayed here has several purposes. The sheep themselves, for instance, have a metonymic function that parallels the way animal imagery is deployed later in the film when Gaston emerges from a duck-pond with a pig on top of his head after his marriage proposal to Belle has been rejected. The slapstick farce of the latter scene is clearly enhanced by a witty allusion to male chauvinist pigs, just as the sheep enact in a proxy mode the town's incomprehension of the idea that a young woman might be seriously interested in literature. The whole town, it is implied, behave like sheep in their willingness to be led and in their herd-like predisposition to conform. But the scene does send other messages too; the mute dialogue between human and animal that is projected here communicates through gesture a relaxed and comic acceptance of species difference.

It is perhaps significant that this scene should focus decisively on the act of eating, since rituals involved in eating and drinking have such a primary significance in separating human and animal culture. Jean Cocteau's 1946 film, *La Belle et la bête*, includes a particularly poignant scene in which the Beast is displayed lapping up water from a pool in the manner of an animal. Although the action seems normal initially, the Beast evinces deep shame once he realizes he has been observed drinking in this way by Beauty. His shame is a sign of the Beast's human sensibility. Beauty responds sensitively to the Beast's shame with a gesture that demonstrates a mixture of compassion, courtesy and acceptance of the creature's 'otherness'. She offers her cupped hands, filled with water for the Beast to drink from. The gesture carries a subliminal erotic charge but, more profoundly, it also connotes respect for the dual

nature of the creature, whom Beauty now draws in to a new phase of intimacy with her. Through her proffered hands, Beauty offers the Beast admittance to the circle of her humanity, whilst simultaneously allowing his animal-like nature full expression. It is a gesture of tenderness bordering on love.

A similar incident, possibly influenced by Cocteau, takes place in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* when Belle and her captor finally share a meal together. Lacking the manual dexterity afforded by the all-important human thumb, the Beast bends his head over the soup bowl, lapping up the contents with accompanying slurps and splashes. Though Belle is represented as initially shocked by this animal-like breach of decorum, she too responds sympathetically, raising the bowl to her own lips in the way the French sometimes take their morning coffee and improvising a mode of consumption that is both amenable to the Beast and indeterminate between human and animal culture. The gesture lacks the sensual, erotic charge of the Cocteau film, perhaps appropriately for a children's movie, but it carries many of the same cultural and psychological significances.

Both these scenes take the viewer beyond issues associated with the representation of animal nature as an essentially separate realm, inviting emotional engagement at a deeper level. By encouraging emotional participation in the scene from the point of view of the heroine, that is, our involvement with animal nature is imaginatively reconfigured as an act of incipient love. In the process, boundaries between the categories of 'animal' and 'human' begin to lose their shape and fixity. Irving Singer has asserted that the act of falling in love bestows a new value upon the person who is loved. This new value, he claims, goes beyond what is perceptible 'objectively' by those who are not in love. He calls this new value 'bestowal'. The interest of Singer's theory of bestowal for the context we are presently examining is that it enables us to focus more sharply on perceived changes in the Beast's nature. For these perceptual shifts, seen from the heroine's viewpoint, involve precisely the bestowal of a new value. Belle begins to perceive the Beast differently, that is, attaching new qualities to him. This 'bestowal' moreover is an imaginative, rather than purely cognitive, process. Singer writes:

> … a lover sees a woman not as others might, but through the creative agency of bestowing value. He need not change her any more than El Greco changed the real Toledo. But he renews her personality by subsuming it within the imaginative system of his own positive responses. (1984: 16)

Hence the lover's art 'consists of taking a woman as she is, in opening oneself to the impact of her presence, at the same time as one invokes aesthetic categories that give her a new significance' (ibid.: 19).

If one accepts that Disney's film effectively dramatizes the process of bestowing value through love, in a similar form to that proposed by Singer, two critical questions arise in relation to the present argument. First, what exactly are the 'aesthetic categories' through which we are invited to perceive 'renewal' in the character of the Beast? And second, to what extent does this involve portraying the Beast as suppressing characteristics previously associated with the idea of wild nature? Both these questions bear centrally on how the parable of human love for animal nature may be understood within the film.

The answer to both questions is, I think, rather mixed. It is true, for instance, that the film invites us to view the Beast through new aesthetic categories, as Belle's love for him begins to become established. We perceive the Beast initially in tones mediated through the dark, baroque ambience of his castle. The statuary here includes human–animal hybrids deriving from classical mythology, together with scaly, reptilian grotesques in the style of medieval Gothic. Each conjures varied attributes of the feared and the abhorrent. A prevailing tone of darkness completes the aesthetic ambience, setting off the massive, looming physical presence of the Beast himself. Marina Warner conjures the figure of the Beast with expressive brio when she acknowledges how suited the figure is to the 'pneumatic signature style of Disney animation' (1995: 315). Warner gives full rein to her perception of the Beast as the embodiment of masculine libido:

> He embodies the Eros figure as phallic toy. The Beast swells, he towers, he inflates, he tumesces. Everything about him is big, and apt to grow bigger: his castle looms, its furnishings dwarfed by its Valhalla-like dimensions. … His body too appears to be constantly burgeoning; poised on narrow hooves and skimpy legs, the Disney Beast sometimes lollops like a big cat, but more often stands erect, rising to an engorged torso, with an enormous, craggy, bull-like head compacted into massive shoulders, maned and shaggy all over, bristling with fangs and horns and claws that almost seem belittled by the creature's overall bulk. (ibid.)

Warner is mistaken about the Beast's feet. They may be of dainty proportions compared to the rest of his body but the Beast's prowling, cat-like movements are on lion's paws rather than hooves. But this is a brilliant evocation of the Beast's presence generally, a potent reminder of the expressive licence that gives the animated medium such imaginative potential. The description makes the aesthetic upon which the Beast is founded impressively vivid, whilst it is also clear that the particular amalgam of animal features with which the creature is endowed carries its own associations. This combination of lion's mane and claws, with bison-like neck and horns, with wild boar tusks, draws on the qualities of animals whose bulk or ferocity has traditionally made them fearsome to humans. But these are also animals that have been hunted, at times close to extinction, and it is their vulnerability, as much as their terrifying power, that provides such evocative associations for contemporary audiences. Warner concludes that the Disney beast most resembles the American buffalo and that this 'tightens the Beast's connections to current perceptions of natural good – for the American buffalo … represents the lost innocence of the plains before man came to plunder' (ibid.: 315).

Vulnerability is precisely the quality that adheres to the Beast as the film begins to work on our emotions in its later phases, invoking new aesthetic categories through which we can perceive him. The lyric of Belle's song, which follows on immediately after the sympathetic rapprochement of the meal scene, makes this vulnerable quality explicit:

> There's something sweet and almost kind
> But he was mean and he was coarse and unrefined
> And now he's dear and so unsure –
> I wonder why I didn't see it there before?

Clearly Belle is displayed as opening herself up to the presence of the Beast in new ways here, which surprise her, and in the process she renews our sense of the Beast as he becomes 'subsumed within the imaginative system of (her) own positive responses'. The changed aesthetic that embodies these responses has a number of key elements. First, and most traditionally, the Beast's propensity for violence has to be redirected so as to acquire chivalrous motivation in the service of the vulnerable and unprotected. The shift in Belle's emotional response is triggered by the Beast exposing himself to injury while trying to save her from being torn to pieces by wolves. In the process, the aggression he has previously displayed towards her is repositioned with more civilized ethical purpose.

But this action is only the catalyst for a wider set of aesthetic and psychological shifts. The Beast's body is given a subtle makeover in terms of clothes and expressive gestures. His breeches lose their ragged, castaway look; he acquires a Ralph Lauren style white polo jersey to soften the rugged impact of his torso, while his imposing eyebrows lift and pucker, suggesting the bewildered innocence of a lost little boy behind his dominating bulk. This altered mode of representation, with its combination of powerful masculine body, stylish clothes sense and emotional vulnerability, is attuned to the 'New Man' image of the 1990s; but it also allows different kinds of role to be accommodated within the Beast's repertoire. The most important of these is the repositioning of the Beast with respect to the natural world around him. The scene in which he takes on the savage wolf pack suggests that he can counteract nature's destructive potential. But he is now also shown learning how to feed the wild birds in the castle grounds and, with this addition, his inculcation into the responsible human role of 'steward of nature' is almost complete. The aesthetic changes in the representation of the Beast as he is redefined through Belle's love thus also accommodate changes in his social function. Insofar as the emotional re-education of the Beast is designed to make him fit for the Prince's role of responsible ruler, as well as lover, the signs that he can now care for as well as, when necessary, control wild nature are of considerable importance.

If we return to our original questions then we may now be in a position to assess the extent to which these shifts in modes of representation constitute a suppression of the energies associated with wild nature in the film. We are provided with some indication of the precise balance struck by the film in this regard in the scene prior to Belle's climactic dance with the Beast, where the creature is shown being groomed for the occasion. The ritual of preening and cleansing here carries some echoes of the domestic order Snow White imposes on her rustic cottage when the dwarves are forced to bathe and clean up. In *Beauty and the Beast*, however, the bath scene concludes in a different manner to the slapstick play of the dwarves, where the most recalcitrant member of the group was readily cajoled into soapy acquiescence. The Beast, by contrast, emerges from his bath and immediately shakes himself dry in the manner of a dog. His animal identity is partly retained, in other words, whereas the dwarves quickly learn to accept Snow White's new regime of personal hygiene in its totality. After his bath moreover, the beast is coiffured and togged up in the most refined manner, so that his new form will approximate to that of an aristocratic lover. The result is a grotesque parody of courtly style, the animal hulk, peering out from behind a flurry of curls and ribbons, looking ridiculous, constrained and ill at ease

with the effeminate new artifice of his over-refined grooming. After another shake and an animated whirl of scissor strokes, his final form emerges however. The curls have gone, the trimmed mane bristles with manly vigour while the body, though now graced with an immaculately cut topcoat and cravat, retains its animal form and fluid, confident movement. The degree to which animal-like qualities are restored in this scene suggests that the film is looking for a visual equivalent for the concept of 'wild civility' we explored earlier. The attitudes upon which this image is founded are, as I have indicated, overwhelming human ones, attuned particularly to concerns about masculinity and nature that characterize the early 1990s. But the degree to which the attempt to conjure a sympathetic rapport with 'wild nature' is successful may be judged by responses – especially from young viewers – to the film's ending.

These responses are epitomized in a conversation Jane Kuenz reports with a boy who had recently seen *Beauty and the Beast* in the cinema:

> … he liked the movie, he said, but was sorry it had such a sad ending. When asked why this conclusion – the quintessential happy ending – was sad, he said because "everyone turns back into real people". (1993: 91)

Marina Warner effectively builds on this viewpoint when she argues that the Disney film 'ran the risk of dramatic collapse when the Beast turned into the prince'. She asserts further that 'No child in my experience preferred the sparkling, candy-coloured human who emerged from the enchanted monster: the Beast had won them' (1995: 313). Paradoxically then, the film's achievement may well lie in the sense of loss which is registered when the project of completely humanizing wild nature is finally fulfilled. The disenchantment this entails would seem to put us in touch with what John Berger calls the 'new solitude' of modern man, increasingly cut off from interactions with animals as an aspect of ordinary lived reality (1980: 9). To counteract this solitude however, the bulk of the film provides a compensatory fantasy in which the civilizing process is imagined as enabling – not alienation from animal nature – but rather a journey towards intimacy with the symbolic, and now strangely vulnerable, Beast.

The context within which this journey takes place is distinguished from most other versions of the Beauty and the Beast story in at least one further significant dimension. Jane Kuenz's young critic of the film does not single out the Beast alone in articulating his sense of dissatisfaction with the Disney film's ending. It is sad because '*everyone* turns back into real people', he says. The boy would seem to be registering some inextricable connection here – at a level of emotional attachment as well as simple plot function – between the transformed image of the Beast and the rest of his household entourage of servants. Not only does he prefer the Prince in his animal incarnation, he also seems to have a deeper attachment to the servants embodied as clocks, teapots, candlesticks and brooms than the human forms to which they are restored at the end.

In fact, the development of a particular role for the castle's servants, who are magically transformed into utensils and artefacts at the same moment that their master becomes a monstrous animal, is a distinctive feature of Linda Woolverton's intelligently innovative script. In most versions of the tale household tasks and

various kinds of service offered to the inhabitants of the enchanted castle take place mysteriously, through no visible agency, whereas in Disney's film the metamorphosis of the servants into animated objects appears to make their new functions indeterminate between that of humans and that of machines. This aspect of Linda Woolverton's adaptation is significant with respect to the argument I am advancing here because it introduces another axis to the exploration of meanings around the human–animal dichotomy with which the story has traditionally been concerned. If humans have potentialities that make them like animals, as the magically enhanced plot of the film seems to suggest, then they also share capabilities for performing tasks with machines. Indeed in the modern world, many of the tasks undertaken by the servants in the Beast's enchanted castle – the cleaning, washing of dishes, food preparation – would be performed precisely by machines, either operating on their own or extending the capacity of human agents.

The addition of this element to the imagery embodying the story's thematic concerns at this moment is, moreover, not arbitrary. The reduction of the servants' bodies to artefacts representing an aspect of the tasks they habitually undertake gives the characters a form equivalent to that of an intelligent machine, or cyborg. In fact, the Beauty and the Beast story was an especially apt vehicle for the incursion of cyborg figures since, as Donna Haraway has observed, 'The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed' (2004: 10). Moreover, one could argue that the introduction of cyborg figures to the script in the early 1990s was itself symptomatic of wider cultural changes. Anne Balsamo has suggested that, '… the decade of the 1980s stands out as the historical moment when a high-tech human hybrid moved off the pages of science fiction novels into everyday life' (1996: 17). Balsamo sees the appearance of films such as *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*, *Robocop* and *Terminator*, alongside Max Headroom on television and 'Transformers' in toyshops, constituting the 1980s as 'in many ways the decade of the cyborg'. *Beauty and the Beast*'s transformed range of household utensil servants may not be as 'high-tech' as their 1980s cyborg predecessors, but their indeterminate role between humans and machines shares many of the same attributes. But what exactly is the effect of introducing such figures to the narrative?

Film animation, and Disney animation in particular, has long been fascinated by the triple interface between human, animal and machine. It was precisely this dimension of the medium, indeed, which attracted radical theorists such as Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, when he argued strongly for animated film's subversive potential in relation to the deforming effects of industrial capitalism. Benjamin perceived potential in the early Mickey Mouse animations, in particular, for a kind of psychic release in the audience, whereby Mickey's anarchic, wild and playful interactions with machines and humans ruptured a sense of normal hierarchies. For Benjamin, the early Disney films, as Miriam Hansen. puts it, 'rehearsed … alternative visions of technology and the body, prefiguring the mobilization of a "collective physis" and a different organisation of relations between humanity and nature' (1993: 28). Benjamin claimed that an unintended effect of the Mickey Mouse figure was to rupture 'the hierarchy of creatures predicated on the human body' (ibid.: 47). I am not claiming an equivalent subversive potential for Disney's recent rendering of *Beauty and the Beast* (and indeed Benjamin himself became

disenchanted with the later Disney offerings, feeling that Mickey became sanitized and domesticated so as to comply more fully with dominant ideologies of work and production). But the introduction of the servant figures in cyborg equivalent roles in the Disney film does open up the plot to new orientations for its primary themes and preoccupations. Perhaps as significantly, it also marks a move away from pastoral traditions in configuring human relations with nature.

This move away from pastoral traditions is shown most decisively through developing Belle's father's identity as an inventor. Rather than being portrayed in the traditional fairy tale role of woodcutter, farmer or merchant, Maurice is presented as a passionate exponent and developer of technology. Even the house where Belle and her father live is represented as something of an icon for alternative technologies, as opposed to the idyllic rural cottage of earlier fairy tale adaptations. The house's rooftop sports a rather unlikely looking wind turbine, while a more traditional water wheel at the side of the building harnesses the renewable energy of a passing stream. Inside the house Belle's father is seen working on an unwieldy prototype for a labour-saving device that automatically chops wood for the domestic hearth; and, to the right of the front door, an elaborate surveillance device enables would-be visitors to be vetted before admittance. These devices might be taken simply as signs of the inventor's traditional eccentricity but, set off against the harsh light in which the other villagers' conservative instincts are shown, the inventor's activities appear progressive and even, in a rather whacky way, liberating. Maurice's difference from the rest of the small-town community may be less obviously positive than his daughter's, but he is a sympathetic character, his labour-saving device proves effective and, in the end, the device is instrumental in liberating Belle and her father from imprisonment so they can play their role in procuring a happy ending. In terms of thematic structure, the role of the inventor is also linked to the form taken by the servants in the enchanted castle. Belle's father's interest in technology enables him to forge an inquisitive connection at an early stage with the cyborg-like figures of the servants. He is completely unfazed by their strange appearance and fascinated by what he takes to be the hidden mechanisms enabling them to operate. When he first meets the castle's Head of Domestic Staff, Cogsworth, for instance, whose role in regulating the household activities is expressed through his embodiment as a clock, Maurice unceremoniously probes the flywheel and pendulum mechanisms inside the figure, before being recalled to more human forms of polite interaction.

With his mechanical features repeatedly put on display and exposed in the film, Cogsworth could be seen as almost an archetype of the cyborg form. Jennifer Gonzalez has proposed that cyborgs can be broadly divided into two categories: 'an *organic cyborg* can be defined as a monster of multiple species, whereas a *mechanical cyborg* can be considered a techno-human amalgamation.' (2000: 58) Using this taxonomy it is possible to see the Beast as an 'organic' variant of the cyborg form, whereas Cogsworth represents the clearest manifestation of the 'mechanical' mode. In fact, the amalgamation of human forms with the mechanical design of clocks is one of the oldest ways in which cyborgs have been imagined. Human figures working as automatons to chime the hours in concert with time-keeping mechanisms were a feature of clock design throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Gonzalez cites a specific example of this tendency in an eighteenth-century

French engraving entitled *L'Horlogère*. Here the body of an aristocratic woman has been integrated into an elaborate and highly decorated clock so that the two become a single entity. Gonzalez sketches a cultural context within which this image 'can be read as a symptom of the pre-industrial unconscious. *L'Horlogère* substantiates an ideology of order, precision and mechanisation' (ibid.: 60).

Large claims have been made for the liberating potential of cyborg imagery in relation to contemporary consciousness. Donna Haraway has argued that the cyborg provides a tool with which it may be possible to imagine a future in terms that break free from the perception of nature and technology as locked into destructive opposition to each other. She writes that

> … most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artefacts associated with "high technology" and scientific culture. From *One-Dimensional Man* to *The Death of Nature*, the analytic resources developed by progressives have insisted on the necessary domination of technics and recalled us to an imagined organic body to integrate our resistance. (2004: 13)

Haraway urges her readers to resist the essentialism latent in images of integrity and innocence, where the natural is characterized as an 'imagined organic body', whose wholeness needs to be restored if human beings are to become free. Instead she proposes a new metaphysic, within which identity would be accepted as protean, shaped by shifting relationships between the human, technological and natural. Within this new metaphysic, she argues, the cyborg and its accompanying imagery may enable us to inhabit 'lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints'.

The post-modern euphoria with which Haraway greets the prospect of partial and unstable identities brought on by the incursion of technology into our bodies, as well as into the realm of nature, is both utopian and provocative. Haraway's ideas have stimulated some useful and intriguing debates, though their direct relevance to the cyborg imagery invoked in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is perhaps tendentious. While it is true that the displacement of the servants' human bodies onto the forms of household utensils provides a source of pleasure for the audience, through the incongruities and likenesses this trope generates, and that this does enforce some sense of 'permanently partial identities' while the servants inhabit these forms, it is less clear to what extent this disrupts our perception of normal roles and boundaries. In many ways the stereotypes underlying the characters' roles are indeed reinforced or exaggerated, rather than destabilized, by the re-incarnation of the servants as household utensils. Mrs Potts is entirely defined through her kindly maternal role, just as Lumière is in his role as lascivious, French *bon vivant*, Cogsworth as mildly authoritarian fusspot, and so on. Rather than seeing the film's embodiment of cyborg-like figures as automatically liberating therefore, it may be more useful to perceive its imagery as offering the solace and imaginative release of a collective dream, where tensions and contradictions that are rife within contemporary culture may be temporarily resolved. As Gonzalez usefully puts it, '… despite the potentially progressive implications of a

cyborg subject position, the cyborg is not necessarily more likely to exist free of the social constraints which apply to humans and machines already' (2000: 61).

What tensions and contradictions does the film's imagery offer to resolve then? The most substantial is, I think, precisely that fault-line identified so incisively by Haraway. In a world defined by an increasingly fractured sense that nature, technology and humanity are being driven at cross purposes to each other, *Beauty and the Beast* projects an image of a bygone age where we may learn to love the beast again, where machines and the artefacts of civilized life, instead of threatening to destroy the planet, work to facilitate the joining together of the animal and the human in a bond where wholeness is restored. The enchantment is but a means for this parable to enact its spell, while the ultimately banal outcome, where 'everyone becomes people again', is actually extraneous to what the story has now come to epitomize.

Perhaps the most palpable sign that it is the harmonization of humanity, nature and technology that the plot is most intent on working out, springs from the scene in which the castle is prepared for the formal meal and dance designed to celebrate the couple's final acceptance of each other. This scene, which is orchestrated around a song expressing the servants' eager anticipation of becoming 'human again', was cut from the movie when it was first released, but was restored later in the DVD version and when the production was staged as a Broadway musical. The scene reprises elements of the spectacular feast prepared for Belle earlier – against the Beast's express command – in that the servants' activities are co-ordinated in a visually stunning homage to the massed choreography of the classic Busby Berkeley musical. But here, since the scene is synchronized with the Beast's desires as much as Belle's, the significance of the spectacle is more clearly the bringing together of all the disparate elements in the household, as the inner fabric of the castle is renewed by the balletic energies of its servant collective. Such is the élan with which the task of cleaning the castle and preparing for the ball is carried out, that the accompanying song lyrics, expressing the servants' longing to be restored to human form, seem to carry little emotional weight. Perhaps this was one reason why the scene was cut from the film initially, although the full, exuberantly ritualized enactment it provides for the theme of harmonious renewal seems to me to justify its inclusion. It is interesting that, when the servants are eventually restored to their human form, this harmony breaks down, as old rivalries and petty grievances re-emerge. Perhaps the servants' ideal qualities are expressed most purely in their cyborg roles after all.

The ideal that appears to have undergone most complete transformation in *Beauty and the Beast*, when compared to earlier Disney animation however, is that of domestic work. Whereas in the classic fairy tale animations of mid-century the heroine, as we have seen, performed an exemplary role in relation to cooking, cleaning and organizing the domestic space of the household, Belle's identity seems to be defined only in vestigial, marginal ways by domestic work. We never see her preparing meals for her father or tidying up the house, for instance: when she goes into town it is for a new book, rather than to buy food, utensils or clothing; and when we see her at home, she normally has her feet up reading, rather than washing up or cleaning. She does expend her energies in a perfunctory manner feeding the household goats and chickens at one point, but this is swiftly superseded by her movement beyond the home into an open space, a movement whose emotive impact

is enlarged by the rotating, skyward tilt of the camera and by accompanying song lyrics that extol the virtues of the larger existence Belle longs to attain.

Superficially then, the abandonment of a pastoral mode for depicting the heroine's ideal existence would also seem to entail moving beyond mundane attachments to the value of domestic work. This move is all the more striking because so many of the traditional retellings of the Beauty and the Beast story (including Cocteau's film version) place the heroine precisely in the role of a Cinderella, who willingly undertakes all the household work whilst being abused by her indolent sisters. But although Disney's film ostensibly tries to reconfigure the heroine with a more liberated sense of her female destiny, the new role is conjured with significant gaps and silences. Belle's role within the house is really more undefined than redefined. Just as contemporary culture now requires most adolescent girls to contribute little in the way of domestic work before they leave home and have to take on the fraught, multiple responsibilities of the working mother, so Belle is offered to the audience in an oddly free-floating space in her home environment. Partly because the domestic regime involves only the most minimal of duties, Belle's social function is also now defined only in the vaguest of forms, through her predilection for reading romantic fairy tales and her desire for 'so much more than this'.

Ultimately the film resolves the tensions implicit in a mode of being that no longer has any clear social function by transferring Belle to an aristocratic household where the distinction between work undertaken by servants and machines has been elided. In this strange world, the enigma of Belle's social identity goes unnoticed, while the heroine is eventually delivered from the mundane concerns of ordinary life – in the same way as her predecessors – through the transcendent agency of a prince. But in the process the symbolic pattern, whereby the heroine incorporates wild nature by harnessing it to the rhythms of domestic work, has indeed shifted. In this revision wild nature, now as much longed for as feared, is seen as part of a process of transformation whereby humans find themselves accommodating to machines as much as to animals. If the sense of identity that emerges from this new pattern finesses significant tensions within contemporary attitudes to gender and domestic work especially, then the film nevertheless generates within the figure of the beast a sense of renewed potency and interest. It was an interest which, revisited again and again in a remarkable range of animated films brought out in the decade following *Beauty and the Beast*'s release, was to become central to the creative output of the medium. We will explore the significance of a number of these films, which fall outside the genre of the fairy tale, in later chapters.

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PART 2
The North American Wilderness

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Chapter 3

Bambi and the Idea of Conservation

> 'In God's wildness lives the hope of the world … The great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.'
>
> John Muir, *John of the Mountains*

There are three nearly universal stories, taking different forms in various cultures, that give shape to our sense of having moved away from the nature that was our origin. Though they have many counterparts elsewhere, the names most commonly given to these stories in the West are Arcadia, Eden and the Golden Age (Eisenberg, 2000). Walt Disney's *Snow White* is, as we have seen, essentially the story of Arcadia, decked out in populist modern colours and grafted onto the root stem of the fairy tale. *Bambi*, released in 1942, was Disney's next animated feature to deal centrally with wild nature and is essentially the story of Eden. Perhaps less definitively, the nostalgia for an ideal, innocent past that is ingrained within all Disney's feature films could be seen as congruent with the myth of the Golden Age. Hence Disney feature animation, from its earliest phases, can be seen as related to all three of these major story forms.

Bambi is the story of a deer growing up in the forest, surviving the death of its mother, reaching sexual maturity and siring fauns of its own. It is based on a children's novel by the Austrian writer Felix Salten, that was first published in English in 1928. Insofar as the narrative structure of the film version is dictated by the life cycle of a particular kind of animal, *Bambi* could be taken to be a fictionalized form of natural history. Successive episodes focus on key moments in the development of the deer and its growth to maturity. The film opens just after Bambi has been born and charts the deer's initial wobbly progress towards acquiring physical agility and prowess within its environment. The audience watches the deer as it learns to use the food rich, but dangerous, open space of meadowland prudently. We observe the young deer as it changes its grazing habits through necessity, adapting to the harsh conditions of winter. Later it grows to understand the physical differentiation of the sexes when the male acquires antlers, together with the competitive struggle for females that ensues once bucks have reached sexual maturity. All this is relayed to the viewer within animated frames that strive for new heights of realism; indeed, the degree of realism within *Bambi* disturbed a number of early viewers of the film, who felt that this had pushed beyond the aesthetic boundaries appropriate for animation. We will return to the issue of what is implied by the mode of representation Disney developed within this film at the end of this chapter.

But *Bambi* is not just a depiction of the life cycle of the deer, picked out with a degree of realistic detail that is highly unusual within the format of a children's animated feature. The film is capable of engaging with our feelings powerfully because it is also, at a deeper level, a version of the Eden myth. The forest is conjured

with a kind of joyful and lyrical delight appropriate for the representation of unfallen nature within paradise. Marc Eliot describes *Bambi* as 'the most visually gracious of all Disney's classic animated features. The purest evocation yet of Disney's vision of a perfect world …' (1995: 177). As in the biblical Eden, nature's predatory, stinging, biting, aggressive functions are almost wholly absent. The only natural predator represented in the film, the owl, is a kind of grumpy, middle-aged guardian of forest life whose most aggressive act is to hoot at a group of amorous birds who are disturbing his springtime peace. The storyline of the film – changed from Felix Salten's book – finishes with a kind of expulsion from this forest paradise, as the combination of a large-scale hunting expedition and a fire drive the deer up over the mountains to seek safety. The relative ease with which the animals are able to reclaim their scarred but rejuvenating 'Eden' at the end of the film can perhaps be understood as a result of the fallen state of their world being attributable wholly to Man, who drives them out, and not at all to the gentle, innocent forest creatures that nature eventually rescues. Finally Bambi is himself showcased as a gawkily comic pastiche of the biblical Adam, when he struggles, in anthropomorphic vein, to acquire language early in the film and to name the other forest creatures.

The version of the Eden myth that is offered to us within *Bambi* is also, in the broadest sense (as with *Snow White*), a kind of pastoral. The opening song of the movie highlights its principal theme as 'love' and, as in classical and renaissance forms of pastoral, there are set pieces that play on a repertoire of expressive conventions to elaborate this theme. Perhaps the most striking and (despite its obvious sentimentality) visually successful of these is the sequence in which the trio of young animal friends fall consecutively and hopelessly in love. The sequence is given a framework of ironic distance that helps counteract its more sentimental effusions by the owl's opening disquisition on the universal process of 'twitterpating', a neologism he coins disparagingly to represent the sexual imperatives taking over the minds and feelings of all creatures in spring. But the visual play that is made with conventional gestures of female seductiveness and male emotional susceptibility works also because of the imaginative excess with which the stereotypes are allowed to hold sway. As with Charlie Chaplin's romantic feature films, it is the comedy that restrains and redirects the fundamentally sentimental impulse here, the potential gap between animal and human, biology and feeling, both collapsed and paradoxically exploited. Joseph Meeker has observed that comedy is more highly attuned to the processes of the natural world than other major forms, such as tragedy, since it so often 'grows from the biological circumstances of life' (1972: 23). This is certainly true of the comic patterns that evolve within *Bambi*, which are based, ultimately, on the drive towards reproduction and the environmental conditions that shape growth to maturity and survival. Meeker, indeed, posits a significant, and generally overlooked, similarity between the 'organizational principles and processes' of nature and 'the patterns found in comedy. Productive and stable ecosystems are those which minimize destructive aggression, encourage maximum diversity, and seek to establish equilibrium among their participants – which is essentially what happens in … comedy' (ibid.: 27).

Pastoral comedy is not simply a play with conventions whose ultimate purpose is to create a dynamic equilibrium that harmonizes – and emphasizes parallels

between – human experience and the processes of the natural world however. It is also a way of seeing. And exactly what Disney's pastoral take on the Eden myth allows us to see – and not to see – in *Bambi* is of central significance in terms of the film's connection with ideas of nature. What we see are natural forms – behaviour and environments closely and (within the limits of the anthropomorphized animated medium) accurately observed. The film's opening sequence is a long tracking and crabbing shot that seems to circle ever inwards through a misty half light that slowly reveals trees, branches, mosses, stones and river as the camera moves us sensitively into the very intimate heart of the forest. In this intimate and enclosed space we bear witness, alongside the other small animals, to the mystery of life's origins, the birth of a young faun that is accorded a special reverence and significance by the other forest dwellers. Our viewpoint is that of the small animals and the camera's slow penetration of successive layers within the forest space (the effect of which is considerably enhanced by adept use of the relatively new multi-plane technology) seems to take us into a special realm where we can see what is normally secret and unobserved within the lives of the animals. The whole film, indeed, works up this feeling of enabling an intimacy with the natural world, in modes ordinarily inaccessible to humans, through its selective focus on details of animal behaviour that are, at least partly, grounded in the real world. Thus images of the young faun curled up lovingly within the contours of its mother's body are complemented by observations of seasonal changes in patterns of feeding: cautious access to the food resources of the meadow in summer; feeding from the bark of trees, when the ground is frozen over in winter; the sensuous pleasure, made keen by prolonged hunger, of tasting the first shoots of new grass in spring. Alongside the conceits, gags and heavily anthropomorphized scenes, children watching *Bambi* learn about a range of issues affecting animal behaviour. They learn, for instance, that skunks hibernate in the winter whereas other small animals, such as rabbits do not; that male deer grow antlers as they reach maturity and use these in contests of strength with other males as they struggle for the right to mate with female deer; and so on. By the time they have finished watching the film, children with little experience of country life will have been immersed in a plethora of images accessing knowledge of the natural world. Perhaps most striking in this respect is the way the environment of the forest is depicted – the particular forms of trees, the sensitivity to patterns and light, the variety of terrain, even within the forest, from grassland to deciduous woodland mixed with largely coniferous areas, to open spaces, created by a river running through the forest valley, carving out vistas that open onto the cliffs and mountains beyond.

Bambi, in fact, locates the animals within an environment that offers the same kind of visual pleasure as landscape painting and photography. While such a ravishing visual texture might be taken simply as the film's rhetorical strategy for heightening audiences' sense of the forest as a natural Eden, I would argue that what we see is also being structured in more specific ways. For the landscape photography lens which defines nature in *Bambi* shows not just any beautiful environment, but a rather particular one. For a start, even if we did not count the uniformly mainstream, American intonations of the animals' speech as admissible evidence, the fauna of the forest region, with its skunks, chipmunks and raccoons, is distinctive to the

North American sub-continent. This is important because many of the later Disney films featuring wild nature, such as *The Jungle Book*, *Tarzan* and *The Lion King*, focus on more distant and exotic locations and use speech patterns with much more strongly differentiated racial and cultural accents. The forest paradise of *Bambi* is a linguistically as well as geographically enclosed area, homogeneously grounded within middle-class white America. Even more significantly though, the native fauna and landscape also allow the film to draw on an idea of 'wilderness' that is central to North American traditions of thought and feeling. From the writings of early pioneers and settlers, through Thoreau and Emerson to John Muir and Ansell Adams, 'wilderness' has been invested with a special value that goes right to the heart of American identity.

Within this powerful American idea of wilderness something more specific is also being invoked however. Taylor (1991) has made a useful distinction between the world views implied within two broad categories of environmental discourse, each of which draws on different rhetorical strategies to support its perspective. Taylor names the first of these world views 'expansionist'; this view is predicated on the notion of an ever expanding world economy, with its concomitant need for enhanced exploitation of resources from the natural world. In order to realize a positive outcome for this 'expansionist world view', and to invoke the objective of a sustainable long-term environment, this outlook must be embedded in a storyline which Taylor calls 'wise management'. Each stage of new human incursions into the natural world, in other words, must be carefully assessed for its full repercussions and the process of economic development 'wisely managed'. In contrast, a second perspective, which in Taylor's analysis may operate in dialogue with, as well as in opposition to, the first, is called the 'ecological world view'. This viewpoint stresses the idea that the delicate balance of intersecting ecosystems within the natural environment requires protection from the consequences of ever expanding human exploitation. Hence this outlook must be embedded in the contrastive storyline of 'conservation' (Taylor, 1991). These contrastive storylines are not necessarily sealed off from each other, however, since 'the very same text may be a dialogue of these two voices. Narrative may transcend the constraints of formal logic, according to which contradiction is the most heinous of all sins' (Harré, Brockmeier and Mühlhäuser, 1999: 70).

Now, although the storyline of *Bambi* is not explicitly that of 'conservation', there is no doubt that the implications of the film are pointed very heavily in this direction. The 'expansionist' world view, represented by the human hunters' desire periodically to exploit the resources of a pristine, natural environment by killing animals, is represented as both fearful and destructive in the film. Not only is the intended outcome of killing game portrayed as a slaughter that disrupts the harmonious relationships and sense of well being of the innocent creatures, but the unintended consequence of 'Man's' intrusion also has even more dire effects. The fire, which is accidentally left to get out of control at the humans' campsite, wreaks havoc as it progresses in ferocious swathes through the whole terrain at the end of the film. If ever there were a 'natural environment' requiring 'protection from the consequences of … expanding human exploitation', surely the forest and surrounding land depicted in *Bambi* is it. The film has the 'storyline of conservation' at its very heart.

It is not only the storyline however, but perhaps more significantly also the way the landscape is shot that angles the film's attachment to ideas of conservation in particular ways. *Bambi* does not depict a generic American 'wilderness' but a rather special one, whose key features set up very strong associations with the first major conservation area formally to be declared a protected region in the United States: the most photographed National Park in the world, Yosemite. Yosemite is an area of spectacular, glacier shaped, rock formations, which frame a river valley rendered especially beautiful through its combination of large open meadows with mixed deciduous woodlands that gradually give way to conifers, including magnificent redwoods, as the land gets higher. It is situated in northeast California, some three hundred miles from the Burbank studios that the Disney team moved into in 1940 and where *Bambi* was largely made. The area was established as a protected region during the period of Abraham Lincoln's presidency and has gradually acquired iconic status in terms of how North American wilderness is represented. The Yosemite Grant was established by Congress in 1864; it initially awarded control of the valley and Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the state of California for perpetuity. When Yosemite became a National Park in 1890, the conservation area was massively expanded from the sixty square miles of the original valley grant, the newly designated National Park covering more than 1500 square miles of the region (Runte, 1993). This protection was not sufficient to prevent a dam and massive reservoir being built in the more northerly sector of the National Park area, the Hetch Hetchy valley, however. Despite vigorous opposition (including the influential voice of John Muir) in one of the most famous political battles in conservation history, the Raker Act of 1913 finally provided a legislative framework that allowed the dam to be built. Thus, in addition to being a site with indisputably iconic significance for the idea of 'wilderness' – Rebecca Solnit calls it 'the very crucible and touchstone for American landscape' (1994: 221) – Yosemite is also richly embedded in the history and conflicts of the conservation movement.

The association between *Bambi* and Yosemite National Park can be detected at a number of levels. At the most general level, the establishing sequence of shots at the start of the film focuses on key features broadly similar to those defining the landscape of Yosemite. The forest in *Bambi* is situated in a river valley, backed off with steep cliffs and rocky terrain that stage the drama of the deer's escape at the end of the film, but which are glimpsed in more picturesque mode at the beginning. As in the Yosemite valley, the woodland is a mixture of deciduous trees and conifers which, when the camera turns skywards to catch the changing disposition of weather, seem to acquire something of the height and grandeur of the famous sequoias. *Bambi* features a large open meadow space in the heart of the forest that has rough equivalence to the meadow space that allows such spectacular views in the Yosemite valley for photographers, artists and visitors. But in addition to these broad features of the landscape, it is also the detailed ways in which individual shots are framed that suggest strong parallels with the traditions of landscape photography that have evolved in relation to Yosemite. In the opening sequence, for instance, as the camera tracks down to the riverbed, the trees suddenly open up around the upward course the river has carved out to reveal a waterfall tumbling spectacularly over a sheer cliff face in the medium distance. The shot of the waterfall and rising cliff framed

by natural features nearer to the eye is, of course, a standard image in landscape photography and Disney uses versions of it in other films such as *The Fox and the Hounds* and *Tarzan*. But the particular form of the framing trees, the angle of the waterfall shots and scale of the background cliffs in *Bambi* are more fully consonant with perspectives that Ansell Adams and others returned to again and again when photographing the Yosemite waterfalls and the Bridal Falls especially. *Bambi* scales down the sense of monumental awe created in much of Adams's work, but the ingredients and angles are strikingly similar. The low angle shots of a succession of rocky, platform promontories used to set off Bambi and his 'Prince' father, likewise bear comparison with classic, though more monumental, shots of key features of the Yosemite landscape such as El Capitan and, perhaps especially, Half Dome.

The association of *Bambi* with both the imagery and forms of representation of Yosemite National Park helps sharpen our sense of what is, and is not, seen in the particular version of pastoral that the film develops. Perhaps the most important element that is excluded from direct representation within the film's pastoral vision is the human figure itself. No human form is ever shown in the film, even though human actions produce such powerfully emotive effects. This absence is particularly striking since it is specifically human agency that drives so much of the plot, especially in the latter part of the film. While it is also true that, in Felix Salten's novel, human presence in the animals' world is registered largely through circumlocutions, designed to capture the animals' incomprehension of human beings' enhancement of their natural powers through the technology of weapons, the film's occlusion of the human figure is much more absolute and also draws on other traditions. In particular, the traditions of landscape representation used within both the photography and painting of Yosemite National Park have almost invariably excluded any sign of humans – or even of human participation – in the scene. As Rebecca Solnit bluntly puts it; 'In most of the photographs that have made the place familiar to the world, there are no people' (1994: 221). As a rider to this observation, she goes on to assert that 'What has been left out of the picture, then, says a lot about how we understand landscape' (ibid.: 222).

The most obvious result of leaving human beings out of the perspective in the depiction of Yosemite is to enhance the feeling that we are witnessing the beauty of a virgin wilderness, untouched by human presence. It is clear, indeed, that the creation of such a perspective has been a major goal driving conservation policy at a national level in the United States. The 1963 report, *Wildlife Management in the National Parks*, of a committee chaired by Professor Leopold, for instance, identified as its primary goal 'that the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man … A National Park should represent a vignette of primitive America'. The report went on to suggest that 'A reasonable illusion of primitive America could be recreated using the utmost skill, judgment, and ecologic sensitivity' (Runte, 1993: 92). It is noteworthy both how aware the authorities are of the energy and skill needed to recreate such an 'illusion of primitive America' and that the criterion invoked in judging the success of such an 'illusion' should be the first experience of the environment by a white man. The emotional investment engendered in this form of engagement with virginal landscape thus tends to push to

the margins of vision, or even obscure completely, perception of how even the most remote places on earth take their specific form from thousands of years of interaction with human beings, as well as other animals. As Gary Snyder puts it, before Europeans came, 'North America was *all populated* … people were everywhere' (1990: 7); and had been, indeed, for thousands of years. Rebecca Solnit argues more specifically both that the representation of Yosemite as a tourist attraction obscures the history of the Indian wars that enabled jurisdiction (and renaming) of the land to be secured by Europeans and that the continued presence of North American natives in the valley region passes unnoticed in official accounts and visual records. Even the land itself, she argues, has acquired the particular mixture of forest, meadow and plant life that it has today through a whole range of interventions practised by nomadic Indians across the preceding centuries. The occlusion of the human figure from the landscape of *Bambi* does not enact such a specific process of rendering human history invisible. But it does produce a very selective vision of human interaction with the landscape, eliminating any sense of an evolving interdependency between landscape and human activity and heightening the audience's feeling for a natural world that is entirely separate.

Nevertheless, *Bambi* does link, in a range of important ways, to ideas and ideologies that have informed the practice of conservation in the United States especially. Consider, for instance, the following passage from early on in Felix Salten's novel; here the author offers a fundamental lesson both to the infant deer and the young reader about how the natural world operates:

> Bambi was in high spirits and felt like leaping off the path, but he stayed close to his mother. Something rustled in front of them, close to the ground. The fern fronds and wood lettuce concealed something that advanced in violent motion. A threadlike little cry shrilled out piteously; then all was still. Only the leaves and the blades of grass shivered back into place. A ferret had caught a mouse. He came slinking by, slid sideways, and prepared to enjoy his meal. (1998: 16)

The death of the small creature is rendered with full empathetic feeling here, particularly in the 'little cry' that 'shrilled out piteously'; but the insight the passage is designed to develop is ultimately unsentimental. The passage is not untypical of the way Salten uses the novel to contemplate the sway of mortality within nature that underpins his other major themes.

Yet there is nothing like this in Disney's *Bambi* – there, no predators appear to exist in the forest world other than the occasional incursions by 'man'. It might be tempting to see this change in tone and perspective from the novel as one more instance of Disney's habitual drive to sentimentalize. However, other Disney films (*The Jungle Book*, *The Lion King*, even the early *Song of the South*) develop the theme of wild creatures' predatory instincts in relation to each other strongly.

The 'illusion' of primitive nature that was being created within America's National Parks from the beginning of the twentieth century was, on the other hand, based on principles much more in key with Disney's presentation of the natural order in *Bambi*. For here the policy was to rid the parks of as many of the major predatory species as possible. Joseph Grimell, whose ideas and advocacy of Yosemite National Park did much to promote the area and prevent further damage after John Muir's

death in 1914, argued vigorously that this policy should be changed. In an influential article published in the journal *Science* in 1916, he made a stand for the principle that National Parks should not be 'sanitized and civilized'. This meant that 'predaceous animals [too] should be left unmolested and allowed to retain their primitive relation to the rest of the fauna'. Instead of human intervention culling predators in order to favour what were thought of as more 'desirable' species, Grimell argued for an ecological understanding of relationships between species in the natural environment. Predator numbers, he suggested, would be 'kept within proper limits by the available food supply; nothing is to be gained by reducing [their numbers] still further' (Runte, 1993: 88–90). Grimell's views did not gain acceptance until after a long period of debate however. Runte states that:

> The Park Service disagreed [with Grimell], and, in fact, pursued a vigorous program against predatory animals until 1931, fully fifteen years after Grimell and Storer's path breaking article in *Science*. The Park service had succumbed, in effect, to nineteenth century visions of National Parks as *scenery*. (ibid.: 90)

By the time the Park service had acceded to Grimell's view, 'many predatory animals had been systematically eradicated from the major Western parks' (ibid.). Parallels between the early twentieth-century Park Service's ideal of 'beautiful nature' and the selective version of the natural order that informs Disney's *Bambi* are thus striking. Characteristically, the Disney film is nostalgically invoking a nineteenth-century ideal of nature that is 'conserved' by having its more unpleasant features systematically culled. It is interesting that the result of pursuing this policy in real life was an over-expansion of grazing herds. This, in turn, upset the ecological balance (particularly evident at Yellowstone National Park) and threatened to change both the distribution of plant life and the way the landscape 'looked'. It was this threat to the 'recreated illusion of primitive America' in the landscape, as much as Grimell's arguments, that finally persuaded the Park Service to shift its policy.

The most dramatic change that Disney's film effects on the plot of Felix Salten's novel, however, is undoubtedly the climactic fire that appears to ravage the whole region in the wake of the humans' hunting expedition. Although the film's primary focus is on the main protagonists, Bambi and his father Prince, this sequence is distinguished stylistically by editing techniques and camera angles that suggest the significance of the fire is much wider than its immediate impact on the fate of Bambi.

The sequence opens with an image of flames from the hunters' unattended campfire licking their way along the dried grass and dead timber that is strewn across the ground, till they reach the surrounding trees. This is followed by an extended series of linked panning shots that follow the flames' terrifyingly swift progress through the forest, whilst also registering the effect of the fire on the smaller fleeing animals. When, eventually, the film cross-cuts to Prince and the wounded Bambi on a rocky platform in the higher ground, the camera takes up a characteristic medium range position, so that Bambi's prostrate form will have maximum impact on the natural stage that foregrounds his body. But as Bambi, prompted by his father's ministrations, recovers enough energy to flee, the camera is moved back to a medium/long range position that reduces the size of the animals within the frame

and enables much more of the surrounding environment to be taken in by the viewer. The effect of this stylistic shift from the medium/close range shots that predominate in most of the rest of the film is partly to emphasize the vulnerability of the animals. The fleeing deer look much smaller with the towering, blazing trees now dominating them from above. But the longer range viewpoint also makes us aware of the fire's devastating impact on a whole environment and that the creatures, with whom we identify strongly in this dramatically intense moment, form a small part of the larger natural world which is now threatened. This secondary effect is reinforced by the way the film is edited. After we have witnessed the stags' desperate final bid to escape the pursuing flames, by leaping from the top of a waterfall, we expect the dramatic tension to be maintained by following the stags' swimming through the water. Instead, the film begins by panning slowly along the river to suggest the stags' possible progress, but then dissolves and crosscuts to a small island, safely situated in the middle of a lake. Here we are aware once again, not just of the deer (Bambi's partner Faline is seen anxiously waiting at the edge of the island) but, more significantly, of the sheer variety of animal life affected. The forms of rabbits, partridges, innumerable birds, raccoons, opossum, mice and squirrels are all clearly identifiable as they gather on the crowded space of the island and the specificity of the animal images extends the viewer's sense of the fire as an environmental, rather than individually focused, catastrophe.

I have dwelt on the stylistic features of this penultimate episode at some length because these enable the film to extend its range of meanings and to engage, potentially, with larger ideas about the relationship between fire and the natural environment. During the period in which the film was made, the authorities responsible for maintaining wild areas in the United States, particularly the Parks Service and Forest Commission, took a very active role in trying to prevent all fires within protected natural areas. The obvious rationale for this, consistent with the impact of the imagery of fire within *Bambi*, was that fires had a destructive, and potentially disastrous, effect on the natural environment.

However, fires within natural environments may actually come about through a number of causes and have varied consequences. Some, of course, like those started by bolts of lightning, are entirely natural. These tend to be a very small proportion however, compared to fires whose origins can be traced to various forms of human agency. Karl Jacoby's statistics on the causes of fire within New York State Forest Preserve Counties between 1891 and 1913, for instance, indicate only 3 per cent of recorded fires that could be definitely attributed to natural causes, compared to 71 per cent with a clear human origin (2001: 74–5). But even the fires started by human beings show marked variations both in intention and effect. Many fires are an accidental or careless side effect of a range of human activities that take place within natural environments, from semi-industrial practices, such as building railways, sawmills or blasting, to the carelessness of visitors to country areas; hunters, campers, smokers and so on. But a significant proportion of fires (33 per cent in the survey Jacoby quotes) are started deliberately and for a variety of reasons. Farmers may start fires to clear land or burn stubble to prepare for new planting, berry pickers to encourage the growth of a new crop of berries at the end of a season, bee-keepers to stimulate the growth of pollinating plants that produce nectar.

Even hunters, responsible for the fire that has such devastating impact in *Bambi*, may start fires deliberately, not only as a strategy to drive animals into places where they can be more easily killed, but also to maintain or create new browsing areas for deer and other game. This was also one of the main reasons why North American Indians set fires, a practice that appears to go back thousands of years and is likely to have influenced the quality and distribution of plant life in positive ways within nearly all areas of North America.

It is important to recognize this range of human practices causing fires in rural environments because public policy in the United States has tended to oppose the uses local groups make of conservation areas and to view local practices, in a wholesale manner, as environmentally destructive. Karl Jacoby suggests that this attitude had a strong class and ethnic bias. Professionals working on conservation projects tended to perceive the rural populace as 'engaged in "unwise" environmental practices that would have potentially catastrophic environmental consequences if left unchecked' (ibid.: 15).

This, of course, is precisely the implication of the images of hunting and the resulting fire at the end of *Bambi*. While Jacoby acknowledges that the 'settlement of the American countryside was accompanied by tremendous ecological devastation as settlers endeavoured to find marketable goods and remake the "wild" nature they encountered into a more familiar world of fields and fences' (ibid.: 49), he argues that conservationist narratives have tended to use this image to obscure many variations in local practices and to deny the validity of less powerful groups' viewpoints and competing interests. Such competing interests often pitched rural communities in opposition, not only to rich private landowners, but also to administrators of public conservation areas.

During the thirty-year period before *Bambi* was made, these competing interests acquired a particularly sharp and public focus, as the policies informing modern fire management within wilderness areas were both strongly contested and took shape. As Stephen Pyne has argued, this controversy was fuelled by what was 'at base a conflict between two sets of fire practices: one set learned largely from Indians and sustained by a frontier economy of hunting, herding and shifting agriculture; the other set, better suited to industrial forestry' (1982: 101). Pyne, indeed, suggests even broader implications for this conflict when he claims, starkly, that the 'history of modern fire protection is basically the story of how one fire regime, that of the frontier economies, was replaced by another, that of an industrial state' (ibid.: 82). By the time *Bambi* was produced, National Parks' policy on wilderness fires had been settled decisively in line with practices shaped by the interests of industrial forestry, but not before a fierce debate had taken place which, in California at least, was eventually opened up to a wide audience in the very public arena of popular magazines. This debate came to be called the 'light burn' controversy. On one side of the debate, the Forest and Park Services were driven increasingly to close ranks around a policy of systematically suppressing all fires within natural environments. As Kenneth Walker, representing the views of the California Board of Forestry in 1950, put it, 'We don't want fire under any conditions in the woods' (ibid.: 112). Pitched against the advocates of this position was a loose alliance of local practitioners, who 'insisted that by broadcast underburning they were following "the Indian way" of wise forest management; foresters dismissed this proposition as mere "Paiute forestry"' (ibid.).

What is especially interesting here is that, underlying the debate about fire practices, lay a more fundamental controversy about the very meaning of 'wilderness' and our understanding of how it had been formed. For many decades in the early twentieth century, environmental historians and anthropologists (despite the overwhelming evidence of frontiersmen and early settlers, whose testimony they mistrusted) fell into line with the Forest Service by asserting that it had never been the practice of American Indians to set fire to the land deliberately. Since the Indian way of life was perceived, almost axiomatically, as being close to the land, it was inconceivable that they could systematically practise something that, according to the modern technical and scientific thought which underpinned the Forest Service's position, was environmentally harmful. Only when, from the late 1960s onwards, the Forest and Parks Service changed policy and began to incorporate elements of traditional practice into their fire regime, did the extent of Native Americans' use of burning begin to be fully acknowledged. This represented not so much a shift of emphasis as a change in the whole underlying paradigm. As it began to be accepted that periodic fires could have beneficial effects, so it was also recognized that fires had been used to affect the environment by hunting, gathering and herding communities within all societies (including the American Indians) throughout history. In the process of this radical shift in attitude and thinking, the whole image of what the wilderness actually was – that 'powerful mirage of the virgin forest myth' (ibid.: 81) that had held both academic writing and the popular imagination in its grip for decades – had to be changed.

Central to that changed perception was the role Native Americans had played in shaping the very constitution of the landscape which Europeans discovered as they explored and took over America. Fire was utterly central to that shaping process. Jacoby, for instance, describes how,

> Among many Indian peoples, including the Bannock, Shoshone, and Crow, it was customary for experienced tribe members to kindle fires in order to drive game animals to locations where they might be killed by waiting hunters. By burning underbrush and dead wood, low-level fires of this sort also helped to recycle nutrients into the soil and create a mosaic of plant varieties at various levels of succession, raising the level of vegetational diversity and opening up a variety of ecological niches for wildlife. The benefits of fire were therefore not only short-term (facilitating travel and the taking of game) but long term as well (maintaining a higher level of wildlife than would have occurred otherwise). (2001: 86)

Rebecca Solnit makes a similar case, claiming that 'at least one hundred tribes of North America used fire for at least fifteen purposes, but nearly all of these dramatically affected the landscape and the ecosystem …' (1994: 297). She goes on to quote Sue Fritzke's claims that what is perceived as the 'primitive and untouched' mixture of flora and fauna in the Yosemite valley is in fact almost entirely the result of a range of Indian practices, including fire setting, that had subtly altered the environment over thousands of years before it was 'discovered' by white men. Without this, 'the valley might have been nothing more than a dense forest of conifers' (ibid.: 307). The long-term result of the National Parks policy of attempting to suppress all types of conflagration was actually to increase the intensity of fires when they did occur.

> In 1988, Yellowstone had devastating forest fires as a result of the long-term policy of fire suppression, and in 1990 Yosemite also had fires whose ferocity was brought about by a century of suppression and years of drought, serious enough that the valley was evacuated. Old trees that might have survived a superficial fire burned through in the huge flames that fed on decades of accumulated [forest] litter. (ibid.: 300)

The policy of fire suppression was related to a more general suspicion of (or even hostility towards) the practices of a range of local land users; its implementation over a prolonged period had an impact not only immediately (and sometimes drastically) on established modes of living of the rural communities involved, but eventually also on the land itself.

Beneath the apparently straightforward portrayal of fire within *Bambi*, as an indictment of humanity's brutal and careless intrusion into the innocence of the natural world, then, there lies a complex history of changing philosophies, understanding and social practices. It is possible to construe the images of fire deployed within *Bambi* as standing in a fairly simple, conservative relationship to this complex underlying history. The film's fire images could be thought of as wholly congruent with what had become the dominant ideological position by the 1930s and 1940s; fire seen as a destructive force with a detrimental and potentially devastating impact on wilderness environments, whose pre-Columbian, 'natural' state was conceived of as largely untouched by conflagration. Support for seeing the film as aligned unquestioningly with official government attitudes can be found in the way *Bambi* was subsequently used within advertising campaigns seeking to raise public awareness of the dangers of fire-lighting in the countryside. David Ingram notes that in '1944, the Wartime Advertising Council used the image of Bambi in its fire preservation campaign, thereby appropriating the movie for its conservationist agenda' (2000: 19). It was only after problems with licensing this use of the film had occurred that the Bambi image was replaced as a propaganda icon by the familiar figure of Smokey the Bear. Even if one reads the alignment of the film in this straightforward way however, it is still important to understand what has been left out or selectively distilled from the more complex history of fire in creating the environmental drama of the film's climax. Such choices structure, at a deep level, viewers' attitudes and feelings towards the natural world. It is also possible, though, to argue that the film mediates conflicting attitudes within contemporary discourses surrounding fire in less simple forms. Could there be elements of the film that engender a potentially more ambiguous or complex awareness of the processes linking fire to our perception of the natural world? To explore this possibility a little further we need to look in more detail at the imagery deployed in the film's ending.

The images of a devastated environment with which *Bambi* closes are not quite as straightforward as might at first appear. After the penultimate sequence in which a representative selection of the animals find sanctuary from the fire on the island, the film signals a movement forward in space and time by cutting to a very different scene. We now find ourselves back in the forest region where the film started, the presence of flowers and new growth eventually marking this as the following spring. Our return to this landscape of origins is conveyed, initially, through a prolonged panning and establishing shot. Here the contrast between the former, richly textured,

light-dappled, living forms of the climax forest and the present, uniformly charred environment could not be starker. The subtle shades and misty, lyrical beauty of the natural world, so evident in the film's opening, are replaced by blackened stumps of the few trees now left standing – a bleak elegy to the wasted fertility of the scorched earth beneath. The long panning shot comes to rest, however, on the oak tree that is home to the forest's elder statesman–commentator, Friend Owl. Here the *mise-en-scène* that shapes our emotional relationship to the landscape undergoes a decisive shift. For the oak tree, though blackened slightly in places, has leaves and does not appear substantially damaged. When, a little later, we track further right through the forest towards the thicket where Bambi was born, the woodland looks thinned out, but intact, with patches of still charred ground already sprouting new spring flowers and vegetation. Hence we close with what is, in effect, a double vision of the seared, forest environment that we can read, ambiguously, as both devastated and regenerating.

Clearly this 'double vision' does service within the cyclical structure of the narrative. The film begins and ends with the birth of fauns; the dramatic crisis that shapes its penultimate phase is supplanted by an image of cyclical renewal that represents the film's ultimate vision and faith in natural process. But, if one takes account of the histories and debates that surround the image of fire that *Bambi* draws on, it is also possible to see the film as more multivalent. For the double vision of the ending, though ultimately reassuring, also re-enacts the key terms of contemporary debates on the effects of fire on the natural environment. Is fire itself an agent of renewal and change that helps the environment to attain its maximum potential in terms of richness and diversity? Or is it a purely destructive force, ultimately aligned to fallen mankind's greed and insensitivity towards the natural world, the very antithesis of environmental responsibility? One's answer, within the framework that the film constructs, would appear to depend on whether the gaze rests on the landscape to the left or to the right of the oak tree that is placed liminally between competing images of fire's environmental consequences. In fact, of course, the film drives onwards, its sentimental closure no doubt discouraging the viewer from posing this question at a conscious level. But the contradictory images that sustain our progress towards this ending do open up a potential space for more resistant readings and suggest that the film's pastoral take on the Eden story may be less simple, and less sealed off from the contradictory pressures of historical process, than at first appears.

What is at stake here is not so much a largely intellectual debate as to how the film should properly be interpreted but more a sense that the feelings, attachments and understandings generated by the film are important and can move us in different directions. Evidence that the film may connect with audiences in a multiplicity of ways can be gleaned from viewers' responses from different periods in which *Bambi* has been released. Even from its opening, it is clear that *Bambi* was capable of eliciting a strong reaction from sections of its audience with a particular stake in the environmental agendas that are dramatized in the film. Ralph Lutts, for instance, has noted how, from the start, the 'film's immediate impact was not limited to children. It also shaped the opinions of many adults' (1992: 162). The feeling that the film had unusual power in shaping public opinion lay behind determined opposition to *Bambi* from the hunting

lobby, who began to campaign against the movie even before it was released (ibid.). The film's potential to shape feelings and attachments may not have been fully realized initially however. Despite generally favourable reviews, audience figures after the film's first release were disappointing and Disney failed to cover the film's production costs. This may well have been due to the way the onset of World War II influenced audiences' susceptibilities. Though *Bambi* is not in any obvious sense about war, its feeling for a pure, natural world that is a retreat from aggressive and predatory human instincts links strongly with the isolationist, non-intervention policies that held sway in American politics up till 1942. Walt Disney, in fact, had been broadly in sympathy with such non-interventionist policies throughout the period that *Bambi* was in production. By the time the film came out in August 1942 however (ironically on the 'glorious Twelfth', the start of the grouse shooting season in Britain), the bombing of Pearl Harbor had brought the United States decisively into engagement in World War II. The emotional charge of a charming film about innocent and peaceful nature had perhaps lost its historical moment, as the American people geared themselves up for commitment to the harsh realities of the war effort. The film was more successful when it was re-released in 1948 and, especially, in subsequent releases in the 1950s. From this stage onwards it clearly began to strike an imaginative chord with wider audiences and, by the time it was made available in a video format in 1990, *Bambi* had become the third largest grossing motion picture in history, eclipsed only by *Gone With the Wind* and *The Sound of Music* (Lutts, 1992: 168). The effect of the film can be gauged not just from the numbers attracted to film theatres; the name 'Bambi' acquired iconic significance within discourses and debates about hunting, being used in largely derogatory fashion in phrases such as the 'Bambi factor' and 'Bambi syndrome' to typecast the sentiments of liberal opposition: and a generation of committed environmentalists. who first saw the film in the 1950s, acknowledged the power its imagery had exerted in laying the emotional groundwork for their subsequent political engagement. In many ways then, *Bambi* could lay claim to being the most important of all Disney's films dealing with wild nature. Both the depth and range of the engagement with environmental ideas that it seems to have fostered go far beyond what might be expected from a sentimental animated children's feature. What is it, one might ask, in the film that accounts for this?

One answer to this question lies, I would suggest, in the way *Bambi* pushed to its limits the animated medium's capacity to incorporate elements of realism. The extent to which realism in *Bambi* may have challenged audiences' expectations of the form can be judged by the uncomfortable responses of a number of reviewers. Richard Schickel, for instance, in a biography of Walt Disney that was first published in 1968, quotes approvingly from a 1942 review in the New York Times: 'One cannot combine naturalism with cartoon fantasy … [It] throws into relief the failure of pen and brush to catch the fluent movement of real photography' (1986: 268). Schickel expresses his own aesthetic reservations about the form of *Bambi*, when he suggests that the 'deer [in *Bambi*] were rather too carefully naturalistic' (ibid.: 176). Moreover other critical responses to the film, deriving from a sense that it is 'carefully naturalistic', have not been limited to aesthetic judgments. The naturalistic style has opened the film up to much more stringent comparisons with 'real nature' than would be the case with most animations. Paradoxically, this has resulted in *Bambi* being criticized, especially in more recent, ecologically attuned

writing, for failing to be realistic enough and thus presenting a false image of the natural world. David Ingram, for instance, takes *Bambi* to task for being founded on a static, idealized image of the 'balance of nature' (2000: 18–20), whereas the reality of 'nature as understood by contemporary scientific ecology is chaotic and unstable' (ibid.: 19). Ingram goes on to quote approvingly Paul Schullery's critique of '*Bambi* for perpetuating outdated ideas on the role of fire in nature', a judgement which concludes with Schullery's dark warning that, in the wake of the 1990 release of *Bambi* in a video format, children will be inculcated in ecological lessons 'that were discarded by fire ecologists decades ago, and these lessons are not good enough in today's environmentally attuned world'(ibid.: 20). Ralph Lutts goes even further in his 1992 article. Whilst acknowledging that 'Bambi has become one of our most widespread and emotionally powerful national symbols of nature, one that motivates deep concern and dedicated action to promote wildlife', Lutts nevertheless roundly indicts the film as 'an empty symbol, because the concept of nature that (Disney's) fawn represents is impoverished'. Hence *Bambi* 'motivates but it does not educate. It may stimulate action but not understanding' (1992: 169).

Lutts's case against the film of *Bambi* is based on a detailed comparison with Felix Salten's book. The film version comes out as 'impoverished' in this comparison because, despite the artistic care that has been lavished on rendering a whole range of details naturalistically, key elements in the real natural world are seen through a seriously distorting lens. Alongside the (mis)representation of fire and the licence taken in making animal behaviour more amusing (such as the opossums sleeping hanging by their tails from branches), the most crucial changes Lutts detects in the Disney film relate to distortions in the deer's bodies (designed to make them cuter and more human) and the absence of predators we have noted earlier. The combined effect of these changes, it is argued, is to displace the philosophical depth of Salten's exploration of what nature means to humanity onto a more facile plane of anthropocentric identification and to offer false images of both animal behaviour and ecology.

In making the gap between the film's ability to move audiences and the false premises on which this engagement is based so clear, Lutts's assessment raises some extremely important questions. Are we right to judge dramatized, fictional narratives for children according to such rigorous criteria for verisimilitude? If a film 'motivates deep concern and dedicated action to promote wildlife' in its audience, does it matter if this response is founded on a sentimental and distorted image of the way the natural world functions? And, in making current scientific thought the standard to which fictional narratives should aspire, are we trying to subordinate the complex web of our emotional intelligence and sympathies to a one-dimensional grid of intellectual paradigms? The role of fantasy – and myth – in expressing the multifaceted loops and paradoxes of our connection to nature is, after all, deeply embedded in our collective, historical psyche and it is not clear what space is left for such a role if we adopt too naïve a standard of intellectual truth. These are complex questions to address and I will return to examine some of the implications for other aspects of Disney's work in later chapters. For the moment though, I would like to focus these questions in a narrower way in relation to *Bambi*, and to suggest that, though the information gathered in approaches such as Lutts's is extremely valuable, the conclusions that are drawn may need further scrutiny and qualification.

Consider, for instance, the death of Bambi's mother, an aspect of the film that nearly all viewers remember as particularly powerful and moving. It might be argued, indeed, that this is a key episode in securing an emotional impact for the film capable of generating 'deep concern and dedicated action' amongst viewers. But to what extent is the profound emotional impact of this scene based on false ideas of processes in the natural world? It is true, certainly, that the emotional impact of the episode is heightened and made more likely to more prompt viewers to want to protect an innocent nature by making man the only predator interested in killing deer. It is true also that our emotional identification with the deer is intensified by drawing them in ways that add or emphasize features that make them look like humans; enlarging the head and making the muzzle smaller so the deer can become more expressive, giving them enormous, appealing eyes and adding human attributes such as pupils and eyelashes. But there are other aspects to the way the scene is played out which, if they do not cancel its anthropocentric sentiment, certainly enlarge the perceptual field within which this is grounded.

The sequence begins, for instance, with Bambi and his mother eating the new spring grass that is emerging in patches through the snow in the open space of the meadow. This medium range shot, angled from somewhat above ground level so that we look down on the grazing animals, is distinctive and makes us keenly aware of their vulnerability in an environment characterized by wide open space. The effect is reinforced by cross cutting to close range shots of the adult deer raising her head repeatedly and apprehensively, as she scans the surrounding landscape for signs of possible danger. When, a few seconds later, the animals flee in alarm, the camera follows their flight at medium distance in a continuous tracking shot, the speed of movement enabling the eye to focus only on isolated features in the immediate environment that might impede the creatures' progress. Bambi's mother's death, of course, famously takes place off camera, while we continue to follow the young deer's flight to the safety of his thicket den in the heart of the forest. At this point, as Bambi begins to look back into the forest for his mother, the style of the drawings changes. Instead of the spare, uncluttered mode which was adopted in representing both the snow covered, open space and the deer's flight, the surroundings are now delineated in full sensuous detail again. The perceptual richness of our relationship to an intimately known, 'home' environment is poignantly restored just as the full impact of loss and change begins to be registered. Finally, the snow, which begins to fall heavily, blurs our perception of the surrounding environment in a mode that is analogous to eyes becoming watery with grief, but which retains a strange air of transforming purity in the moving white veil that covers everything.

My point, in analysing the detail of how this justly famous scene is rendered, is that our emotional involvement is not only engendered through perceiving what happens to the creatures with whom we identify. Our perception of the changing environments that define the animals' mode of being in the world is just as significant. Kay Milton has argued that, caught up as we are in a view of emotions as engendered by our social relationships, we tend to ignore the degree to which feelings can operate powerfully in the relationship between individual creatures and their environment (2002). This neglected dimension of our emotional intelligence may be an important aspect of environmental politics and certainly promotes

insights that are far from simple. In the scene in which Bambi's mother dies, we are aware throughout of how the animals' attention is directed towards the world around them and how this, in turn, shapes our empathetic engagement. At each stage it is the animals' gaze – the way they are configured as taking in their surroundings – that directs us. The apprehensive, surveying gaze of the grazing deer gives way to focused awareness solely of features to be navigated around in the flight path; thence to taking in the comforting detail of a familiar environment experienced in safety; and, finally, to the transformed world, dimly glimpsed through grief, for which the falling snow provides a compelling visual metaphor. What we learn from this film experience is surely not as straightforward as a set of distorted paradigms of the way the natural world around us operates, nor does it work simply as a displacement of human loss onto animal forms. The animal figures are also teaching children how to look at significant detail in the world around them and to integrate these perceptions within their whole emotional response. It is this, just as much as the special weight that we give to a child's loss of its mother, that has enabled *Bambi* to influence viewers in unusually profound ways and to motivate long-term engagement with wider environmental agendas. The 'facts' may be distorted but the process of engagement and the sensitivity to nature that the film encourages have a capacity to connect with viewers in more fundamental ways.

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Chapter 4

Wilderness and Power: Conflicts and Contested Values from *Pocahontas* to *Brother Bear*

> 'Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is!'
>
> Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*

After *Bambi*, Walt Disney did not return to the potent theme of the American wilderness in his animated features during his lifetime. In the late 1940s and 1950s the Disney Company invested very substantial resources in making natural history films, of which *The Living Desert* (1953) is probably the most famous example. Jonathan Burt claims that these nature films 'gave the company a new lease of commercial life' (2002: 150) during a period when financial viability was often precarious. The success of this genre, both financially and critically, probably led Disney towards exploring wild nature primarily in the documentary and live action formats after his initial foray with *Bambi*. Apart from largely symbolic elements in the fairy tales, Disney used predominantly domestic creatures and settings for his animated features (*Aristocats*, *101 Dalmations*, *Lady and the Tramp*, for example) up until his last major film *The Jungle Book* (1967).

The period after Disney's death in 1966 was a major watershed in terms of changing public perceptions and environmental consciousness, however. Rachel Carson's immensely influential book, *Silent Spring*, was first published in 1962. Carson presented an eloquent and far reaching case for intensive farming and industrial waste products having poisoned the environment, threatening many forms of wildlife with extinction and creating irreversible changes in the biosphere which would eventually impact on humans directly. This was the story of nature as environmental catastrophe, a story which has now become so embedded in our consciousness that it could well be seen not only as a 'grand narrative', linking diverse concerns and activities across the globe, but even perhaps as the 'master narrative' of the twenty-first century. From the late 1960s the narrative of environmental catastrophe, which had been embraced by counter-cultural movements in the United States and Europe, began to underpin a number of new initiatives that would have a fundamental impact on public awareness of the natural world. Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace were both set up in 1969, the year before 'Earth Day' on 22 April 1970, when '300,000 people across the US took part in what has been described as "the largest environmental demonstration in history"' (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 46). In 1972 the 'influential *Limits to Growth* report … suggested that aspirations of exponential growth lay at the heart of the environmental crisis, predicting severe food shortages, famine and resource depletion by the end of the century' (ibid.).

The Disney Corporation did not initially respond to changing public perceptions of the natural world in the products they marketed to feed children's imaginations. Indeed, one could argue that the inherent conservatism driving company policy in the wake of Walt Disney's death tended to stifle creativity in its contributions to the film industry generally. Few really notable animated features were made between 1967 and the late 1980s, the films of this period tending to draw even more markedly than before on a deeply nostalgic image of childhood, seemingly impervious to the challenging social agendas that were being developed around race, gender and environmental politics. Of the animated features from this period only *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) deals in any sustained way with ideas and attitudes towards wild nature. Although *The Fox and the Hound* represents the forest areas surrounding the rural homesteads of its setting in ways that bear some superficial resemblance to *Bambi*, however, the film shows much more affinity with the narratives of domesticated animals that had become Disney's mainstay in the intervening years. The fox hero of this movie is really a dog in all but name and colouring. The film does not explore the nature of wild instincts within creatures that can be trained for human use and company with any seriousness (in the way that Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *Wild Fang*, for instance, had done), while observations of natural history are much sparser and more peripheral than in *Bambi*. Ralph Lutts has argued that a conflict between 'wishing to turn wild animals into cute pets and the desire to ensure their survival as autonomous beings in the wild pervades American society' (1998: 15). During the 1970s and 1980s Disney was opting decisively for the 'cute pets' side of this pendulum.

By the 1990s however, the situation had changed. At the end of the 1980s, amid a fanfare of publicity, two environmental pressure groups were created in Hollywood, drawing in support from a number of film luminaries. One of the foremost of these was Michael Eisner, who became Disney's chief executive and who co-founded the Environmental Media Association. The EMA tried to promote more environmentally friendly practices in the Hollywood film industry but also aimed to influence the content of film and television productions, encouraging environmental issues to be explored and promoted more intensively (Ingram 2000: 20–21). As David Ingram notes, the EMA credited itself 'with an increase in references to environmental issues in films and television shows, both as incidental dialogue and as whole storylines. The organization provides an environmental research and fact-checking facility, as well as consultation on story ideas' (ibid.). This initiative was clearly influential in relation to the themes and focus of a number of Disney films from the last decade of the century, most notably, from the point of view of this study, *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Tarzan* (1999) and *Dinosaur* (2000). Having tied his colours so firmly to the environmentalist mast, both Eisner and the Disney Corporation, perhaps unwittingly, invited an intensified level of (largely critical) scrutiny from activists and academics. But the, mostly negative, assessments of how well Disney's practice matches its environmental aspirations do not necessarily mean that the impact of the films on audiences has been wholly detrimental. The focus which a number of important films offer on key environmental issues and, above all, their potential to engage and move young audiences need to be analyzed carefully to assess the impact of contradictory effects and meanings.

The position of the audience itself had also changed substantially, of course, in the half century that elapsed between *Bambi*'s release and the production of more environmentally aware animated features in the 1990s. The 1940s was precisely the time when the population of the United States changed from being predominantly rural to being based mainly in cities. Walt Disney's own life path, from his childhood on a farm in the Midwest to an adult life spent working in one of the great metropolitan centres of the West Coast, was symptomatic of a larger social pattern of migration to the cities that left only around ten per cent of Americans in rural environments by the end of the century. Disney's films had always traded on the effects of this social experience, evoking a sense of a lost world of rural and small-town American values that resonated strongly for many within his audiences, the majority of whom had lost their actual connection to the countryside only in the last generation or two.

By the 1990s farming practices had changed the countryside itself in profound ways too, as the drive towards intensive mono-culture production of plants and livestock, fuelled in large part by the agrochemical industry, altered rural communities and the very look of the environment. Hence, by the time *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas* were being produced, the meaning of both wilderness and countryside were profoundly altered, no longer available as actual experience within the knowable timescale of the preceding generation and seen only in mediated forms on film and television or from the windows of cars on highways. When Disney's animated features finally re-engaged with wild nature then, they did so not with a carefully constructed nostalgia that evoked elements of personal experience still alive in both Walt Disney himself and many of his audience, but from still powerful but more distanced perspectives. The wilderness had become the stuff of legend and myth, of a founding history from the deep past rather than natural history still nostalgically available in the present.

The internal dynamics and contradictions of *Pocahontas*, in particular, need to be seen at least partly from this viewpoint. In *Pocahontas* the wilderness is seen afresh, in some quite powerful ways, from the perspective of both the colonists who were founders of the modern American nation and of the Indians who were its earliest inhabitants. In going back to this point of origin, the Disney film is able to explore that reverence for untouched wild nature which *Bambi* evoked, but did not attempt to explain. But the film is also, and perhaps more crucially, keen to delineate a version of the history of human interactions with the land that, as we have seen, were rendered invisible in *Bambi*. If *Pocahontas*, in the process, raises as many questions as it answers, then perhaps, given that it is produced by the largest multi-national entertainment corporation in the world for an audience whose relationship to its own land and history is especially complex, we should not be too surprised. In contrast to most of Disney's middle period features, the film's images engage with a vitally important topic with a cogency and imaginative force that make it worthy of serious debate.

Pocahontas tells the story of an expedition from London, sponsored by the Virginia Company, to found a colony in the New World. The expedition, which received a royal charter and instructions from King James I of England, was conceived as part of a strategy to contain and challenge the supremacy of the Spanish in the southern parts of North America at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Disney film takes a particular angle on this story, centring on a developing relationship between John Smith (a sailor of yeoman stock who, remarkably, went

on to lead the colonists for a brief but important period) and Pocahontas, a daughter of Powhatan, the Algonquin chief who led a loose confederacy of Indian tribes from the coastal plains area of Virginia. Although these historical figures undoubtedly existed and there was an important relationship between them, Disney's invention of a romantic liaison extends and greatly elaborates a nineteenth-century addition to the Pocahontas legend (Tilton, 1994). The real Pocahontas married another colonist, John Rolfe, only after she had been abducted by the English and kept prisoner for a prolonged period to put political pressure on her father (Woodward, 1969).

The freedom with which historical roles of the key players are handled in the Disney film, however, does not obscure the symbolic importance that the Pocahontas figure derives from crossing the boundaries between two conflicting cultures. In a sense, the romance between Pocahontas and Smith in Disney's film, which has been heavily criticized as a sentimental departure from historical veracity, serves to articulate fundamental issues inherent within the heroine's symbolic role of mediator. Other versions of the story from different historical periods have inflected Pocahontas's potent symbolism to serve changing ideological needs in similar ways (Tilton, 1994). In this respect, the key event that imbues the story of clashing cultures with such imaginative range and flexibility is undoubtedly Pocahontas saving John Smith's life. Pocahontas is reported to have thrown herself over Smith's body as he was about to be executed by her father, persuading Powhatan through this remarkable, dramatic gesture to spare Smith and seek reconciliation with the colonists. The incident is recalled in John Smith's memoirs and, though some historians doubt its veracity (Rountree, 1989: 121), it is a central element in all the major retellings of the story and is retained as the dramatic climax of the Disney film. Pocahontas's acting from the heart to deflect the violence at the centre of cultural conflict suggests both that individuals can break with the assumptions of their social conditioning and that differences separating social groups can, ultimately, be overcome. Both these notions inform the fundamental ideologies shaping America's distinctive consciousness of itself. No wonder then, that the Pocahontas story has been described as one of the key founding narratives of the American nation (ibid.).

The form of this narrative within the Disney film remains highly distinctive, however. Conflicting ideas about the natural world are given central imaginative significance within the drama and are configured, characteristically, as Manichean opposites. The benign aspects of this opposition are represented almost entirely through the Indian community, whose farming practices, attitude towards the earth and its life forms, and feeling of integration within the dynamic web of nature are seen as wholly admirable. These attitudes are summarized in the soaring lyrics of the keynote song 'Colors of the Wind', which Pocahontas, stung by John Smith's patronizing assumption of cultural superiority, sings in a confident and challenging assertion of her people's fundamental values.

> The rainstorm and the river are my brothers
> The heron and the otter are my friends
> And we are all connected to each other
> In a circle, in a hoop, that never ends

The English colonists' assumptions about the land they are encountering are set off in stark contrast to this holistic life philosophy. Although the principal English protagonists, John Smith and the Governor Ratcliffe, differ in terms of the degree to which they are driven by materialistic goals, both share an unquestioning assumption of their right to possess the land they see before them. For Smith this possession is expressed as a quest for adventure, the land seen as a territory within which masculine will and desire can achieve its ultimate test and sanction. 'This land is all I've ever dreamed of', he says, as he leaps vigorously around its peaks and contours, his physical energy betokening mastery in a similar form to John Donne's expansively ebullient image of exploring his mistress's body in the line 'O my America, my new-found-land!'

Ratcliffe's attitude towards the land is a cruder and more direct expression of imperialist designs; driven by competition with other colonizers for the glittering prizes that will bestow status and wealth, he seeks simply to ravage the earth for its immediately realizable resources and is obsessed by the notion of replicating the Spanish discovery of gold. For both Smith and Ratcliffe, the indigenous people, conceived as 'savages', are seen as obstacles to be overcome or eliminated in their respective quests for different kinds of mastery. Smith is differentiated through his ability to respond to Pocahontas's tutelage in alternative values, increasingly distancing himself from the colonial urge towards mastery as the film progresses. But *Pocahontas* as a whole would seem to offer an extremely clear and forceful indictment of imperialism, centring its critique on a decisive assessment of the environmental philosophies of the principal social groups involved.

In making explicit the conflict of values over how the earth is perceived and used, it might be assumed that *Pocahontas* is removing the mystique (expressed so evocatively in *Bambi*) surrounding the innocence of virgin nature. In fact, however, that mystique is merely repositioned, albeit in some quite complex ways. Innocent nature now comes to include the culture of the Native Americans, and especially the values of its chieftain's virgin daughter, while the fate of the land, caught up in the trammels of human history, comes to be perceived, in a mode familiar within romantic melodrama, as conjoined to the fate of the romantic heroine. Pocahontas's decision not to go off with John Smith at the end of the film, it is implied, springs from her deep-rooted commitment to her own people and to the land of which they are a part. It was the dramatization of these sentiments, no doubt, combined with the film's critique of colonial ideologies, that led American Indian movement activist Russell Means (who speaks the part of Powhatan in the movie) to declare *Pocahontas* to be 'the single finest work ever done on American Indians by Hollywood', by virtue of its being 'willing to tell the truth' (Strong, 1998: 197). But what is seen in *Pocahontas* is not quite as straightforward as the 'truth' of how the land was taken over, nor even the 'truth' of the alternative values of the American Indians which, until recently had been marginalized, distorted beyond recognition, or forgotten. The revisionist history that is dramatized in *Pocahontas* may be welcomed as refreshing and vivid, but in some ways it is just as selective as the representation of virgin nature in *Bambi*.

Animated feature films are not intended to be scholarly histories and some aspects of the selection that takes place in such dramatizations are perhaps interesting, rather than of critical importance. A number of analyses of *Pocahontas*, for instance, have

rounded on the producers for turning history into sentimental romance (Byrne and McQuillan, 1999; Giroux, 1999; Ingram, 2000). Reviews of this sort have tended to underestimate the emotive power of the critique of colonialist values that is embedded in the narrative form of the romance however and, as we shall see later, fail to acknowledge the way melodrama can operate within popular culture to shape audiences' responses to social processes in thoughtful as well as impassioned ways (Williams, 1998). The form in which Indian culture is idealized in the film seems to me, particularly from the thematic viewpoint of this book, to be more problematic than the movie's distortions of history in the direction of romantic melodrama. Some aspects of this historical distortion should perhaps best be seen as dictated by the need for strong, clear forms rather than strict accuracy in configuring the contest over values. Hence realistic aspects of Powhatan Indian culture with which contemporary Western audiences might find it hard to empathize – the public execution of warriors captured from other tribes that was accompanied by ritualized torture and the excruciatingly slow amputation of each of their limbs successively, for instance – are tactfully omitted.

In this respect, it is remarkable to note how quickly, in general, inconvenient facts tend to get lost from view as new paradigms for interpreting history emerge. Forty years ago Grace Woodward was still confident in praising the historical Pocahontas forthrightly for showing 'an extraordinary ability to move from a culture grounded in sacrifice and superstition into a culture that was by contrast enlightened and sophisticated' (1969: 159). Clearly she did not feel compelled, in shaping this judgement, to attach any moral weight to King James's 'enlightened and sophisticated' burning of Catholics and ritual disembowelling of his enemies. Only thirty years later, Pauline Taylor Strong clearly felt equally confident in making a quite opposite judgement of cultural difference. In her analysis of Disney's *Pocahontas* she argues that the aggressive ideology driving the English colonists should be distinguished from 'Algonquian attitudes towards their own enemies' (1998: 202). The Algonquian Indians, she concludes, 'generally aimed to politically subordinate and socially incorporate, rather than exterminate and dispossess'.

Strong bases her conclusions on a rather selective reading of the excellent studies of Algonquian and Powhatan cultures by Helen Rountree (1989, 1990). Leaving aside the fact that Chief Powhatan had precisely 'exterminated' the whole of the Chesapeake tribe shortly prior to the English colonists' arrival (which was, in fairness, uncharacteristic of Algonquian war protocol), the phrase 'politically subordinate and socially incorporate' implies predominantly non-violent resolution to inter-tribal conflict. Yet, as Rountree makes abundantly clear, 'political subordination' was ensured by killing off the entire male warrior sector of defeated tribes, either in battle or, as described earlier, through torturing survivors to death. The 'social incorporation' into the dominant tribe of the women and children who remained might well be seen as morally superior to the mixture of social exclusion, economic discrimination and periodic genocide that were the main forms through which Europeans secured dominance. But, ultimately, it does no favours to marginalized ethnic groups to repackage their historical identity with euphemistic phrases congenial to Western sensibilities that are currently dominant. The Algonquians were an extraordinarily tough minded people, whose male culture included the expectation of taking on,

and inflicting, the most extreme physical suffering stoically and without complaint. To sidestep or ignore this aspect of their culture is to fail to engage with otherness and difference in any real way. The tendency is then for an idealization of 'difference', selectively filtered to produce an image of ecological and social harmony, simply to be substituted for 'difference' construed pejoratively as 'savagery'.

This issue is especially relevant to the way ideas of nature are deployed in Disney's film. Just as the violence that was a central component of Powhatan culture is reconstituted to fit contemporary Western ideals, so too the imagery of an environmentally attuned Indian culture in the film is carefully airbrushed so as to conflict with market orientated contemporary values only in the most limited ways. At first sight this claim might seem to be perverse. After all, images of the pursuit of gold for the European market and the ecological crassness that accompanies this goal are absolutely central to the film's moral stance. Closer analysis reveals how many of the ecologically attuned images of Indians, supposedly in opposition to the crude economic drive of the colonists, are actually accommodated in more subtle ways to contemporary market orientated sensibilities however.

This accommodation takes two major forms. First there is an elimination of all overt signs of market practices from the images that are presented of Indian culture. Virginia may have looked like a natural paradise initially to the Europeans, but in some respects the Powhatans lived in an environment that provided a somewhat impoverished material base for their culture, especially in terms of the tools available to them for cultivation. Before European iron began to become available through limited contact with white settlers in the late sixteenth century, the Powhatans were essentially 'a stone age people faced, in many areas, with a shortage of stone' (Rountree, 1990: 7). Whatever else the Powhatans thought and felt about the invading strangers then, they certainly perceived them as a source of supply for materials and tools, which they valued and were arguably extremely useful to them. They were keen to trade with the Europeans for all kinds of 'metal goods, guns, ammunition and textiles' (Krech, 1999: 186) and showed themselves to be experienced bargainers who could strike a shrewd deal. No doubt it was partly because of this that the Powhatans were often willing to supply the emergent colony with food in the early years of its existence, and indeed without this support from the Indians the colony would almost certainly not have survived. But perhaps the most important commodity that was offered in exchange for European goods in this phase was deerskin. The status of Powhatan men in their own community was as dependent on their skills as deer hunters as it was on their bravery as warriors and, after essential food, deerskins were the trading item most sought by the early Europeans. Following in the tradition of *Bambi* however, in *Pocahontas* it is only the white man John Smith who is shown raising his gun to try to kill a wild mammal. The Powhatans are presented solely as a fishing/farming community and it is Pocahontas who prevents Smith from firing at the larger animal he has in his sights.

These points of historical deviation may seem relatively trivial in comparison with the film's larger moral and political agendas, but their combined effect is not only to enhance the idealized image of the Indians as non-predatory, near vegetarians but also to imply that no market forces operate in the innocent world of nature that the Indians inhabit. This obviously increases the moral force of the contrast with the

Europeans' drive to acquire the specialized commodity gold, but it also serves to obscure the more normal operation of the market in fundamental items such as food, clothing, building and farming materials. Hence the film's 'critique' of colonialist, or even early capitalist, values falls on the fairly soft target of excessive desire for the fetishized (and practically useless) commodity gold; the critique is thus limited and effectively blind to the cultural consequences of exchange and market forces in their broader, more everyday contexts.

This omission is made more significant through its conjunction with images of the Powhatan Indians' supposedly pure, ecologically attuned way of life, since these images are subtly adapted to modern, commodity-based cultural expectations. Take, for example, the representation of the Powhatan Indian farming practices. Although the opening song refers accurately to the farming of maize, beans and squash, the main crop we actually see growing in *Pocahontas* is maize. The maize is seen growing in fields, where its luxuriant growth and fertile yields seem to accord with the notion of a natural, unspoilt, earthly paradise. More surprisingly though, given that earthly paradises are generally imagined as offering variety as well as profusion, the crop seems to exist entirely as a monoculture. No weeds, variants, weaker plants or other crops are in sight as deep green swathes of the ten-foot-high, regularly spaced maize are seen towering above the human participants at key moments in the film. This, in other words, is exactly what we might expect to see in a field grown for contemporary food commodity markets with the assistance of artificial watering, herbicides, insecticides and synthetic fertilizer.

In fact, the Powhatans' farming practices were not ecologically unsound, but neither were they especially productive. They cleared land through traditional slash and burn techniques, planted a mixture of crops (maize, beans, squash) together and used no fertilizer. They used no ploughs either and left tree stumps in the ground, a technique described as 'dig-stick' horticulture (Rountree, 1990: 5). When yields lessened after a few years, as the soil began to be exhausted, they left the 'field' to return to its natural state and cleared more land. This was a sustainable agriculture for a relatively small population, but it required large swathes of land at any one time not to be used for crops.

The ecological sensitivity of the Powhatans is signified in the film through their relationships with animals as well as plants and the earth. But here too the emotional connection is conveyed more through the rhetoric of the songs than through images of what is actually enacted in the environment. *Pocahontas* follows the formula, set up in early Disney classics such as *Bambi* and *Snow White*, of counterpointing more serious action involving the main protagonists with comic sideshows involving smaller creatures. The racoon and hummingbird which are Pocahontas's permanent companions in the film serve a similar function to Bambi's friends Thumper the rabbit and Flower the skunk. But *Pocahontas* does not demonstrate the same care in representing a range of creatures whose lives are configured as partly independent from the principal characters. When the keynote song poses the question 'How high does the sycamore grow?/ If you cut it down you'll never know', the camera rakes upwards to the topmost branches of a tree whose species is hard to determine, but which is certainly more pine than sycamore. No attempt is made to shade images of animals in with elements of natural history that would gesture towards their

autonomous existence. The heron and the otter may be signalled representatively in the song as Pocahontas's 'friends', but (in contrast to Snow White) the Indian princess's movements and gaze do not suggest any active interest in them. The otters function like fashion accessories, designed to set off and complement the grace and sleekness of the romantic heroine's own body, while the eagles, whose eyes reflect Pocahontas and Smith in a striking image signifying the interconnectedness of all life, fly off their upraised arms as though the couple were a pair of feudal falconers.

Everywhere in *Pocahontas* there is a gap between words and the images that are designed to embody them. The words betoken respect for an animistic, spiritually alive, natural world that elicits wonder and is, often literally, enchanted. The images translate this gestalt into forms that contemporary commodity culture has appropriated for selling things. The 'Colors of the Wind' song lyrics, for instance, contain a well crafted, almost Buddhist, paradox that urges us to 'discover things you never knew you never knew'. We are invited to 'walk the footsteps of a stranger', as a way of understanding, of moving towards a different kind of knowledge and empathy. The visual imagery translates this into a set of bear footprints that the camera follows till it reveals a snarling animal that Smith instinctively tries to shoot. The 'discovery', that Pocahontas leads Smith towards, is revealed in following the footsteps, beyond the aggressive standoff with the bear, to a cave in which young cubs are being reared. Smith, apparently, has blocked himself off from the realization that bears can be mothers too.

As a brief, exemplary nugget of experience for young minds to chew upon this is not altogether unpromising. Arne Naess has reminded us how fundamental the capacity for empathy with other life forms is in structuring our relationships with the natural world, and this empathy is likely to be generated most strongly through fresh perception of the universals of birth, suffering and death that are a common thread binding all forms of mortal being together (Naess, 1989). But Disney cannot resist turning this ordinary, yet potentially profound, emblematic connection into an experience more closely related to the cuddly toys that are mass marketed for children. Pocahontas completes her re-education of Smith by picking up the bear cub and cuddling its cute, furry form; her action encourages us to disregard completely the mother bear's natural instinct – and almost certainly murderous response – in defending its offspring, even from ecologically sensitive Indians. The film's editing encourages us to be oblivious to the nature of the bear's interests and response by constructing the shot of the couple playing with the cub as a close up, leaving the mother bear's response unimagined and out of the frame. What kind of 'respect' for nature is being taught here?

The transformation of wild animals into the equivalent of pets and accessories is sanctioned in *Pocahontas* by the supposedly Indian notion of an enchanted, animistic world within which all life forms are connected. Presumably Pocahontas can pick up the bear cub because she is 'at one' with nature in this enchanted sense. But the forms that this 'enchantment' takes are also adapted for a commodity culture in ways that can be subtly distinguished from the early period Disney classics. The dominant visual cue for the experience of enchanted nature, for instance, is colour. When the colonists catch their first glimpse of the Virginia's richly forested landscape, it is not only misty but also tinted blue, signifying its difference from their expectations. This blue tint is intensified in the film whenever the theme of enchantment underlying

natural life forces in the environment needs to be emphasized. Hence the blue is strongest in the space under Grandmother Willow, the talking tree who acts as spiritual adviser to Pocahontas and with whom she communes regularly. This signifier of unusual beauty and strangeness in the environment is complemented by the iconography of wind in the film. The wind is established as a key metaphor for Pocahontas's essential mode of being, associated with freedom, fluidity of movement and change. It is also the force which guides Pocahontas in her moments of indecision, a transformative, natural energy which clarifies and deepens her understanding. The film signals such moments of connection with a transcendental force in nature that shapes destiny through the onset of mysterious sounding music and through swirling eddies in the wind, seen as distinctive patterns of leaves that are swept up in circles. But it is the colours, as much as the patterns, that make these swirling leaves distinctive, for the palette extends beyond what nature offers (even in the glory of a New England autumn) to include a rather striking pink. This 'unnatural' pink serves a double purpose within the film's semiotics. On the one hand, as with the blue tint, it is a de-familiarizing device connoting enchantment. But it links also to the idea of girlhood and adolescent femininity within popular culture, from 'My Little Pony' through to young women's clothing and accessories. Disney used bright, garish and 'unnatural' shades within its colour repertoire from the earliest period of its animated features as part of a popular, modernist aesthetic. But, apart from the gaudy, experimental kitsch of the 'Pastoral Symphony' sequence from *Fantasia*, these tended to conform more closely to natural colours in films, such as *Bambi* and *Snow White*, where sympathy with the natural world was a key theme. In *Pocahontas*, on the other hand, a more discordant note is sounded by having the exhortation to 'sing with all the voices of the mountain' and 'paint with all the colours of the wind' emblematized through sexy, pink leaves. Clearly we have moved beyond sympathy with the natural world in any simple sense here.

A clue as to where we have moved is provided by the form of Pocahontas herself, the figure who, above all others, is supposed to embody the ideal of sympathy with nature. During the 'Colors of the Wind' sequence there are moments when Pocahontas's normally beige, deerskin, off-the-shoulder dress appears to have been tinged by the more exciting pinks that are shot through the landscape of her exhortatory song. And this is understandable, because Pocahontas is, in reality not one but two iconic modes of being. She is both a child of nature, 'a 'free spirit' who embodies the joys of belonging to an enchanted and uncommodified world' (Strong, 1998: 196); and she is a fashion icon, created from images of the exotic creatures who stalk the catwalks, a supermodel designed for the film to compete for the audience's attention on a stage crowded with international media stars and celebrities.

Pocahontas's body has, indeed, generated more opprobrium from commentators than almost any other aspect of the film. Glen Keane, who supervised the animation, claims he was instructed to 'make her the finest creature the human race has to offer' (Ward, 2002: 36), while Paul Rudnick, rather salivatingly, described her as a 'Rodeo Drive stunner in a fringed, one-shoulder minidress, with a micro-waist and an infomercial-ready mane' (ibid.). The prototype for her body is reputed to have been supermodel Christie Turlington and the blending of her image with white ethnic

ideals is completed by a skin tone significantly lighter than that of most of the rest of her tribe. Disney often provides sexy outfits and bodies for its pubescent heroines, of course, but here the link to the glamorous consumer world of high fashion is more flagrant and specific than in previous incarnations. Moreover the glamour mode clashes directly with the film's ostensible values.

The ultimate effect of pushing Pocahontas's image so determinedly in this direction is hard to assess. Is this an example of what Baudrillard and other post-modern theorists have described as the dissolution of boundaries between what is perceived as 'natural' and 'produced' in the modern world, so that 'nature', as an inherently separate source of meaning, no longer exists? Or has Disney's drive to maintain its commercial dominance within a global entertainment market pushed it towards overkill, creating ever more seductively market-orientated versions of the images it has always traded in, even when these contradict the film's founding ethos? The effect then might be to create an unintended, ironic gap between the twinned images of supermodel and child of nature that the film purveys, a gap that would encourage a frankly sceptical response from resistant readers, even as the appeal of glamour holds others in thrall. In either case though, *Pocahontas* is unlikely to have an emotional impact that would lead viewers to become engaged at a deeper level, and want to take action later in life, as *Bambi* is purported to have done. Its contradictions – at least in terms of its ecological agendas – are fundamentally disabling.

Pocahontas did relatively well at the box office (it was the tenth most successful animated feature of all time according to statistics gathered in 2000) (ibid.: 114). But we need to know more about how viewers other than professional critics respond to the film to be clearer about its effects. Meanwhile, as David Ingram has pointed out, the image of this supermodel purveyor of deep ecological messages has been replicated remorselessly on mass-produced pyjamas, made by Haitian workers who are paid wages they can barely live on (2000: 53). There remains something deeply depressing about a film idealizing the philosophy and history of one marginalized ethnic group, albeit in a flawed way, whose spin-off products involve the thoroughgoing exploitation of another.

Animated features obviously do not have either ideological purity (if such a thing exists) or historical accuracy as over-riding goals. But some recent films outside the Disney stable indicate that it is possible to create popular sentimental narratives that are exciting and engaging, yet avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls of *Pocahontas*. In this respect, a comparison of the DreamWorks production, *Spirit*, with *Pocahontas* is particularly illuminating. *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) has a relatively simple plot structure. It tells the story of a wild mustang horse, who is captured and taken away from his home on the mid-nineteenth-century western prairies and who tries, eventually successfully, to return. Like *Pocahontas* though, it establishes many of its key values and emotional charge through contrasting the attitudes of Native Americans and white settlers towards nature. As in *Pocahontas* too, the narrative is shaped around a defining moment in American history; in this case, the period around 1867 when there was intense competitive pressure to push the railroad system through the western plains area, so that the frontier region beyond could be developed. Just as *Pocahontas* deals with a founding narrative in terms of the identity of the nation, so *Spirit* explores critical elements in the myth

of 'Frontier', which has played such a central role in defining aspirations and goals throughout American history. But if the historical moment has been moved on a stage in *Spirit*, then so too has the range of strategies that is deployed in depicting human relationships with the natural world.

Before considering these in more detail though, it is important to recognize how important the idea of 'Frontier' has been within American consciousness. Richard Slotkin explains this with particular eloquence and succinctness:

> The Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. According to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and "progressive" civilization. The original ideological task of the Myth was to explain and justify the establishment of the American colonies; but as the colonies expanded and developed, the Myth was called on to account for our rapid economic growth, our emergence as a powerful nation-state, and our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization. (1998: 10)

If the setting of *Spirit* is a particular phase and space in the development of the Frontier, then the most potent, underlying theme that the film works on is precisely what Slotkin calls 'the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization'.

The life of the protagonist stallion, while in enforced exile from its homeland prairies, is split into three main episodes in the film. During the first phase, Spirit is taken to a US army fort to be 'broken' for use by the cavalry. In the second phase the horse escapes from the fort with an Indian who has also been taken prisoner and begins a new life among other Indian horses in one of the settlements of the Lakota tribe, who were a branch of the larger Sioux nation. In a final stage, after his release from the Indian camp, the stallion is recaptured by a gang working for the railroad company and set to work hauling trains over a mountain pass that cannot yet be laid with rails.

No overt attempt is made to explain that these episodes may have an underlying connection in the film – this is a 'horse's eye' view and the narrative develops in picaresque fashion – but in fact they are all powerfully linked to the 'disruptive processes of modernisation'. One of the main roles of the US cavalry in this region was to protect the railroad companies' building programme from attack by Indians who feared – rightly – that this would have catastrophic consequences for their communities and way of life. The Indians, like the wild horses, were dependent on the expanses of the prairies remaining open, amenable to migration and to the needs of the grazing herds of wildlife. Within a few short years of the first railroad through the region being completed in 1867, the plains would be split again and again into discrete areas by a succession of competing railroads. White hunters would flood in on the new transport systems from the east. By 1883 they had virtually exterminated the buffalo herds from the entire plains region. As Shepard Krech III explains vividly; 'Hunters flooded in; unskilled they wasted three to five times the number they killed. The carnage defied description: four to five million killed in three years alone' (1999: 141). Since Plains Indian culture was built around the buffalo, which

tribes depended on for food, tepee building and clothing, the effect was devastating. In a poignant comment on the last phases of the buffaloes' slaughter, Krech notes how the Indians, 'confined to reservations and distressed from hunger', were driven to compete with white hunters and take part in the killing themselves 'until the bitter end' (ibid.). The feelings they were left with when the last buffalo had been slaughtered can barely be imagined.

Although the feeling that something of vital importance has been lost from the deep past is central to *Spirit* however, the film works by leaving gaps within which connections and understanding of historical process can be made, rather than trying to explain. In this respect it is a much less didactic film than *Pocahontas*, leaving the viewer with more space and imaginative work to do. This effect is facilitated by centring the story on an animal representing 'wild nature' rather than on a human embodying sympathy with wild nature. In this way the history can be represented elliptically, in nuanced and relatively open forms, whilst the emotional centre of the narrative takes its bearings more fundamentally from the natural world. *Spirit*, indeed, takes the narrative strategy deployed so effectively in *Bambi* even further in this respect. Like *Bambi*, this is the story of a wild animal seen from the animal's point of view. But *Spirit* does not rely so directly on the anthropomorphic device of the animal speaking. The horses in *Spirit* express themselves by making animal noises and gestures, while the storyline is developed through a few linking voice-overs that deliver the equine protagonist's framing reflections on what has happened in a retrospective mode.

Competing ideas about human relationships with the natural world are left largely implicit within *Spirit*, rather than being spelled out in keynote songs. Different values are shown largely through contrasts between the way the Lakota Indians are shown relating to the horse, and its treatment under the regime of the cavalry commander and later the overseers of the railroad construction. The railroad workers treat their horses in a purely utilitarian way, as instruments to be used in order to get a job done as quickly as possible. The cavalry commander takes a more particular, personalized interest in the wild horse, but this interest is characterized by egotism, the challenge the horse offers to the commander's professional pride, and his desire for mastery. Hence the cavalry commander's attempt to break the horse in is accompanied by a particularly brutal regime of starvation and water deprivation over a three-day period, designed to weaken the animal and break its spirit. The Indians' treatment of the horse, by contrast, is kinder, based on empathy and identification with the creature. The portrait no doubt contains elements of idealization of historical Indian practice in the same way as *Pocahontas.* Chief Buffalo Child stated that, within his tribe's traditions, being gentle too early was recognized as an ineffective way of handling horses: 'a wild horse … will not react to quiet kindliness at first. He must be treated gruffly – but not harshly – and then when he is on a touching acquaintance with man, kindness is the quickest way to win his affections' (Roe, 1955: 265). Spirit's Indian captor-cum-comrade shows no signs of being anything other than kindly, and never attempts the commonest Indian form of horse-breaking, which was to mount the animal as it was held between two other horses in a river or area of boggy ground, where its efforts to lose its rider would quickly result in exhaustion. However, at least one area of difference between Plains Indian and European horse husbandry represented in the film is both crucial and realistic. Indian horses, once they had

accepted humans, roamed free; they were generally neither tethered nor fenced. The plains Indians were astonishingly skilful riders who relied primarily on sympathy and mutuality between human and animal during the often arduous routines of training. As Frank Roe notes, there 'can be no parallel between the accomplishments of an animal living in more than partial freedom, which it could regain *in toto* almost at will, and the … performances of the hapless victims of fear and the lash' (ibid.). In this respect particularly, the horse is an apt and powerful figure for exploring ideas of freedom in terms of human relations with the natural world.

If *Spirit* is in many respects more successful than *Pocahontas* in dramatizing and exploring ideas about the natural world however, its handling of the historical dimensions of these ideas is still not unproblematic. Like *Pocahontas*, *Spirit* allows itself some licence in incorporating the factual underpinning of its storyline. The wild horse, for instance, is represented from the start of the film as synonymous with the natural, unspoiled life of the prairie region before human intervention. As in *Bambi*, thousands of years of interaction between Indians and the animal protagonists' environment is occluded by invoking this mythic ideal of a natural world wholly separate from human beings. The horse, moreover, is a peculiarly inapt symbol for untouched nature in this context. Horses had not existed in North America for thousands of years before the Europeans came and these 'natural' inhabitants of the plains environment were almost certainly very recent descendants of imported Spanish animals that had either escaped or been released in the early sixteenth century (ibid.). This inaccuracy is perhaps less important in itself than for its contribution to a fundamental contradiction within the structure of feeling of the film as a whole, however. Seen in its historical role, the horse is not a symbol of a pure, natural past; rather it is a symptom, or facet, of the very forces of conquest, modernization and change that the film portrays as threatening both the wilderness and the qualities of freedom that the idea of wilderness represents. Hence the elegiac mood that frames the film's central narrative feels uneasy, even though it may be provocative of thought. Since the elegy is focused on the imagined life of a creature that was imported, rather than 'natural', brought in precisely to secure the colonists' version of progress, it is not clear where the film stands in relation to what has been lost, or what exactly the audience's sense of connection to imagined wilderness that is the movie's heartland may be. The film seems to acknowledge this uncertainty as to how viewers may ultimately relate to the Myth of Frontier being reconfigured not as 'progress' but as 'lost purity and freedom'. As the opening voice-over puts it; 'They say the mustang is the spirit of the Old West. Whether the West was won or lost in the end you'll have to decide for yourself'.

This equivocation may be a sign of the open quality of the narrative referred to earlier, but it also expresses confusion about what meaning the idea of wilderness now has for us. The film's claim to tell a truth that 'cannot be found in a book' rests on its central (and scrupulously observed) conceit of being a history of the plains region not written (by humans) from 'the saddle of a horse' but rather told as if 'from the heart of a one'. But the animal-centred conceit means there can be no directing consciousness of the larger histories underlying this story; from the horse's viewpoint the concept of 'Old West' is a human projection that obscures

more fundamental truths lying beyond the reach of human imperatives and historical consciousness. As the horse narrator explains at the start of the film:

> I was born here, in the land that would come to be called the Old West. But to my mind the land was ageless – it had no beginning and no end, no boundary between earth and sky. Like the wind in the buffalo grass we belonged here; we would always belong here.

This assertion of a natural sense of belonging that appears to transcend time operates as a powerful challenge to assumptions of human agency and ownership – of the unquestioned right to do what we want with the land. But it also obscures and mystifies, so that the processes that have made the land what it is fall curiously out of focus. We are offered an image of the wind in the buffalo grass as eternal, so that our consciousness of what actually happened to the buffalo becomes blurred; we are reminded of the wild origins of the horse as an unalienable marker of its identity, but the long process of the horse's evolution in association with human cultures (both Indian and European) is elided. The film's ambiguities seem to express contradictions that have become particularly pressing within contemporary consciousness; we remain rooted to the economic imperatives of progress and growth, yet are increasingly aware of half severed connections to older ideals that are embodied within images of nature.

In this respect, *Spirit* is a particularly interesting example of what Leo Braudy has identified as the 'genre of nature', a genre which he sees as evolving significantly new cinematic forms from the early 1990s. Braudy sees the films emerging within this new genre as sharing a suspicion that technological solutions to social and environmental problems, embodied in a narrative of progress, no longer work. Instead such films focus on 'primitives' – aborigines, children, animals – whose primary quality is an innocence, which established society is hostile to and threatens. As Braudy puts it, 'the phenomenon that science and technology seek to control is innocence, which can never open its secrets, because *telling* isn't what is does. Innocence just *is*' (1998: 301). What then emerges is an 'assumption that only an untouched and perhaps impossible freshness will allow a new beginning' (ibid.: 292). Braudy's theory provides a useful context for understanding *Spirit*'s dominant strategy of showing, rather than telling, while the ambiguities surrounding its elegiac feeling for an 'impossible freshness' in the prairie wilderness perhaps make more sense seen as part of a desire for a 'new beginning' that is as widespread as it is difficult to conceive in realistic form.

In at least one further respect, however, *Pocahontas* and *Spirit* part company from each other. For while the framing sentiment of elegy in *Spirit* implies rupture – a longing for something that cannot now be recovered – the seemingly anti-romantic ending of *Pocahontas* is actually much more sentimental. Pocahontas's decision not to go back to England with John Smith but instead to remain with her own people might at first sight appear to resist the easy sentiment of the traditional romantic union. But, in fact, the ending suggests that the animistic harmony with nature that the Algonquin Indians represent in the film is – precisely – recoverable. Pocahontas's commitment to the way of life of her own people, despite an openness to Western culture that has culminated in passionate love for the figure embodying its heroic ideals, suggests the

possibility that her values may survive both the force and attraction of the colonizers. In another kind of embodiment, keeping alive the possibility of recovering such values might become radical or utopian. Within Disney's *Pocahontas*, however, so complete is the absorption of the iconic heroine within the commodified imagery of the West that this brave stand can only be seen as sentimental. The comforting illusion that our rift with nature might be healed through the recovery of Native American values is sustained in contemporary film narratives only by obscuring or eliding the actual histories within which those values have been formed.

It is interesting, in this respect, that Disney's most recent offering within the new 'genre of nature' should have sidestepped the problematic terrain of colonial history altogether, setting itself in a pre-historic, Canadian wilderness, in a period at the end of the last ice age when 'mammoths walked the earth'. *Brother Bear* (2003) is in many ways a less artistically accomplished film than *Pocahontas* (though it was nominated for an Oscar as Best Animated Feature in 2004). The film is built around a promising story concept, however, that engages – potentially – with a number of the central issues we have been considering.

A headstrong young Inuit, Kenai, takes revenge on a bear that has killed his brother and is taught a lesson by the spirit ancestors who turn him into a bear. This plotline – which attempts to develop moral and spiritual awareness from a particularly dramatic incorporation of the common animation device of seeing the world from an animal's point of view – has the potential for engaging seriously with contemporary ecological agendas. Despite some ravishing landscape shots however, and a compelling scene in which Kenai is initially transformed into a bear, the opportunities are rather wasted and the moral agenda becomes ultimately facile. In part this is due to weaknesses in the script (the humour is often flat-footed – literally in the case of the two grotesquely stupid moose) and the somewhat pedestrian nature of the songs, which carry little of the emotional charge and energy displayed in many of the classic Disney lyrics. But it is also because the animation team is not sensitive enough to the qualities of the natural world – even as displayed in a comic, fantasy mode – to allow the moral agendas to be grafted onto the comedy and to work properly. Unlike in *Bambi*, the film shows no interest in animal behaviour and movement beyond the most superficial elements required for the plot. Nor is there any real sense of awe or beauty in the way the natural environment is depicted, such as is displayed intermittently in DreamWorks' *Spirit* and often brilliantly in the work of the Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki. Instead the main protagonist behaves consistently like a bemused human dressed up in a bear outfit after his transformation, while every detail of the other animals is so remorselessly anthropomorphized that the creatures are never allowed to become more than empty ciphers for human types, or sidekicks for the gags. The film thus picks up on the worst elements of eco-kitsch (as the historian Simon Schama once memorably described it) in *Pocahontas*, without the latter film's more genuine sense of conviction in its moral and political agendas. This flaw is particularly damaging in *Brother Bear*, where a key element in the moral fable is that Kenai should learn to understand and respect the natural world he has previously placed himself arrogantly above. The film's rhetoric tries to persuade us that Kenai has gone on a journey where he discovers love for his fellow creatures – as his totem figure of the 'loving bear' prescribes. The film renders this 'love' as cuddly and charming, however, without

giving enough force to the sense of animal nature as different, as well as connected, to the human.

The ending to *Brother Bear* enacts closure in a form that seems to have unconscious parallels with *Pocahontas* though, and is perhaps more challenging. Having 'proved himself', by discovering love for his fellow animals, Kenai is given the opportunity to return to his human form. Most audiences anticipate that the film will end with Kenai re-united with his real human brother – perhaps after a last solicitous cuddle with the bear cub, Koda, who has helped him towards enlightenment. In fact, Kenai elects to remain a bear, on the grounds that his animal 'brother' needs him. This is a move that breaks with the conventional expectations of the genre in a similar fashion to Pocahontas choosing her tribe over the romantic claims of John Smith. This is perhaps just as open to the charge of sentimentality as *Pocahontas* is, but it does produce a more thought provoking dimension, at least for the end of the moral fable. What it seems to illustrate is that the option of prioritizing nature over human allegiances – previously unimaginable within sentimental adventure narratives for children – has now become viable within the fantasies that feed our thoughts and feelings.

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PART 3
Tropical Environments

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Chapter 5

The Jungle Book: Nature and the Politics of Identity

> 'Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize the infinite extent of our relations.'
>
> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

The Jungle Book, which was first released in 1967 a few months after Walt Disney had died, was the last animated feature over whose production Disney presided. It was, in some ways, a significant departure from the earlier animations. Although, like many earlier films, it was based on a classic text within the canon of children's literature, the world that Kipling had created in his jungle stories was not, like other classic texts, either the 'Old Europe' of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, or the alternative world of fantasy and fairy tale that had provided so much of the material for Disney films to date. Kipling's child-orientated narratives certainly offered immersion in a very different world to that experienced by young people in mid–twentieth-century western culture but, despite the sometimes archaic, biblically intoned language, Kipling's India was not the pure fantasy land of the *Alice* stories, or *Wind in the Willows*, or Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood. Kipling's jungle tales may have allowed animals to speak and borrowed from the conventions of traditional oral storytelling, but they were also tough edged, realistic in many ways, and, in their depictions of animal life, owed more to observations of natural history than many earlier sentimental nature stories. Kipling's jungle stories were, moreover, steeped in the sensibility of the most aggrandized phase of the British Empire, displaying the manly virtues of assumed, dauntless superiority, whilst also expressing deep-seated anxiety about the nature and reach of an underlying order – or 'law' as Kipling termed it – that was alone capable of sustaining life in a bearable, morally apprehensible, form.

No wonder then that Disney, with his instinct for sentimental populism, was wary of the original narrative, which he urged his animators and scriptwriters neither to read too closely nor to emulate. Robin Allan has described Disney's treatment of the Kipling story in *The Jungle Book* as being akin to taking a sausage, throwing away all the contents except the skin and 'filling that skin with their own ideas very far away from the original substance' (1999: 244). Like many of the early Disney classics, the film opens with an image of a leather bound volume with the title, *The Jungle Book*, embossed on its cover. Kipling's name only appears on an inner leaf however, turned over so swiftly that it barely registers, and the chapter headings that follow bear no relation to Kipling's narrative design, gesturing instead towards key divisions in the film's own episodic structure.

The freedom that the film's opening rhetoric claims from its literary antecedent suggests the possibility of a very different narrative space. Within Kipling's story the names, both of animals and places, are signs that hold together a web of memories of past events, shaping influences, patterns of behaviour that distinguish different animal and human groups. Far from being an amorphous region, a playground for childhood exploration and adventure that is shadowed with danger, Kipling's jungle is positioned within a set of interlocking histories, each bearing the weight of specific attachments to custom, tribe and locality. Hence, when we are introduced to the monkey tribe who carry Mowgli off to the ancient temples, the monkeys are given a specific name – the *Bandar-log*. The ancient, disused city they have colonized is described in detail, its different significance and meaning for humans, forest animals and monkeys clarified. With Kipling, we are reminded of how each specific landscape that is known intimately is, as Simon Schama puts it, 'a bulging backpack of myth and recollection' (2004: 574).

Disney's jungle floats much more freely in imaginative space; the burden of an interlocking set of histories is removed from it and the roots, which Kipling's names expose, that lead into the soil of specific region and locality, are largely severed. Disney's film, for instance, concludes with the image of a young Indian girl collecting water to take back to the universalized 'man-village' from an unnamed river. Kipling's specification of both the village – 'Khanhiwara' – and the 'Waingunga River' that runs near it is neither accidental nor a superficial detail adding realistic texture. To name is a primary act in human consciousness and affiliation. The history of place names – and of colonial struggles over which names should have precedence – provide a telling reminder of the centrality of naming within the processes of forming identity, memory and attachment to place.

Other aspects of the configuration of the natural world in the Disney film also contribute to this free-floating effect. Much more licence is taken, for instance, in the realistic portrayal of species characteristics than is the case for animations set on the North American continent. The major animal characters are primarily social types, whose body forms and movements are essentially caricatures of the creatures they represent, rather than naturalistic images with certain features exaggerated, as in *Bambi.* More extensive claims have sometimes been made, suggesting that many of the key figures in the animal cast are essentially American imports that would never naturally be found within forested regions of central Asia. Patrick Murphy, for instance, ridicules the idea that 'Wolves, not to mention a North American bear, are major players in the jungles of India?' (1995: 130). This may not be wholly just. The Indian variant of the wolf, it is true, had been hunted almost to extinction before the middle of the twentieth century but its habitat range was once varied and extensive; likewise the Asiatic bear, though darker and longer haired than the version shown in the film, is a plausible inhabitant of the mixture of tropical forest and more open terrain depicted in the film. Disney's Baloo probably lacks sufficient species characteristics to make it anything other than a generic bear, while its figurative lineage could no doubt be traced more readily to Yogi Bear from the popular television series than to any naturally occurring species. But, though Kipling was no doubt aware that his cast of jungle animals were at least historically plausible, it is true that Disney's aesthetic within *The Jungle Book* is deliberately set loose from such a potentially

realistic base. The introduction of an orang-utan leader of the monkey people, in King Louie, suggests that social signifiers far outweigh the prescriptions of habitat range and locality in determining the presence of particular species.

If the world of *The Jungle Book* appears initially to stand outside the claims of both history and region however, it nevertheless opens up space for reflection on relationships between culture and nature in other ways. In what forms does this take place? The best way to begin to answer this question is to recognize the richness and potential range of the opening premises on which the narratives of both film and book are founded. For Mowgli, like his African counterpart Tarzan whose narrative would also provide the basis for a major Disney animated feature in the 1990s, is a manifestation of one of the most important archetypes enabling exploration of what is distinctively human: the child of nature. From Rousseau onwards, the idea – tempered occasionally by historical reality – of the child brought up without access to human civilization and culture has haunted Western thinking with a sphinx-like fascination. Contained within this archetype, albeit elusively, is perhaps the answer to the ultimate riddle; what is it that makes us human and what does it mean that so many of the attributes that seem to make our consciousness distinctive arise from processes of development and culture that appear to separate us from nature?

The tone of Disney's *Jungle Book* is, of course, more playful than philosophical but it is worth noting that the main problem confronting Mowgli from the start of the film is precisely the reverse of the way characters' identities are normally construed in relation to the natural world. Whereas the plots of most Western narratives seek to heal the rift between what is natural and what is shaped (or deformed) by society through engaging their protagonists in closer contact with key elements of nature (Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* is a particularly compelling example of this type), the founding trope of *The Jungle Book* is of a boy already immersed in the natural world. Whereas in many adventure stories the protagonist's quest leads them into some form of natural wilderness, either in order to restore moral order or to bring back something that is needed within society, Mowgli's ostensible problem is how to elude the pressures that would remove him from the jungle where he feels at home. Mowgli's situation in *The Jungle Book* is therefore best conceived as a device which, in reversing ordinary expectations, opens viewers up to potentially fresh ways of perceiving and thinking about one of the most fundamental polarities determining human experience.

If this seems a rather grand claim for a charming but light narrative, it is worth looking in some detail at how the central device of Mowgli's unusual affiliation to wild nature is developed in the film. In the process, we will also be able to trace how this initial device enables a range of ideas about nature and identity to be playfully integrated into the film's overall design and reflected upon.

The most decisive problem faced by Mowgli throughout the film, and the one that drives the episodic, almost picaresque plot forwards, is undoubtedly the problem of survival. The problem emerges at the film's opening, when, after a series of establishing shots reviewing the principal spaces within which the drama will unfold, the camera pans down the course of a jungle river to reveal a broken boat with a lone, defenceless infant wrapped in swaddling cloth in its upturned bow. The dilemma that faces the panther Bagheera at this moment is one that will be

repeated in different forms throughout the film: whether to intercede, under the promptings of a nurturing and protective instinct, or to allow the natural processes of jungle life to hold sway, with the inevitable result that a defenceless creature will be (literally) swallowed up. This being a sentimental Disney comedy for children, the panther opts, unrealistically no doubt, to intervene on the defenceless human's behalf, establishing Mowgli, after some initial difficulties, among a surrogate family of wolves. But adoption by a close-knit foster community of aggressive carnivores defers the key issue of survival only for a brief period in the film. It re-emerges under the threat of the tiger Shere Khan, which forces the wolf pack to cast out their young human charge; thereafter the survival issue acquires renewed dramatic force at successive intervals – through the predatory interest of the python, Kaa, and the aggressive bullying of the monkeys – before reaching a climactic apotheosis with the return of Shere Kahn himself. The film's dialogue is punctuated by series of dire prognostications, expressed with a mixture of paternal concern and exasperation by Bagheera the panther, which take the form of variations on the stock phrase 'Mowgli will never survive in the jungle on his own'.

The pervasive emphasis on this central issue of survival in the film might suggest a popularized version of Darwinian theory being deployed to shape the drama of the natural world that emerges from the jungle landscape. There is certainly some evidence within Kipling's stories of responsiveness to the pressure of Darwinian ideas, if not direct incorporation of them. Unlike novelists such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Jack London, Kipling does not seem to have been influenced directly by Darwinism and the offshoots it spawned almost immediately within the sphere of social philosophy. But Kipling's *Jungle Books* do express a deep-rooted concern with the issue of what human instincts share with those of animals and with what, ultimately, differentiates the human species. These issues acquired a particularly intense and troubling focus in the wake of Darwin's publications, of course, and though the form in which Kipling presents such issues is more indebted to ethical and religious thinking than to Darwin, the intensity of his focus suggests sharpening under the pressure of Darwinist ideas. Kipling's particular concern is with the issue of species dominance, related but not identical to Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest. Kipling's jungle, to a much greater degree than Disney's, is an arena within which will and power are contested between the different species groups.

Disney was clearly interested in Darwinian ideas however. As Peter Viyakovic observes, 'Disney was himself clearly fascinated by the concept of biological evolution and was enthusiastic about a "dawn of creation" sequence in the 1940 film *Fantasia*, which he said represented "the fight for life"' (1996: 19–20). More recent children's animations, such as Twentieth Century Fox's *Ice Age*, make reference to evolutionary ideas in more explicit ways. In *Ice Age* (2002) the pre-historic animals share arch, ironic jokes with the audience about their role in the drama of evolution, suggesting that, within contemporary society, Darwinian ideas have such currency they can be played with, in complicity with even quite young audiences, rather than simply dramatized or spelled out.

Despite the apparent coincidence of thematic concerns however, Disney's *Jungle Book* is not really even comically orientated towards Darwinism. Within Disney, the survival motif is deployed not to assert the pre-eminence of the human animal as

'fittest' in terms of adaptive capacity and power, but rather to explore the notion of dependency in relation to the maturing figure of the child. The mix of mentors and aggressors that accompany Mowgli on his jungle journey provide him with a rich environment for learning. Learning is also potentially a Darwinian theme; but what Mowgli learns is ultimately not so much a set of strategies for survival in a potentially hostile environment but rather a sense of who he is and where his destiny lies. In Disney's *Jungle Book* the theme of survival provides the stimulus for what, in the film, are more compelling concerns with identity, values and attitudes towards life. Mowgli's dependency on larger creatures provides him with a set of models for the kinds of qualities and contested values that will shape his own identity. Although, at the end of the film, the sentimental evocation of his sexual drive is decisive in determining Mowgli's fate as a human within the 'man-village', this ultimate species choice is actually less significant than the differentiated modes of being offered as 'options' by the animals he has encountered along the way. In this respect *The Jungle Book* operates like a fable, using the animal forms to highlight and debate ethical and psychological issues, which the stress on survival throws into sharp and engagingly problematic focus.

Although the connection to ideas about nature in *The Jungle Book* may not be, in any substantial sense then, Darwinian, the mapping of psychological and ethical issues onto animal figures is not arbitrary. The key to understanding this relationship is the significance attributed to performing the self through imitation, one of the most distinctive modes of interaction portrayed in the film. For if Mowgli is to be considered anything more than a notional 'child of nature', purely a cipher for socially constituted forms of being for which the jungle setting is little more than an exotic backdrop, then his affinity with the natural world must be demonstrated through some significant aspect of the character's performance. It is imitation, I will contend, that fulfils this crucial role and enables the film to engage young audiences potentially in ways that go beyond those generally available for social comedy played out in animal costume.

One of the aspects of feral children that has fascinated those who have been able to observe them has always been the degree to which such children's physical gestures resemble those of animals rather than humans. Jill Paton Walsh's imaginative rendering of this experience in her novel, *Knowledge of Angels*, provides a particularly intense instance of the extreme ambivalence such figures can create:

> They closed in. Then, suddenly they could see into the hollow in the drift in front of the creature's lair. The melt-cave at the door of the rock cave was abominable with scraps of slaughtered things – with blood and feathers and bones. Even on the nearly frozen air the stench reached them. The thing held the stolen haunch of meat between its front paws, and was worrying it, snarling like a dog as it ate. It had a mantle of matted black fur over its head and shoulders, and bluish bald hindquarters. It did not hear or smell them coming, for it did not cease to drag off strips of meat from the bone.
>
> Galceran let out a bloodthirsty yell. He raised his snow mattock high above his head and swung it murderously. It was Jaime who stopped him. He jumped forward with a wail and, grabbing Galceran's sleeve, deflected the blow. Then he lurched backwards, doubled over convulsively, and vomited. He had seen, just in time, that the monster was a human child. (1995: 19)

Clearly the physical manifestation of a completely 'natural' human being is capable of provoking feelings of profound ambivalence in those who witness it. It is often experienced as grotesque and disturbing, a transgressive image that serves as a reminder of how thin the shell of civilization within which we preserve a sense of our distinctive humanity may be. Perhaps because the detail of such animating gestures, realistically conceived, are likely to be read as disturbingly grotesque, Kipling tends to offer the physical detail of his natural child's life in rather generalized forms, though he does dwell on the nature of the killing rituals that Mowgli shares with his animal brethren. Edgar Rice Burroughs had more taste for the grotesque and the *Tarzan* novels persistently attempt to titillate and shock readers with the details of animal gestures transposed onto the human protagonist in both hunting scenes and the consumption of raw flesh.

In Disney's *Jungle Book* this issue might seem at first to be avoided; as a child Mowgli is not shown hunting (whether on two legs or 'all fours') with the wolf pack, and is certainly not depicted eating raw flesh. His interactions with his wolf 'siblings' are identical, in terms of gestures, to those of a boy playing with large puppies. But Mowgli's embodiment of a desire for a substantive identity within the animal world is signalled in physical forms at later stages in the film. This desire is enacted comically, for instance, in the scene where Mowgli attempts to copy the actions of the young elephant who befriends him, when Mowgli becomes involved with 'Colonel' Hathi's ramshackle troop. When the lead elephant Hathi lines his 'platoon' up for inspection and orders them to raise their trunks in the air, Mowgli, who has already gone down onto all fours to accompany his new-found, young elephant friend, raises his head at an equivalent angle. The comedy operates along an edge of double irony here, for the elephants' gestures are themselves a burlesque of military ritual, while Mowgli's attempt to merge with them positions him as a human imitating animals imitating humans. As in all good comedy, however, there are moments where it is possible to see more profound and difficult feelings being finessed. Mowgli's precise imitation of the elephants' stance, as they strain their trunks upwards in a pastiche of the military salute, marks him out as irrevocably different (he lacks so much in the nose department!) at the same time as the skill of his mimicry expresses a desire to be at one with the group.

The potential poignancy of this desire becomes more obvious in Mowgli's interactions with Baloo the bear. Here the range of gestures imitated – roaring, fighting, scratching, dancing, food gathering and singing – forms a much more extended repertoire, emotionally nuanced with lightness of touch and subtlety, and provides the basis for interactive modes of engagement, as opposed to slavish or merely mechanical imitation. Baloo claims he will 'learn' Mowgli to act like a bear and indeed the scene in which they form a bond of affection is not only one of the most touchingly brilliant amongst all Disney's animations but also demonstrates a whole process of enculturation with extraordinary deftness and economy. Mowgli moves swiftly from imitation to exhibiting his own competence in the dubious arts of living to which Baloo introduces him, adding something of his own to the fictive bear *modus vivendi*, in a form not unlike what Richard Barney, drawing on Bourdieu's theories, calls 'regulated improvisation'. Within this mode of learned behaviours the individual, having internalized the main elements of a system of cultural values and practices,

becomes able to extend the expressive reach of such values through more spontaneous, variable and responsive kinds of performance (Barney 1999: 14–18).

It might be objected that Mowgli's 'imitation' is not really apprehensible as an expression of wishing to remain at one with the natural world, since the 'animal' behaviours he is depicted as mimicking are in fact overwhelmingly human. Yet the dividing line between human and animal behaviours is neither as clear, nor as absolute as it might at first appear. The desire to see animals behaving like humans is surely the mirror image of the human desire to be more attuned to the natural world of animals. Teaching bears to dance and elephants to perform choreographed rituals in the circus diffuses the boundary between the world of nature and culture, just as much as attempts by humans to live in more primitive and empathetic ways within the natural world do in the opposite direction. The animals that Mowgli is depicted as being particularly drawn towards imitating are, in this sense, significant. Elephants and bears have been absorbed into human military and recreational culture for at least two millennia (at times, in singularly cruel ways); these animals display a range of characteristics in the wild that appear highly analogous to human qualities and their capacity to adopt human forms of behaviour in captivity – including dancing, wrestling and fighting – has promoted (albeit ambivalently) a greater sense of intimacy than is commonly available with other animals.

It is this intimacy that is the crucial point at stake in *The Jungle Book*. The film draws audiences in along a line of desire for closeness – emotional as well as physical – between Mowgli and the animal figures that befriend him. At the same time, the film asserts the critical importance of differences between the various species. These differences are then often used to dramatize dangers and limitations to the project of intimacy, to the playful merging and immersion of the human within animal forms that is such a central element of the film's emotional appeal. 'You wouldn't marry a panther would you?' Bagheera asks Baloo, in a *reductio ad absurdum* attempt to persuade the bear that his species-blind intimacy with Mowgli is ultimately untenable. *The Jungle Book* plays on a series of such oppositions between culture and nature with a lightness of touch that mitigates against serious analysis. Nevertheless, the very pervasiveness of interplay between these underlying themes implies the presence of fundamental structuring principles and a set of preoccupations that are of more than casual concern.

I want to look in more detail now at areas within which the play of such oppositions suggests particular thematic weight. The first of these is the importance attributed in *The Jungle Book* to the theme of 'home'. The issue of what constitutes home for Mowgli is clearly of primary significance in structuring the whole narrative. The film opens with a moment of rupture in terms of Mowgli's attachment to the idea of home within a normal human environment, then develops its storyline by invoking a series of surrogate possibilities (the wolf 'family', an itinerant existence with Baloo, enforced captivity with the monkeys and so on) before settling on a return to human civilization within the community of the 'man village'. In the process of exploring the implications of this range of proffered 'homes', a clear opposition is developed. The home that is aligned with Mowgli's desire is the natural world of the jungle: the spirited young protagonist appears willing to endure almost any degree of privation and exposure in trying to achieve this goal. In opposition to this version of home stands the idea of the

human community, the option which the flawed authority figure of Bagheera asserts as the right, responsible choice for Mowgli and the outcome which the ending of the film appears ultimately to endorse. The journey of the film is thus a staging of responses to different images of home, structured around a central, defining opposition.

The film's staging of responses to home has some highly distinctive features. To begin with the jungle itself is rendered attractively, but also in ways that bring into play particular kinds of association. It is worth noting, in this respect, the degree to which the jungle as landscape is itself less rooted and fixed, more susceptible to fluid, protean shifts of perspective, than are the more naturalistically depicted North American environments of *Bambi* or *The Fox and the Hound*. When Mowgli stalks off in fury at Baloo's apparent betrayal of him towards the end of the film, for instance, the jungle suddenly transforms itself into an arid desert region inhabited by vultures. After the storm that accompanies the final, decisive showdown with Shere Kahn has finished, the terms of this abrupt transition are reversed. The land reverts almost instantaneously to its former lushness, the emotional relief of victory over the dark powers of the tiger apparently enabling the downpour to enact the daily miracle of water's replenishing plant life with extraordinary, breathtaking rapidity. More generally though, the sense of fluidity of form within the jungle environment is more attributable to artistic style. Robin Allan has suggested that the colours used in Disney's *Jungle Book* are reminiscent of the palette of Gauguin. Moreover, he argues that the formal characteristics of the forest itself owe much to the work of Le Douanier Rousseau (1999: 244). These stylistic influences are highly suggestive in terms of the film's wider thematic concerns. Gauguin and Rousseau's project of imaginatively embracing tropical landscapes to try to recover a vital, primitive quality, lost to Western civilization, provides an additional layer of thought and feeling to *The Jungle Book*'s playful depiction of intimacy with animals in an exotic environment projected as a potential 'home'.

The figurative influence of Le Douanier Rousseau and Gauguin is suggestive in other ways too. Gauguin's later pictures especially tend to depict versions of dwelling in the world in which the human subjects are peculiarly open to the environment. In part, no doubt, this is a question of climate; there is less need, in a benign tropical climate, for the layers of clothing, the walls, windows and roofs that act as a defence for our bodies against the harsh effects of the surrounding environment. But it is also a question of values. The tropical environment is sought precisely because it enables different kinds of openness, sensitivities and freedom: a deep centring of being in a space where the human body and its more extended habitations appear coterminous with the natural world, rather than struggling to assert themselves against it.

I am not suggesting anything quite so profound is being asserted within the figurative rhetoric of Disney's films. But most of the Disney narratives with an exotic, natural setting do insist, to a remarkable degree, on the protagonists being positioned in ways that are open to the forces of the wider environment around them. The plot of the recent Pixar computer-generated animation *Finding Nemo* is entirely characteristic in this respect. The animal protagonists leave the protected home environment of their reef on a quest that takes them to the open seas. The protected environment, when it is reinstated in the narrative, is actually the restricted state of captivity that a fish tank embodies. The open waters of the sea may be dangerous, but

this is also a potentially creative space that symbolizes the possibility of freedom and development. It is not only openness to the wider environment, including its hazards, but also the removal of the protected defence of the home environment that appear to be jointly required for the narrative to develop in this type of film.

In the case of Disney's *Jungle Book*, the forms of protection offered to the young, infant body of the protagonist are quite exceptionally limited. The baby Mowgli appears initially in a cradle basket, which shares many of the formal qualities of the nest in nature, and the cave-den of his early upbringing offers the same solid protective shape as a human home. But these spaces are glimpsed only in passing at the start of the film. Thereafter, Mowgli's body is configured within unusually open spaces, even during periods, such as sleep, when it is at its most vulnerable. Mowgli spends his first night away from the wolves on the precarious ledge created by a tree branch. His second night is spent sleeping on the open ground with his animal guardians, Baloo and Bagheera, debating his future nearby. He wears no clothes throughout and carries neither weapons nor devices that would serve either as protective armour or to offer emotional comfort. His skinny arms and legs emphasize his vulnerability, a physical trait that, recent audience research has indicated, makes it difficult for some boys to identify with him as child-hero (Wells, 1998: 235). The extent and form of Mowgli's exposure to a potentially hostile world are thus remarkable. Even those aspects of his environment that appear to resemble the sheltering and enclosing forms of the home turn out, on closer inspection, to be hostile. The sinuous, caressing coils within which the python Kaa wraps Mowgli's body are the snake's prelude to consuming the boy; later, the buildings of the monkey city are revealed as a crumbling, dangerous façade mocking the role of civilized dwellings in nurturing development.

The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, has suggested that enclosing forms such as houses, shells and nests are of primary significance in developing the human psyche and its modes of attachment to the world. He writes movingly of the 'nest' that has the potential to become, within our imaginative experience, 'the centre – the term is no exaggeration – of an entire universe, the evidence of a cosmic situation' (1994: 94). The potential for this psychic connection resides in the relationship between the nest and the body that both forms it – 'by constantly repeated pressure of the (bird's) breast' (ibid.: 101) – and is contained within it. This relationship, in the context of the perceived vulnerability of the nest's apparently small, frail structure, creates a feeling of connection and of primary confidence: '… when we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence. Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world?' (ibid.: 103). Such feelings, Bachelard suggests, connect at the level of dream and memory with the security offered by our human experience of the house. 'Our house', he writes, 'apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence if, in our dreams, we really participate in the sense of security of our first home' (ibid.).

Bachelard's insights and accompanying phenomenological analysis suggest some interesting questions in trying to understand the significance of the minimal role that forms and spaces associated with nurturing security play within Disney's

Jungle Book. How do we explain the apparent discrepancy between the irrepressible confidence of Mowgli's desire to remain in the dangerous world of the jungle and the absence of protective forms that, Bachelard suggests, nurture and sustain such confidence? Even though the genre of animated adventure is hardly realistic, we might expect the imagery to provide some analogous experience for the child audience, if the narrative is to be fully emotionally satisfying and successful. Within *Bambi*, for instance, the enclosed space at the centre of the thicket where the young deer is nurtured and brought up by his mother clearly offers a visual equivalent for Bachelard's idea of the nest. If similar protective spaces are not available to Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, are there any other significant forms that come into play and support an underlying confidence in the world?

One possible area where we might look for such forms lies in the relationship forged between Mowgli and Baloo. Baloo, more than any other character, instils in Mowgli a sense of openness towards the world and the experience it offers. Baloo's own shape indeed, his large, ambling bulk and the bottom heavy distribution of his body weight that makes him seem firmly rooted to the earth, inspires a kind of loose-limbed confidence. This feeling is greatly extended, however, by the contexts within which Baloo's interactions with Mowgli are displayed. In the famous 'Bare Necessities' song sequence, for instance, Baloo expresses a sense of profound ease in his engagement with the 'big world' of his surroundings. But what, exactly, is this 'ease' founded on? And, if Baloo's characteristic *modus vivendi* is freebooting, open, without apparent need of protective barriers, what does this imply about the experience that the film as a whole offers in connecting viewers imaginatively with images of the wider, natural world?

We need to define more closely what exactly is meant by the 'bigness' of the world to which Baloo's song – and his generally optimistic, easy-going attitude – provide such an engaging entrée. Bachelard has stressed the importance of those moments when we can experience the immensity of the natural world that surrounds us in positive ways, offering a brilliant analysis of the poetry of Baudelaire and Rilke to develop his argument. He points out that the experience of immensity may be particularly associated with the forest, where we so easily lose a sense of direction and precise spatial orientation. This is precisely what happens to Mowgli, of course, when he runs away from Bagheera towards the end of Disney's film.

It is certainly possible for the art of animation, especially through the judicious use of non-naturalistic devices distinctive to this medium, to engender an analogous experience to the one Bachelard describes. In the Japanese film *Princess Mononoke*, for instance, the young hero seeks a forest region in which he can make restitution to the ancient guardian spirits with whom humanity (in a parable that invokes the condition of modernity estranged from nature) has broken its links (Napier, 2001). Early in the film the young hero is guided by lesser spirits to a sacred area of the forest. It would take a very detailed analysis of artwork, dramatic and cinematic technique to give a full sense of the impact of this scene, which brings a remarkably fresh viewpoint to that potential cliché of children's cinema – the enchanted forest. But it is worth mentioning the skilful integration of three devices that perhaps go some way towards accounting for the film's engendering a much fuller sense of immensity and wonder than are commonly available in animation.

Paradoxically, since the feeling engendered is of a mysterious vastness, this involves a restriction, rather than amplification, of key expressive modes available to the director. The first of these restrictions is to point of view. The gaze is directed predominately downwards, towards the roots of the trees, or along the forest floor, so that the sense of a mysterious unseen expansiveness beyond is maintained in the realm of the imagined. This restricted viewpoint is complemented by the extreme steadiness – suggesting stillness of being and concentration – of the protagonist's gaze. Although the action can be swift at key points in the film, there is also a feeling throughout this scene, indebted partly no doubt to Japanese spiritual and cultural traditions, of restraint in terms of movement. Finally, in the build up to the numinous moment when the animal form of the spirit that presides over the forest is glimpsed, the stillness is reinforced by utter silence on the soundtrack.

Nothing could be further from the expressive modes that characterize Disney's *Jungle Book*. Here there is always some business surrounding the characters – even when the principal figure is not moving – while what attunes protagonists to the world around them is more often expressed through variations in rhythm than through stillness. Baloo ducks and weaves around the plants and rocks on the forest floor as he inculcates Mowgli into the pattern of the bear's life, rubbing his back with deep pleasure against the trunks of palms and swaying into banana trees with his ample hind-quarters so they will release fruit in abundance. Even when Baloo has apparently stopped moving, when he is stretched out on his back in the water extolling the virtues of blissful ease, the camera actually tracks alongside of him as he allows his body to be subsumed in the languid rhythm of the river's motion. The significance of the rhythms that define Baloo's way of life become explicit in Baloo's signature tune, 'The Bare Necessities', which is the centrepiece of this episode. The song is not only a comic anthem extolling the virtues of carefree existence: it is also grounded on a distinctive relationship to a world configured with delight as a bountiful larder:

> Look for the bare necessities …
> Old Mother Nature's recipes
> That bring the bare necessities of life.
>
> Wherever I wander, wherever I roam,
> I couldn't be fonder of my big home;
> The bees are buzzing in the trees
> To make some honey just for me,
> When you look under the rocks and plants
> And take a glance at the fancy ants
> Then maybe – try a few! …
> The bare necessities of life will come to you …

The actions with which Baloo accompanies this bohemian rhapsody exemplify the diversity and range of food resources that the earth makes readily available to this relaxed and dextrous omnivore. The delightful sequence of bum bumping trees to release their harvest, lifting rocks that conceal insect fodder and skilfully paring away the inhospitable outer skins of other exotic delectables reveals a world that is literally ripe for the taking. The sequence is a creative gift for the animators, who

transform the ungainly form of the bear into a food appropriator of such extraordinary grace and versatility that the world's larder appears to fall to him effortlessly.

In a sense of course, as so often with Disney, this is an ancient literary trope that has been wittily appropriated in a new, popular idiom. We do not have to look too far behind Baloo's joyous natural larder to see the outlines of one of the oldest forms of pastoral conceit, the earth configured in its golden age innocence as a cornucopia. Shakespeare develops this conceit most famously in Gonzalo's speech in *The Tempest*, where nature is imagined as bringing forth 'without sweat or endeavour … All foison, all abundance,/ To feed my innocent people' (II i: 161–5). The trope became a staple of the renaissance lyric, incorporated with particular versatility and wit in the poetry of Andrew Marvell. Here though, the more contemporary, exotic setting of Disney's jungle relies on a rather different set of associations.

To pursue these associations further I want to concentrate for a while on the image of the humble banana. The banana features in a variety of situations within Disney's *Jungle Book* and, perhaps surprisingly, in addition to being one of the film's most versatile comic props, it is also a richly evocative signifier. In terms of its abundance and accessibility, the banana is the most important of the food resources revealed as so readily available to Mowgli by Baloo. The multiple significations of the banana proliferate, however, in the succeeding episode to the adventure where Mowgli is captured by the monkeys in the Lost City. Here the unfurled skin of the banana features as a mock crown; the fruit is launched repeatedly and at high speed from its skin as a nutritious projectile; it adorns Baloo in his vaudeville costume as pastiche of the dancing native; and it is proffered, then virtually force-fed, to Mowgli as a food item in superabundance by King Louie. The banana and its versatile, slippery skin are a stock item of vaudeville-style jokes. Disney's film draws richly on this tradition; but beneath all the slapstick humour lies an unease, I would argue, that goes to the heart of the film's playful exploration of the relationship between nature and culture. For the banana is both a food item in this scene, a gift of nature from the monkeys that parodies traditional rituals of hospitality towards guests, and it is a weapon, deployed to extort knowledge from the captive representative of a higher and more powerful order of species being. King Louie wants the secret of 'man's red fire' from Mowgli and he seems ready to continue firing his mock arsenal of banana artillery at him until he gets it. It is not hard to detect, beneath the carnivalesque animal trappings, the image of something darker here. For what is being rehearsed, surely, is the narrative of a 'primitive' society, rich in primary produce deemed to be of little value, seen trying to extort the knowledge that will enable technological development to redress an inherent imbalance of power. This little scene, in other words, is a mini-parable that embodies the major features and tensions of neo-colonialism.

If this interpretation seems a little strained, then it is worth recalling that, alongside its comic attributes, the word 'banana' was deployed regularly to denote key areas of American neo-colonial interest and expansionism by the middle of the twentieth century. The 'banana republic' had become a populist cliché, referring derogatively to the short-lived regimes of Central American republics whose governments, ironically, were often destabilized by the machinations of United States' foreign policy. Even more explicitly, historians have deployed the concept of 'banana wars' to identify the

structural causes shared by a series of US military interventions in Central American countries that began with the Spanish American war. Although the long-term strategy linking these wars was to shore up lines of defence against potential threats from the immediate neighbours of the United States (Musicant, 1990), the 'banana wars' epithet gained currency because it recognized substantial economic drives underlying the broader issue of defence. The banana industry was run by some of the largest conglomerate organizations in corporate America. The power wielded by corporations such as the United Fruit Company was (and indeed, in its contemporary form as United Brands, remains) vast. By the 1930s United Fruit owned nearly three and a half million acres of land in Central America – the majority of which was used to produce bananas – an acreage equivalent to about a quarter of an entire country such as Costa Rica or El Salvador (Kepner and Soothill, 1963: 26). In addition to land owned formally, the company's role in many areas as a virtually monopolistic buyer enabled it to hold what has been described as 'autocratic sway' (ibid.: 27) over producers in a much larger territory and to influence substantially the nature and rate of development within countries supplying primary produce. Unsurprisingly, the banana companies were a major lobbying force exercising a decisive influence on US foreign policy and military intervention over a prolonged period.

If the image of the banana is loaded with political significance, then, the culture of banana growing is also, in many ways, both representative and symptomatic of the terms under which the natural world has been developed and farmed in the tropics in the modern world more generally. Like a number of other 'cash crops', the banana evolved from its role as a basic food item in subsistence agriculture for local markets under the dual influence of technological advance and demand for imports to the developed world. The enhanced speed of steam ships from the mid-nineteenth century made limited exports of bananas to temperate countries possible, but demand increased exponentially from the late nineteenth century when advances in refrigeration techniques made large-scale transportation feasible. More intensive production for export markets led swiftly to structural features characteristic of third world agricultural production: rapid depletion of the soil, leading to the appropriation of ever greater areas of uncultivated wilderness to maximize yields; enhanced susceptibility to disease, created by intensive farming of a single crop monoculture, that also increased the financial exposure of indigenous producers and intensified dependency on the products of Western agrochemical companies; the erosion of traditional, indigenous cultures and ways of living on the land; and a massive imbalance in terms of the way the market rewards producers and the vested interests of importers/consumers within the developed world. Official figures from 1971, four years after Disney's *Jungle Book* was first released, showed, according to Thomson, 'that in the total amount of economic activity generated by the world banana trade, nearly nine tenths benefits the processes of growth and diverse development of the importing countries, and only one tenth benefits those of the exporting countries' (1987: 14).

In outlining some of the features characterizing banana production for Western markets, I do not mean to suggest that Disney's film should bear the whole moral, political and ecological weight of the meanings that accrue. Clearly, the hints of shadows that play across the film's ebullient surface should not be expanded in significance till they sink the actual viewing experience without trace. But it is worth

reviewing the significance of the banana in the world outside the film as a serious, coherent whole because it enables us to view the comic play through which the film engages us from a larger perspective. In the process we may begin to engage with the issues that are finessed and displaced within the film's narrative more seriously, emphasizing what Edward Said calls the 'worldliness' of the text. The barely disguised mini-parable of neo-colonialism at the film's centre, combined with the extraordinary versatility with which the banana motif is deployed, justify such an approach.

But the film's images of consumption can be contextualized in other ways too. It is instructive, for instance, to compare Mowgli's experience with the monkeys in Kipling's version of the story with that embodied in the film. The monkeys take Mowgli to a space in the city known as the 'cold lairs' in Kipling's story, a name evocative of the place's estranged, harsh atmosphere. Mowgli is hungry, cold and tired. He asks the monkeys for food:

> Twenty or thirty monkeys bounded away to bring him nuts and wild pawpaws; but they fell to fighting on the road, and it was too much trouble to go back with what was left of the fruit. Mowgli was sore and angry as well as hungry, and he roamed through the empty city giving the Strangers' Hunting Call from time to time, but no one answered him, and Mowgli felt that he had reached a very bad place indeed. (1915: 69)

Kipling's monkey realm is a harsh, cold place: its anarchic lawlessness fails even to provide food, the most basic requirement of life. The energy generated around Disney's King Louie, by contrast, though it also tends toward the anarchic and contains an aggressive undercurrent, is both vibrant and in many ways attractive. Baloo is drawn inexorably towards the 'beat' of the music that expresses the energies of this realm, and the monkeys, though unfeeling, have both style and chutzpah. Moreover, far from being starved, Mowgli ingests a superfluity of nutrients, even if his diet is limited to the ubiquitous banana. These differences seem to me not simply a question of tone – as a literary version of the traditional tale is transformed into musical comedy – but also stand in significant relation to the historical moments within which the texts were respectively produced.

Disney's *Jungle Book* was created within a very different set of historical circumstances to those that prevailed both in Kipling's era and in the early 1940s, when films like *Bambi* were being produced. The natural world depicted within *Bambi* is weighted towards the experience of austerity, an experience made vivid by still recent memories of the Great Depression of the 1930s. By the mid-1960s, on the other hand, America was highly conscious of itself as an affluent society. While unease about the drive towards ever-greater consumerism was growing, providing the main basis for critiques that fuelled a new oppositional politics, mainstream American culture remained grounded on its relation to material wealth and productivity. The Disney Corporation itself was central to the dissemination of this consumer ethos, not only in the United States but also worldwide, having greatly extended its global reach in the post-war years. Although the Corporation continued to sponsor the production of feature animations, from the mid-1950s onwards these constituted a relatively small part of the total business activity and the character of the organization as a whole had changed greatly. The Disney Company had

pioneered the mass marketing of products associated with films: 'The worldwide proliferation of merchandise' became, as Janet Wasko argues, 'one of the key features of the Disney Empire' (2001: 48). By the 1960s, indeed, the Disney brand became virtually a byword for the mass merchandizing of consumer products. By this stage, Disney had become one of the largest corporations in America, a major distributor as well as producer of films with an intensely focused sense of the role that its own image and identity played in the promotion of a vast range of Disney products. While maintaining its image as custodian of family values and innocent, childhood pleasure, Disney also epitomized the intensified market forces that were driving a consumer-orientated society.

By the mid-1960s though, when *The Jungle Book* was being produced, the drive for ever-greater consumer expansion had begun to generate contradictory feelings and attitudes. While the desire that fuelled demand for consumer products showed no sign of waning, as the US economy underwent strong growth, unease about the effects of such continued expansion had intensified. Critiques of the 'affluent society', as the influential American economist J.K. Galbraith memorably termed it, found their way increasingly into populist forms of debate, while a significant youth counterculture – of which the 'hippies' were to become the most colourful manifestation – emerged with a set of rather incoherent values, that were nevertheless set in passionate opposition to the main tenets of consumerism.

Within this new cultural climate, the distanced, exotic space of the jungle that Disney ventured into in his last film could be conceived as a relatively safe arena for projecting contradictory feelings about consumption onto the backdrop of the natural world. It is significant then, that the readily available abundance of the world presented in Baloo's freebooting version of pastoral should be conjured in forms designed largely to make the audience feel comfortable and to inspire feelings of delight. But there are occasional shadows cast across the seeming ease with which the earth gives up its produce, most evident, perhaps, in the images of excessive consumption that accompany the monkeys' jostling for power. Moreover, the context within which the easy, 'natural' consumption of the world's resources takes place can also be related to aspects of the ideology emerging within new countercultures. Bagheera's derogatory epithet for Baloo as 'that shiftless, stupid jungle bum' places him in the tradition of the hobo tramp that had been extensively mythologized in mid–twentieth-century American literature. Although the hobo's itinerant, apparently rootless, lifestyle 'bumming' around America was scorned in conservative circles, it could also be extolled as a image of freedom, a resource for alternative values to those generated by the staid conformity of an increasingly culturally predominant suburbia. Baloo's amiable philosophy of travelling light does not only connect with the hobo's resistance to incorporation within the settled complacencies of contemporary culture, however. The ambling bear's imagery of a benign earth, generously yielding sustenance to those relaxed enough to trust in its native fecundity, can also be related to the primitive forms of direct connection with nature advocated in hippie ideology. The small communes, idealistically set up to rely on subsistence agriculture, drew on such imagery, while popular song lyrics also regularly invoked the idea of nature, imagined still untouched on the margins of society, as beneficent provider. David Crosby's apocalyptic song lyric 'Wooden Ships', first recorded in 1968, in the spring

after Disney's *Jungle Book* had been released, includes an exemplary instance of survival by reliance on natural resources after the ordinary social world has collapsed. 'You must try some of my purple berries: I've been eating them for six or seven weeks now', the lyric confides, adding, with a rather surprised note of cautious optimism, 'Haven't got sick once – probably keep us both alive'. The song's imagined journey to new, uncontaminated shores takes place – in the wake of a nuclear holocaust – on ships made of wood, the organic material of their construction symbolizing a more natural relationship with the earth that must be established on the new land. The image of the wooden ships is conjured in the lyric's refrain as 'very free and easy', an epithet designed to link to the idea of how things should be naturally. 'Easy, you know the way it's supposed to be', the refrain concludes: a rider that, one feels, would have gained Baloo's full approval.

However, the film imagery's connection to such ideals, circulating as oppositional alternatives to the affluent, technological society in the late 1960s, is not entirely straightforward. It is counteracted most centrally through the values espoused within Bagheera's more austere and prudential attitude towards life. In a sense, if Baloo represents a carefree hedonism and optimistic consumption of the world's resources that was one aspect of 1960s social values in the West, then Bagheera's attitudes are a legacy of the tougher economic climate that the previous generation had experienced. The dialectic between these contrastive attitudes is not resolved in Disney's film; if Bagheera is more prudent and 'responsible', then Baloo's responses come across as more emotionally attractive, entertaining and vital. To some extent, this opposition mirrors elements of generational conflict that were coming into sharp focus in 1960s America. The social attitudes of the young, especially those who sought to opt out of conventional consumerist society's 'work and spend' ethic, were regularly criticized by elder spokesmen of the previous generation. The new attitude to work, especially, was seen as irresponsible and feckless in the same way that Bagheera accuses Baloo of being a 'shiftless bum'. One of the most articulate, though discriminatingly critical, advocates of youth culture in this period, Theodore Roszak, makes a particularly interesting defence of the new attitudes towards work that were emerging:

> … a good liberal like Hans Toch invokes the Protestant work ethic to give the hippies a fatherly tongue-lashing for their "consuming but non-contributing" ways. They are being "parasitic", Professor Toch observes, for "the hippies, after all accept – even demand – social services, while rejecting the desirability of making a contribution to the economy." But *of course* they do. Because we have an economy of cybernated abundance that does not need their labor, that is rapidly severing the tie between work and wages, that suffers from hard-core poverty due to maldistribution not scarcity. (1971: 36)

Roszak's defence of youth counterculture is significant in this context because it highlights an economy whose 'abundance' no longer necessitates everyone working in the old patterns; indeed this new economic order is structured so as to enforce non-productive roles within significant portions of the population. If society creates a structural underclass of the unemployed in poor ghettos, so his argument goes, how can it be reprehensible for hippies 'to enjoy their mendicant idleness'? The problem has become one not of productivity but of the distribution of resources: the 'economy can do abundantly without all this labour'. What is interesting here is

that Roszac's case depends, in effect, on validating a new kind of ecology within the economic order, one that necessitates participants whose somewhat specialized role is to convert the stigma and poverty associated with enforced idleness into a leisured mode of being that has alternative social value. The foundation of this new role is the abundance of the economy and it is hard not to see parallels here with the life of ease that Baloo advocates, founded as this is on his assured access to the equally abundant store of nature.

There are some important differences here too though. The natural world of Disney's playground jungle is not simply a palimpsest for American society and, as we have seen, the images of animal forms bring their own associations with them, feeding especially on the fantasy of being self-sufficiently at home within nature. Moreover, the contest of values that is played out around Mowgli's destiny in the *Jungle Book* is not located primarily between generations. Baloo and Bagheera are both father figures for Mowgli and, although Baloo's charismatic charm wins Mowgli's heart, the film as a whole seems more set up to heal generational differences than to exploit them. Despite his antithetical values, Baloo is eventually persuaded to side with Bagheera and, in a finale reminiscent of *Casablanca*, the two male animals end up seeking solace as buddies together as they stroll off into the sunset. Nevertheless, the interplay of social values predominates more fully than in a film like *Bambi* because the degree to which realistic details from natural history are allowed to hold sway has been minimized. The more exotic, distanced natural arena of the jungle allows a purer fantasy to evolve, in which the separation of humans from animals can be removed almost completely.

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Chapter 6

Tropical Discourse: Unstable Ecologies in *Tarzan*, *The Lion King* and *Finding Nemo*

> 'A being dedicated to water is a being in flux.'
>
> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

If Disney's *Jungle Book* sprang from familiar literary territory in its reworking of an established children's classic, the exotic, jungle setting broke new ground (within the canon of Disney animation features at least). While Disney's animal documentaries and 'true life' adventures of the 1950s had regularly made use of tropical locations in Africa and Asia, the settings of feature animations tended to be more home grown, gesturing towards Europe in terms of their roots but American in tone and environment. Even where an exotic animal, such as Dumbo, played the lead this was in an essentially American environment, provided with a quasi-realistic pretext by the circus. As we saw in the last chapter, *The Jungle Book* provided a more fluid imaginative space within which themes and nuances of changing attitudes towards the natural world could be played out. But for a long time *The Jungle Book* remained something of a 'one off', the last of Walt Disney's films to enter the canon of classics, much loved but, in terms of its distinctive features, little imitated. For two decades after Disney's death, animation production tended to be conservative in terms of style as well as setting, generally retreating to the safer territory of the past. On the odd occasion where the theme of relations with wild nature achieved prominence, as in *The Fox and the Hound*, the location chosen was that mainstay for nostalgic American values, the rural homestead community.

All this changed with the new range of animated features produced by Disney from the late 1980s however. The credit for this change, in terms of both organization and support for renewed artistic endeavour, is generally given to the team that surrounded Michael Eisner, when he took over as head of the Disney Corporation in 1987. There can be little doubt that the changes initiated by Eisner ushered in a new creative climate for animated production within Disney that had lasting consequences. But these organizational changes took place at a time when the cultural sensibilities that film narratives both explore and help create were also shifting decisively. The political demise of the Soviet Union, the removal of the barriers separating east and west in post-war Europe, and the end of apartheid in South Africa signalled a world that was more open, where old lines of demarcation and struggle were reconfigured with sometimes bewildering rapidity. At the same time this very openness – whose economic correlative was the phenomenon of

globalization – was deeply troubling as well as liberating. Driven by the competitive imperatives of late capitalism, the renewed 'openness' of the world could appear rapacious, its intolerance of barriers often manifesting itself in the rapid erosion of the localized traditions that bind communities together, as well as in crass indifference to the intricate long-term effects of ecological damage, where this conflicted with economic gain. The spirit of the age that was emerging at the start of the 1990s was a new form of internationalism, experienced directly through the near instantaneous global reach of communications technology. But it was an internationalism where openness was often experienced as anxiety, instead of optimism. In the wake of some of the world's most oppressive systems crumbling, globalization seemed to heighten awareness of vulnerability within all areas of life and, at its outer limit, to intensify the feeling that the fate of the earth itself was precarious.

In this new climate, the theme of nature emerged within a variety of forms of popular culture with renewed force. In an influential article published at the end of the 1990s, Leo Braudy asserted confidently that 'for almost a decade both the popular and political cultures of the United States have been preoccupied with the question of nature' (1998: 278). Braudy argued that, within popular narratives particularly, this preoccupation with the 'question of nature' was manifested in forms whose common features suggested the emergence of an overarching 'genre of nature'. This genre is characterized by its assertion of both the value and precariousness of an innocence that is persistently associated with the natural world. The late twentieth-century nature genre is 'energised by a sense of imminent world destruction that results not from war but from the fatal by-products of human progress and success – the apocalypse of trash. … the 1990s seem attached to the assumption that only an untouched and perhaps impossible freshness will allow a new beginning' (ibid.: 292). We have already examined some of the implications of this renewed desire for an 'impossible freshness' in *Pocahontas*. Braudy's analysis suggests that the protagonists of these sagas are often typed as 'primitives' – Neanderthals, aborigines or aliens who, 'even when they come from another … more technologically advanced civilization, … retain an indomitable innocence' (ibid.: 290). But this simple innocence is associated even more frequently with animals and children, the very figures who stand at the heart of the Disney's animations.

> Animals and children are often the incantatory familiars of this commitment to nature, and their fluidity is expressed by a visual preoccupation with rivers, streams, oceans …. Water in particular stands in for the repressed values of nature that must be acknowledged before heroism can be achieved and culture renovated. (ibid.: 291)

Braudy's analysis is richly suggestive and I will return to particular aspects of it in exploring individual films later in this chapter. For the moment though I want simply to suggest how congruent the sensibility underpinning what Braudy defines as the 'genre of nature' is with key elements of Disney's films. 'Innocence' and 'nature' had long been the keynotes of value within Disney narratives. Michael Eisner's changes to the organization and ethos of the Disney Corporation coincided with a period when these qualities would play an increasingly crucial role in the formation of political and cultural sensibilities of the new era. The moment was ripe, in other words, for Disney's

core themes to be redefined with new creative energies that tapped into the sensitivities that were emerging with particular intensity at the end of the century.

A rough index of the extent to which the renewed creative energies associated with Disney animations from around 1990 were harnessed to the theme of nature can be gauged from considering the sheer number of feature animations set in the wild natural world. Between 1990 and 2004, not counting sequels and straight to video productions, Disney was responsible for around fourteen animated feature titles (the figure is disputable because Disney put its name to films made by companies such as Pixar, whose productions Disney distributed but over which it exercised little creative control). Of these films no less than seven are set primarily in the wild. *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *A Bug's Life* (1999), *Tarzan* (1999), *Dinosaur* (2000), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Brother Bear* (2003) are set within an extraordinarily varied range of natural environments and periods of history. We perceive the world in these films through the eyes of creatures in all domains of the animal hierarchy, from ants and fish to extinct species of dinosaur to the familiar repertoire of mammals with more obvious human affinities. But all centre on relationships within wild nature, configured with differing degrees of realism and anthropomorphic sentiment. This concentration on the genre of nature and the apparently inexhaustible imaginative variety it has engendered achieved perhaps its most extraordinary concentration in the five-year period between 1999 and 2004, when five of the animated features produced focused on one dimension or another of a wild natural environment. More than a significant cultural orientation, multiple configurations of the natural world have become almost an obsession. Within this body of work it is also notable how many films have an exotic setting within the tropics. Before 1990 *The Jungle Book* was, as we have seen, unique in exploiting the potential of an exotic natural location. Since then there have been four films – *The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, *Dinosaur* and *Finding Nemo* – that have used predominately tropical locations.

What links all these films most strikingly is that they are structured so that young viewers will align themselves with the point of view of animals or even – explicitly in some instances – with cosmologies that centre on sustaining the qualities of the environment as a whole. Many commentators have been dismissive of such structural features – if indeed they are noted at all – seeing them simply as evidence of the sentimental anthropomorphizing tendencies that have marked Disney's enterprises from the time of the first animations. But it seems to me that the sheer pervasiveness of such features within recent films should prompt a more discriminating and attentive response. For, while these films continue to operate largely within the limitations of a perspective that projects human sensibilities onto wild nature and fosters empathy with cute animals, there are breaks within this dominant mode of representation whose significance is worth exploring. Moreover a number of recent animations appear to be conscious of environmental processes and issues in forms for which there are no real earlier equivalents, even within such a powerful and innovative film as *Bambi*. It is thus a question of some importance as to whether the adoption of a narrative point of view aligned with animal figures may have the potential to develop lines of thought and feeling that move beyond cosy sentiment. Since exploration of the desire – or fantasy – of a mode of being much closer to

nature than modern existence allows lies at the heart of this question, I shall begin by looking at *Tarzan*, a narrative in which the fantasy of complete human immersion in the wild is given full rein. As *Tarzan*, like *The Jungle Book*, is based on the idea of the *enfant sauvage*, it will also serve as a link to the themes and issues we began to explore in the last chapter.

Tarzan tells the story of a young English aristocrat, Lord Greystoke, whose parents are first shipwrecked on the coast of West Africa while on an ill-fated expedition and then killed by a leopard. The orphaned baby is discovered by an ape, whose infant has also died recently and who adopts the human child as a surrogate for her own offspring. Tarzan is the name bestowed on the young Lord Greystoke by the apes; he is brought up in the ape community, aware of his difference from the other apes but oblivious, for a long time, of the precise nature of his human identity. A chance discovery of the cabin that his parents built after their shipwreck provides him with images of other humans but he cannot understand their full significance. The arrival of a group of English explorers, nominally headed by an eccentric professor who wants to study apes but actually driven by the aggressive instincts of the hunter–guide, completes the first stage of Tarzan's sentimental education. From this point on, the plot begins to mix adventure with romance, as Tarzan deploys his animal strength and jungle acumen to rescue the Professor's beautiful daughter, Jane, from a series of dangerous situations. As Tarzan's intimacy with Jane develops, the European group's interest in the apes begins to pull Tarzan's allegiances in two directions. In satisfying the group's curiosity (and, unwittingly, the guide Clayton's hidden ambition to capture the creatures) Tarzan betrays his ape 'family', exposing the apes by facilitating contact with his human friends. The last part of the film's narrative can be read as a parable in which crass economic drives to exploit the natural world undermine the credibility of more humane scientific interests. The Professor's project of observing gorillas gives way to Clayton's concealed plan to capture the apes for an undisclosed western market, at a price of '300 pounds sterling' per head. In the inevitable happy ending, Clayton's exploitative aggression is thwarted by the heroic alliance of Tarzan and the jungle animals, while the romantic plot is resolved by installing an unlikely ménage of Jane, Tarzan and the Professor in a restored version of the innocent jungle paradise.

The character of Tarzan is founded throughout on a contradiction that, as in the earlier *Jungle Book*, reverses conventional expectations about human identity within Western society. Just as Mowgli's desire to remain in the jungle can be seen as a playful inversion of a normal child's fear of exposure to the hostile environment of wilderness without human contact, so *Tarzan* reverses the ordinary relationship between culture and instinctual drives. We are used to perceiving culture as quintessentially human and instinctual drives as related to our animal natures. Within the narrative of *Tarzan* (particularly evident in Burroughs's novel but informing more subtle aspects of humour in the Disney film as well) the hero's culture, gestures and responses are shaped by his relationship with the apes, whereas it is his instincts that mark him off as distinctively human. This dimension is part of the more general fascination exercised by the image (and myth) of the 'child of nature' within the Western imagination. But in the film it is also a rhetorical device that estranges us from our normative modes of understanding, edging viewers away from their

ordinary perceptions and expectations. In this respect *Tarzan* and *The Jungle Book* tend to work rather differently however. Mowgli's facility for mimicry in *The Jungle Book*, for instance, is a human instinct that suggests his identity is less fixed, more amenable to adaptation, than those of the other jungle animals whose behaviour he often imitates. But, as we have noted, the animal movements that Mowgli imitates – the dancing bear and the military display of the elephants – are in fact often a pastiche of human gestures. Although I have suggested that this still allows ideas about human relationships with nature to be invoked and played out at a thematic level, the natural world that is displayed here remains quite thoroughly humanized. Even when the film wants to signal the primal ferocity that underlies the tiger's sinuous grace, it does so by having Shere Khan inspect the sharpness of his extended claws in a gesture more reminiscent of the stock villain of melodrama than of the big cat in a natural environment.

Tarzan's instinct for mimicry and repertoire of gestures, on the other hand, are deployed to quite different effect. When Tarzan imitates the sound and movement of Sabor the leopard in the film, for instance, he does so within a social context – playfully attempting to scare his ape 'mother', a behaviour mode with clear human correlatives. But the actual sound and movements he reproduces are designed to be close to the realistic portrayal of a wild leopard. The animators of *Tarzan* were generally fascinated by the idea of reproducing animal-like gestures accurately using the human form; indeed they perceived the medium of animation as being uniquely well adapted to the pursuit of this goal. Configuring the human instinct for mimicry in this more realistic form has a potentially different impact to the mode deployed in *The Jungle Book*; Tarzan's body is made to go beyond what would be naturally possible for a human being and the effect is to reinforce a strange sense of the otherness of animal gesture. At the same time the fantasy of being at one with animal nature is fulfilled and reinforced.

The capacity of animal gesture to make ordinary human interactions appear strange, and available to be seen freshly, is exploited in other ways within the film of *Tarzan*. Recently, an important strand of philosophical and social theory, grounded in ecological values, has focused on the effects of sight having acquired privileged status within the hierarchy of the senses. Sight has been granted overwhelming predominance, it is argued, in authenticating knowledge and experience within the modern world (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 104–29). The privileging of the realm of the visual, which tends to confer power on the observer in ways that distance the viewing subject from the world that is seen and controlled, is often taken to be a major constituent of the estrangement from the natural world that constitutes the experience of modernity. A number of theorists have emphasized the role that senses other than the visual have played in pre-industrial societies, while feminist writers have claimed that the cultural pre-eminence of sight has had a structural role in underwriting patriarchal power.

Seen from this perspective, the scene in *Tarzan* where the hero first encounters Jane could be understood as having more than lightly comic undertones. Tarzan, lacking verbal means for communicating with the extravagantly befrocked girl he has just rescued, approaches her cautiously on all fours till he achieves an intimate bodily proximity that alarms the bemused Jane. He then proceeds to sniff her from

different angles, even progressing tentatively towards lifting the edge of her dress so he can extend his exploration to that most fascinating region for olefactory encounters – between her legs. Jane finally regains her self-control at this point and firmly slaps him down. This little vignette is in part a comedy of manners, playing on the parallels and contrasts between animal behaviours for establishing intimacy and the courtship rituals human males engage in when they attempt to get past 'first base'. But it also highlights how exclusively human rituals tend to rely on the visual and verbal and, in doing so, opens up a thoughtful space within which the assumptions underlying normative behaviour are made strange and potentially questioned.

The extent to which the animators are exploring new territory here can be gauged by contrasting this episode with Edgar Rice Burroughs's evocation of Jane's first intimate encounter with Tarzan. Burroughs has Jane thrill to a primeval struggle between male bodies as she watches Tarzan kill the mighty ape Terkoz in order to protect her. Intoxicated by the struggle, Jane gives way to her primitive passions, yielding to Tarzan in a passionate embrace, before recovering a sense of civilized decorum and pushing him away. The muse of dime-store romantic adventure has Burroughs in thrall here, as he focuses primarily on Jane's response:

> Jane – her lithe young form flattened against the trunk of a great tree; her hands tight pressed against her rising and falling bosom, and her eyes wide with mingled horror, fascination, fear and admiration – watched the primordial ape battle with the primeval man for possession of a woman – for her. (1990: 174)

The scene – all heaving bosoms and passionate desires, barely repressed beneath the veneer of socially inculcated propriety – offers nothing beyond the stereotyped rhetoric of popular romance. Tarzan's acute use of his sense of smell is noted in other parts of the novel; here his courtship is rendered wholly conventionally however, the rhetoric of 'primeval man' merely adding an exotic frisson to his stock role of countermanding the turmoil of Jane's contradictory, feminine emotions with the simpler edicts of masculine desire and authority. When the last of Tarzan's polite advances to Jane has been repulsed, Burroughs takes some delight in informing us, 'Tarzan of the Apes did just what his first ancestor would have done. He took his woman in his arms and carried her off into the jungle' (ibid.). It is hard not to feel some relief in moving from this to the Disney version. Burroughs's rendering of the scene is sealed off within a dramatically enhanced version of the gendered ideologies of his time. In comparison, Disney's image appears open to the challenge of different ideas and perspectives, exploring the nature–human dichotomy afresh with some brio and wit.

The argument I am rehearsing here would suggest that the more interesting kinds of engagement with ideas of nature that take place in *Tarzan* depend on the film's adopting a more realistic aesthetic, in terms of its representation of the natural world, than was the case in *The Jungle Book*. This enhanced realism does not just extend to the depiction of animal movement and adaptive human gesture however. As with *Bambi*, the animators of *Tarzan* took considerable care to render the details of the jungle environment, as well as the movement of the apes in particular, as accurately as possible. Thousands of still photographs and extensive film footage were shot

during a field trip to Uganda, where gorillas could be observed in wild habitats, and these images were studied intensively in creating the drawings from which the film of *Tarzan* was developed. Doug Ball, the Artistic Supervisor for Backgrounds, stated that he wanted the field photography to provide him with as much detailed information of the jungle environment as possible, 'of the moss, of the vines, of the different types of trees, the bark on the trees, from the smallest details to (information provided by) the longer shots' (Disney DVD 2000). Whereas, I have argued, the look and feel of the landscape in *The Jungle Book* is essentially painterly – more specifically indebted to Gauguin and Le Douanier Rousseau – *Tarzan* merges the cartoon/caricaturist's art with the realism of location photography.

Films are not still photographs or paintings however, since the impressions they create are sequenced in time and the images are almost constantly moving. The realism inherent within individual frames of a film is rendered more complex than the still images through which it is constituted, as the experience of watching is caught up in rhythms created by camera movement and cutting, as well being affected by the speed with which actions within particular sequences take place. In this respect, the realism of *Tarzan*, though it takes as its starting point the close observation of the natural world, differs markedly from that of *Bambi*. The pastoral world of *Bambi* is composed in a spirit of lyricism; the camera is often still or moves slowly around the forest floor so that attention may be caught up almost as much in the shifting shapes and dappled colours of the woodland environment as in the actions of the protagonists. *Tarzan* is predominantly an action movie however, and the viewer is connected to its images of a natural environment in a quite different mode. These differences are enhanced by the way the film makes use of technological innovation in the field of animation, in particular the so called 'deep canvas' effect that software developments for computer-generated images have made available. Deep canvas enables animators to model a sense three-dimensional space on the screen that accurately adjusts perspective, lighting and contour as the camera moves through a particular environment. The technique is used so extensively in *Tarzan* that it becomes almost a hallmark of the film. It is particularly effective in rendering Tarzan's movement through the jungle. As he swings from vine to vine and uses the branches of trees as roadways through the air, the camera appears to follow him – often at breathtaking speed. The three-dimensional contours of the scene are adapted to the constantly shifting perspectives of the pursuing camera with extraordinary facility and accuracy.

The effect, quite conscious on the animators' part, is to make the experience of movement through the jungle equivalent to that of an extreme roller-coaster ride in a theme park or to the spectacle of watching the most extraordinarily agile skateboarder transform the hard landscape of an urban environment into a dextrously negotiated slalom run. 'I wanted it to be like a thrill ride', stated the Art Director, Dan St Pierre (ibid.). Within these sequences Tarzan's body movements imitate those of surfers and skateboarders, rather than apes. The choice of imagery is hardly accidental, since it associates the film with the kudos of the iconic folk heroes of urban youth culture whilst linking, like a simulated ride, with Disney's other great commercial empire in the realm of modern childhood – the theme park. In terms of the experience of the natural world that is offered, however, the effect is ambiguous; the impression

of environmental realism created by surface detail is transformed, through speed and movement, into a visceral analogue that is quintessentially modern.

The experience that the film offers of time and modernity is important, not only as a selling point in terms of its youth audience but also in terms of what it suggests about how we relate to the 'nature' that is *Tarzan*'s distinctive theme. Time, indeed, is perhaps the most fundamental structuring element within the experience of modernity that separates us from nature. Our vast resources of technologically harnessed energy enable us to condense time in the speed at which we are able to move through our environment. We seal ourselves up, in the process, within our cars, trains and aeroplanes, so that we lose contact with the natural sounds and smells around us. Our use of electricity enables us to live substantially outside the rhythms of natural time, as defined by the seasons, the sequence of light and darkness. Instead we adapt and segment our lives according to the demands of the clock, that mechanical arbiter of time whose emergence within early modern culture so profoundly conditioned the way human experience was organized.

For all the elements of surface realism in its portrayal of the natural world, *Tarzan* does not provide the viewer with experience equivalent to that of natural time. It is debatable whether any art form can do this completely, though I would argue that some kinds of art (the lyrical–pastoral mode, for instance, with its feeling for detail, slow change and elemental life patterns) are potentially more sensitive to this dimension than others. But if *Tarzan* transforms natural rhythms into the experience of speed so characteristic of modernity, then it does so in ways that occasionally betray a knowing awareness of its own condition. When the animals accidentally stumble upon Professor Porter's deserted camp, for instance, we focus on salient features of the camp afresh, from the creatures' viewpoint, registering their stunned surprise. What greets our gaze – in a staccato rhythm imposed by the jump cut editing – is a sequence of artefacts that epitomize human culture and modernity. Starting with a grandfather clock (shot from an extremely low angle – worthy of *Citizen Kane* – to heighten its dramatic impact), we proceed to chemical distillation apparatus, a typewriter and a steaming teapot. This brief montage seems to offer, in metonymic form, a resumé of modern civilization – from mechanically ordered time, to science, the printed word and social ritual founded on international, colonial trade. No wonder then, that the elephant's alarmed response to this shocking tableau of modernity is to ejaculate, 'The horror!' to a stunned animal audience. All this is delightfully silly, of course: a ludicrous reconfiguring of the nihilistic despair expressed by the character of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In its new context, this is a frivolous aside, designed to entertain Disney's adult audience. But it does show the scriptwriters' awareness of more complex issues underlying the film's major themes and it keeps the audience intellectually alive to the possibilities inherent in reversing animal and human viewpoints. Gazing disdainfully at the scientific equipment sprawled around the centre of the camp, Disney's young gorilla Terk asks 'What kind of primitive creatures are responsible for this mess?'

The patter line of jokes is prevented from reaching any deeper levels of suggestiveness, however, by the essentially de-historicized nature of the film narrative. Conrad's famous line 'The horror' was a response to extreme dehumanization, in the context of a particularly abhorrent form of colonial rule,

while Burroughs's novel, alongside the virulent racism that informs most of the images of black Africans, provides a more sympathetic historical rationale for the native humans' incursion into Tarzan's territory. The black Africans have migrated as a result of harsh treatment by European colonials in the same, Belgian-run territories that Conrad excoriated. By contrast, the action of Disney's film takes place in an unspecified landscape of the imagination that is, as the opening song informs us, a 'paradise' previously untouched by humans. By eschewing the complications of colonial history the Disney version avoids some of the problems – as well as the positive challenges – encountered in *Pocahontas*. But as a result, potentially probing lines and comic devices connect only at a simplified, surface level. The real 'mess' of modern civilization – and the attitudes towards the natural world that underpin it – can be understood only in relation to the histories of both science and colonialism. But the gorilla's 'joke' is inoculated against probing such connections even lightly by its decoupling from history. Although the Professor carries the apparatus of hard science around with him, he is typed as an innocuous, childlike figure whose 'experiments' consist only of observing animals (where his inept movements allow) in a spirit of rapt, almost stupefied, admiration. In the Victorian period where the film is ostensibly set, on the other hand, the most enlightened naturalists who made expeditions to tropical regions – men like Alfred Russel – saw themselves as collectors as much as observers, shooting, poisoning and pinning onto boards as many different species of wildlife as they could manage (Raby, 2001). Disney's trans-historical, buffoon-like scientist owes more to late twentieth-century wildlife protection movements, formed in response to the prospect of major species extinction and to the cult of the ape inspired by popular conservation sagas like *Gorillas in the Mist*, than to any real-life Victorian counterpart. The result of this historical sleight of hand, which separates the benign scientific observer of wildlife absolutely from the hunter–collector who shoots and traps animals for the market, is to produce a cosy fiction that, while it enhances the film's feel-good effect, restricts the degree to which its humour is probing.

A more sustained, and perhaps deeper, kind of exploration is suggested by the way the theme of representation is embedded in the film however. Whereas the potentially troubled relationship between science, knowledge and controlling power is finessed in *Tarzan* so that it is rendered safe, the power associated with images and looking is a more persistently contested issue in the film. Jane and Professor Porter have come to Africa to 'look' at gorillas, as they keep reminding Clayton when he repeatedly fires his gun. Jane records images of the animals she encounters in a series of finely drawn sketches. All this might pass without comment in the film, as human behaviour that does nothing to upset normative expectations. But more problematic perspectives are opened up through an extended sequence in which a baboon struggles with Jane for possession of the sketch she has just drawn of him. It is possible to read this struggle as simply a comic enactment of the anarchic play that is commonly perceived as characterizing monkey interactions with humans. But the issue of who has ownership of the baboon image is treated with frightening intensity, as well as humour, in the film. The young baboon's attempt to gain possession of Jane's sketch is supported by the whole of the baboon tribe, who pursue Jane with a ferocity that would appear to place her in mortal danger, were she not assisted by

Tarzan's more than capable grasp. The intensity of the scene makes it difficult to write it off as simple, monkey devilment – as in *The Jungle Book* – while Tarzan's handing back the sketch to the baboons, when he and Jane have finally thrown off the pursuit, appears to be teaching the heroine a moral lesson.

The ownership and use that can be made of images of human beings has become a hotly contested issue in recent years, especially in relation to rights of privacy. And in a different, but parallel, vein, the Disney Corporation have long been used to fighting sometimes ferocious legal battles over the right to reproduce images of characters from its films. In this scene – although within an imaginative realm – Tarzan seems to be tacitly adjudicating in favour of the animals' rights; Jane is made to appear naïve in assuming that the process of representation is unproblematic and that the animal she is drawing is simply the object of her artist's gaze. The creature turns out to have teeth, as they say, and what ensues is indisputably a power struggle over ownership of the image that we are encouraged to examine from both animal and human points of view.

Although the idea that animals have rights in relation to the images human beings make of them might appear ridiculous, the issues involved here are in fact far from trivial. John Berger's influential essay 'Why Look at Animals' examines the power relationship embedded within the human need for images of animals. Berger reflects on how 'the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. Thus a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man' (1980: 3). Although animals are distinct they also share many qualities with humans. This ambiguity is at the heart of the fascination which animals hold for humans.

> What were the secrets of the animals' likeness with and unlikeness from man? … All the secrets were about animals as an *intercession* between man and his origin. …. With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species. (ibid.: 4)

This analysis seems especially pertinent to *Tarzan*, where the primary interest focuses on images of apes – long considered the closest link between 'man and his origins' – and the ambiguous 'ape-man'. Berger reminds us further, that though images of animals may express a desire for companionship, the power conferred by knowledge simultaneously distances us, making that desire unattainable. Thus, within 'the accompanying ideology' of wildlife photography in children's picture books, 'Animals are always the observed. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know the further away they are' (ibid.: 14). The unease that Disney's *Tarzan* betrays in the interactions that surround attempts to represent animals would seem to mix awareness of this distance with a sentimental move to cancel it. The bizarre image of the mixed happy family at the film's ending, which closes the gap between the worlds of apes and humans completely, attempts to heal this aching awareness of separation in a realm of pure fantasy.

This fantasy also represents a shift in cultural values. Although the desire to shed our knowledge and consciousness of ourselves as different might be seen as primarily regressive, it connects to contemporary revaluations of the 'primitive' in more critical ways too. Leo Braudy's analysis of the role of the primitive within the recently evolved 'genre of nature' suggests that it expresses a dissatisfaction at the heart of late twentieth-century social experience that is not simply modish and superficial. Disney's Tarzan is, indeed, an archetypal example of Braudy's nature-orientated primitive – innocent in attitude, animal-like in behaviour, Neanderthal in culture. The fantasy he embodies does not simply represent an escape from the politically compromised, environmentally anxiety-ridden, world that Braudy sees as prompting the emergence of the new genre of nature. It is also an attempt to reformulate, within an affective domain, the distinctive position of humanity in the process of evolution. The fantasy that structures Disney's *Tarzan*, in other words, involves remoulding key elements of the Darwinist inheritance of imagery and thought.

The film signals its intentions in this regard with the opening song by Phil Collins, which asserts roundly that the realms of animal and human constitute 'One world, one family'. This contention is then developed at a number of different levels within the plot, so that it becomes a virtual leitmotif for the film as a whole. Its force thus becomes something more than that of a simple metaphor. Taken literally – which the sentimental focus on Kala as Tarzan's mother encourages us to do – the image of 'one family' encompassing both humans and apes runs counter to the principle that is the very engine of evolutionary change. Evolution takes place, in the Darwinian model, because organisms adapt within their environments to the point where they represent a break within the 'family' containing other creatures of shared ancestry. Species differentiation means that breeding (or creating a 'family') with creatures other than one's own particular kind is abnormal and, in many instances, becomes anatomically impossible. Although the metaphor of 'cousin' is commonly employed to indicate evolutionary proximity in the animal world, the more intimate relations implied by the term 'family', as deployed within *Tarzan*, normally take place only within the confines of a single species.

Clearly the extension of the idea of family to embrace inter-species relationships in *Tarzan* is designed to suggest a positive response to the notion of shared ancestry with animals that so disturbed Darwin's contemporaries at the end of the nineteenth century. But it goes further than substituting a sentimental wish to identify with animals for the older fear that the bestial within humanity was degrading. The 'two worlds' of animals and humans in *Tarzan* run in parallel, rather than being constituted as a hierarchy. Hence the assumption, inherent within popular understandings of Darwin, that evolution involves progress to higher states of being is countered, or at least pushed to one side. Instead, the image of family not only affirms what is shared between animals and humans as being most decisive, but also implies a sense of equality in terms of rights and respect for non-human life forms that chimes sympathetically with recent developments in ecocriticism and the green movement more generally. This distinctive new attitude is effectively summarized by Tim Ingold, when he urges readers to regard animal species other than human as '*different*', rather than as 'failed – or at best partially successful attempts at humanity ….

To defeat anthropomorphism we must stop interpreting statements about the disabilities of other species as assertions of their inferiority' (1988: 10).

The revisionist model of popular Darwinism that is so central to *Tarzan* can be seen working in different ways within other recent Disney animations. *Dinosaur*, for instance, opens with the narrator's proposition (similar to ideas derived from chaos theory that have influenced our recent understanding of environmental processes) that 'sometimes the smallest things can make the biggest changes of all'. The film goes on to portray a world inhabited by small mammals and dinosaurs that is disrupted by an environmental catastrophe, when the earth is hit by a large asteroid. The plot is thus founded on an event similar to that which is thought to have exterminated the dinosaurs 200 million years ago and changed the course of evolutionary history irrevocably.

As well as being analogous to one of the most dramatic events in the early history of the earth, the film's central motif of environmental catastrophe is no doubt also designed to resonate with contemporary anxieties. The ensuing flight of the animals, trying to escape the fallout from the asteroid explosion, combines one of the oldest narrative structures, the journey, with the drama of survival that is so central to Darwin's evolutionary plot. The development of the narrative is hardly realistic: the small mammals have 'adopted' a non-aggressive dinosaur that they find as an abandoned egg and the journey itself conflates notions of periodic migration to breeding grounds with the more random movement brought about through the wide-scale destruction of environment. But it does incorporate conflicting ideas about the processes that will best enable the survival of different species within testing environments. In part, these ideas debate human social values – in particular the rival claims of competitive individualism set off against more caring attitudes that prioritize the needs of the whole community. But such debates also have correlatives in the categories devised by ecologists to distinguish between the qualities of pioneer species, for instance, which display dominant, aggressive features in colonizing hostile environments initially, and the species that take over as the environment matures and which coexist in more complex interdependent modes (Eisenberg, 2000; Meeker, 1972: 27–33).

A similar conflict of ideas can also be seen as underpinning the narrative of *The Lion King*. The film's framing image of a 'circle of life', within which all creatures form an interdependent whole that ensures continuity through the cycle of life and death, is ruptured when a single species – the hyena – acquires dominance. As in *Dinosaur*, the environmental catastrophe that results from this ecological imbalance is configured in forms that connect with apocalyptic contemporary visions of the precarious fate of the earth. After the usurping lion, Scar, has allowed the hyenas to take over, the landscape is depicted as turning into a desert – resembling those imagined within recent apocalyptic film narratives – in which no larger life forms can exist. But the film does not really engage in any serious way with the processes that underlie profound ecological imbalances. No reason is invoked as to why predation by hyenas should be any more destabilizing within the environment of the African savannah than predation by lions, while the link to climate change suggested by the ensuing drought is a metaphor for moral degradation, rather than being connected to any rational cause in the natural world. *The Lion King* is, as Annalee Ward has argued, a predominantly mythic narrative, which employs archetypes and rituals, often with strong biblical overtones (2002: 10–32). The film's literary roots lie in

the contest of ideas about 'kingship' that animate Elizabethan drama – especially *Hamlet* and *Henry IV* – and the animal characters act almost entirely as ciphers for human attributes and psychology, with minimal realistic grounding in the natural environment that serves as a backdrop for the action. Hence, as in the later Pixar animated fable, *A Bug's Life*, the film's connection to ideas about nature, as opposed to human society, is actually rather limited.

By contrast, however, Pixar's most recent offering under the Disney label, *Finding Nemo*, though also a psychologized morality tale in which animal behaviour is inflected with primarily human motivation, connects with the natural world in much more varied and richer forms. It will therefore be the subject of the last part of this chapter. The most distinctive single characteristic that defines the natural world portrayed in *Finding Nemo* is that it is under water. The watery realm has perhaps always been an important site for imaginative fiction read by children. Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and Henry Williamson's great animal sagas, *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon*, spring immediately to mind as examples. Disney, moreover, had made intermittent forays into the underwater realm, within some of its early nature documentaries, in the animated features *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Little Mermaid*, and in live action movies such as *Splash*, for instance. But no animator before Pixar had, to my knowledge, invested the underwater world with such loving and precise attention to detail as can be found in nearly every frame of *Finding Nemo.* The film is, as many reviewers acknowledged, both extraordinarily beautiful and realistic in the impression it creates of a range of different tropical ocean environments. David Edelstein's excitement at the film's 'sheer eye-popping beauty' was also characteristic of other reviewers' responses, if couched in a somewhat more hyperbolic, colloquial style. 'Pixar does fish like nobody does fish' he extolled in a review (2003). The film's fish protagonists also broke new ground as figures with which children were invited to identify. Not obviously cute or cuddly, and with a leading role in the narrative rather than being presented as human side-kicks, the fish present a challenge for the filmmakers in extending the range of animal forms with which viewers can be affiliated.

The ocean environment that the fish inhabit suggests connections to Braudy's idea that the fluidity of the watery medium may express values of nature that are ordinarily repressed (1998: 291). But what is immediately striking about the film is the more obvious commitment to representing the physical environment that is shown, through the care taken over nearly every realistic detail. All leading members of the production team took scuba diving lessons so that they could experience the terrain of the coral reef directly for themselves. The natural history of the marine environments portrayed was extensively researched through both museums and books. A professor of animal physiology was brought in to advise on the precise movement of fish; the director/writer, Andrew Stanton, was particularly fascinated by the way fishes' bodies are semi-translucent and the models on which animators based their simulations carefully incorporated this quality. The multidimensional quality of constantly shifting light patterns in the marine environment more generally was so carefully modelled in a succession of early simulations, indeed, that the images became virtually indistinguishable from documentary footage within films such as *The Blue Planet*. The overall texture of the image had to be subtly adjusted so that it would not impede

the creation of an animation-style aesthetic, which requires that some distance from reality be established to exploit the expressive freedom of the medium fully. As Stanton put it, the world depicted had become too real, 'we want you to believe that it exists but we want you also to believe that you are in a make-believe world' (Disney DVD, 2004). No Disney-sponsored film since *Bambi* had invested so much effort in creating the impression of surface realism within a natural environment.

But what is the ultimate effect of this surface realism and why is it needed in a film where, superficially at least, the animals' concerns and motivations appear almost as exclusively human as those portrayed in *The Lion King*? To make a start in addressing these questions, we need to explore more fully how the film's story is realized within the animated medium. The plot of *Finding Nemo* concerns the search of a clownfish, called Marlin, for his son Nemo. Nemo is captured by a scuba diving dentist from Sydney early on in the film and then held in a marine aquarium that is displayed in the dentist's surgery. Marlin has earlier been widowed when a barracuda attacks his family just outside his anemone home on the edge of a coral reef, devouring not only his wife but also 399 of their 400 eggs, that are about to hatch. Nemo thus becomes, in a very special sense, Marlin's only son, invested with a double weight of paternal attachment that springs from traumatic loss. The story, as Philip French has remarked, is loosely based on John Ford's classic Western *The Searchers*, though the scenes in which the small fish are attacked, first by a barracuda and then by a hilariously scary Great White Shark called Bruce, could also be seen as a homage to the more recent horror/thriller classics *Jaws* and *The Shining* (French, 2003). As in Ford's *The Searchers*, the hero's long journey to retrieve an offspring whose violent capture has torn his family apart is shaped by tensions in the relationship with a 'buddy' figure who travels alongside. In place of Jeffrey Hunter however, *Finding Nemo* has a blue tang fish called Dory, who suffers from chronic memory loss and is played with immaculate comic timing by Ellen DeGeneres. Albert Brooks's neurotically anxious Marlin is likewise more Woody Allen than John Wayne, but the narrative has its own inner strength and is played out with great wit and style throughout.

There is little in the plot résumé presented thus far to suggest any underlying concern with animal behaviour and interests that might be enhanced by the film's impressively realistic depiction of movement and undersea environment. But, although neither the overwhelmingly human psychology of the talking fish nor the skilful integration of references to the classic repertoire of Hollywood films justifies this realism, the film does display an extraordinary range of knowledge of the underwater world it depicts. It is this knowledge, embedded in a variety of forms, that connects with the surface realism and makes *Finding Nemo* such a rich viewing experience at a number of different levels.

The theme of knowledge, indeed, becomes overt from an early stage. The environment of the reef is reviewed initially from a fish-eyed perspective that is thoroughly annexed to the anxieties of middle-class suburbia, as Marlin extols the virtues of their new home to his wife in terms of the space, neighbourhood and quality of amenities that it offers. But in the aftermath of the traumatic attack that ruptures this suburban idyll, the focus moves on swiftly to the issue of Nemo's schooling. This too installs a human frame of reference, of course – the idea of 'schooling' is at best a metaphor for the adaptive modes of behaviour learned by animals. But the

education theme allows a wealth of largely scientific discourses about the natural environment to circulate around the realistic visual imagery of the reef, anchoring this imagery within a domain of 'objective' knowledge that is playfully and half-jokingly rehearsed. The doyen of this domain of scientific knowledge is Nemo's new teacher, a stingray whose curvetting flight around the underwater world is matched by the streams of instruction and tutelage that issue from him continually, swirling in quick-fire verbal eddies around the young fish.

The form in which this knowledge is offered to the young audience – both viewers and fish – is distinctive. The scientific categories that are proposed for understanding the nature of the reef environment are often abstruse and specialized. Moreover the speed at which these new terms of reference are delivered makes it impossible to grasp more than a surface impression of their significance. It is often difficult enough to distinguish key terms, let alone to cognitively assimilate them. Yet the terms are meaningful. When Mr Ray first swings into view, he is intoning a list of the different kinds of spaces into which the sea environment is scientifically divided. Exuding enthusiasm, he chants:

> Let's name the zones of the open sea.
> There's epipelagic, mesopelagic, bathyal, abyssalpelagic;
> All the rest are too deep for you and me to see.

The divisions between these zones are not pure abstractions, for the reef fish look out on what, in more colloquial language, is described as the 'drop-off zone', where the ocean shelves steeply to its deeper levels. Crossing into this deeper, more open zone is perceived as dangerous and much of the drama in the film relates to choices that must be made in moving from one distinctively defined area in the ocean to another. But there is a further aspect of the way this knowledge is presented here that is equally significant. Through some near miracle of elocution Bob Peterson, who voices the Mr Ray character, manages to deliver his convoluted inventory of different zones with all the sing-song, rhythmic simplicity of a nursery rhyme. As this extraordinary, piscine pedagogue later extols 'Knowledge exploring is oh so lyrical, when you think thoughts that are empirical': Mr Ray, it seems, would have his rationalist, scientific categories embodied within the rhapsodies of the poets. The verse quality may be more *Sesame Street* than Keats, but the lines suggest, in a comic mode, that analytic understanding is wholly commensurate with the sense of beauty and wonder that the 'lyrical' encapsulates.

Linking the scientific urge towards categorization with the realm of sensuous feeling is not only important because it connects with innovative kinds of pedagogy that children's television has been particularly adept at developing. For the rift between the forms of cognitive abstraction that characterize empirical understanding and more direct modes of apprehending sensuous reality – that have often been seen as less estranged – runs deep within modern culture. This rift has been of central concern to writers as varied as William Blake, D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley. Lawrence, in particular, returns to this theme repeatedly, at times in forms that would seem relevant to the modes of presentation offered in *Finding Nemo*. In his early novella *The Trespasser*, for instance, he explores, through his female protagonist

Helen Corke, a mode of being in the world that is directly antithetical to Mr Ray's implied philosophy of learning through abstract categorization:

> She refused to learn the names of the stars, or of the constellations, as of the wayside plants: "Why should I want to label them", she would say. "I want to look at them not hide them under a name." So she laughed when he asked her to find a Vega or an Actura. (1981: 99)

Lawrence's novella appears critical of the Helen Corke character at times and does not wholly endorse the attitude expressed here. But the conflict between sensuous apprehension and forms of knowledge that are more cerebral and disassociated was an issue that became increasingly pressing in Lawrence's later work. It informs, for instance, a debate about children's education in *Women in Love*, where the ideas argued over are loaded with the most fraught and intense undercurrents of personal emotion. Here it is the emotionally complex figure of Hermione who is used to articulate an extreme viewpoint, vigorously contested by her lover, Rupert Birkin:

> "Are not young people growing up today, really dead before they have a chance to live?"
> "Not because they have too much mind but too little," he said brutally.
> "Are you sure?" she cried. "It seems to me the reverse. They are over-conscious, burdened to death with consciousness."
> "Imprisoned within a limited, false set of concepts," he cried.
> But she took no notice of this, only went on with her own rhapsodic interrogation.
> "When we have knowledge, don't we lose everything but knowledge?" she asked pathetically. "If I know about the flower don't I lose the flower and have only the knowledge? Aren't we exchanging the substance for the shadow, aren't we forfeiting life for this dead quantity of knowledge? And what does it mean to me, after all? What does all this knowing mean to me? It means nothing." (1993: 37)

The absolutist denial of any value for knowledge that Hermione is pressured into articulating here is extreme. But it is not wholly distinct from John Berger's view of knowledge as a form of power that alienates us from the realm of being that animals and all other life forms inhabit. This is part of what Hermione means by being 'burdened to death by consciousness' and, indeed, the whole of *Women in Love* can be read as a failed quest for a mode of being that restores an instinctual wholeness – often in radically disturbing forms – to the fractured experience of modernity.

Within *Finding Nemo*, on the other hand, scientific understanding and sensuous apprehension of the world appear to rub shoulders without many obvious signs of friction; the fracture lines between them become the site of playful contrasts in point of view, rather than displaying any more fundamental disjunction. Hence Mr Ray's scientifically precise taxonomy of the zones of the sea is not insisted upon as a higher form of knowledge, but left dangling as a kind of background jingle that simply coexists with the looser nomenclature of the 'drop-off zone' and with the vivid sense perceptions that shape the drama of ordinary experience. The film often plays with perspectives on animal behaviour derived from empirical science, turning them around with the imaginative freedom that the fantasy mode allows, only to reinstate them later. Thus a trio of sharks is reconstructed as a therapeutic support group, dedicated to overcoming the animals' primal, compulsive instinct to eat other fish.

The heady idealism of this self imposed, anthropomorphic restraint collapses when the sharks get a sniff of blood and the full force of their natural drives is reasserted. Likewise, when Marlin and Dory identify a shape in the murky distance as a huge whale, Dory uses scientific knowledge to reassure Marlin as to their safety. Unlike the shark, this type of whale feeds only on tiny krill rather than fish. Unfortunately this objectively accurate piece of information overlooks the mechanism whereby krill are absorbed into the whale's body and the fish find themselves stuck in the whale's cavernous maw notwithstanding. In this instance, the fear, driven by direct sense impression of the enormous disparity in size, serves as a more reliable guide for behaviour than scientific knowledge that is partial. It is only the fantasy of cross-species communication in whale language that eventually enables the small fish to be restored to safety. Such playful integration of scientifically accurate perspectives within the overarching flow of fantasy occurs throughout *Finding Nemo.* My point here is not to suggest that, as in Lawrence's fiction, this play constitutes an critique of scientific modes of apprehending the world that are construed as potentially limiting. Instead, the multiplicity of viewpoints is tolerated in *Finding Nemo*, indeed serves as a positive base for the film's creative energies.

The film's watery setting provides this broad tolerance of disparate, potentially conflicting discourses with an apt medium of expression. The ease of movement between conflicting ideas that is such a hallmark of the film's intellectual quality might be construed as analogous, in its essential fluidity, to water. And this fluidity, indeed, informs the narrative structure of *Finding Nemo* at a number of levels. Gaston Bachelard has argued that imaginative work that is focused within the medium of water is highly distinctive. He writes that:

> … the material imagination of water is a special type of imagination. … Water is also a *type of destiny* that is no longer simply the vain destiny of fleeting images and a never ending dream but an essential destiny that endlessly changes the substance of the being. … One cannot bathe twice in the same river because already, in his inmost recesses, the human being shares the destiny of flowing water. Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux. He dies every minute; something of his substance is constantly falling away. (1983: 6)

The elemental flux that Bachelard describes here provides an insight into a fundamental principle of narrative development within *Finding Nemo.* For, in the state of anxiety over the loss of his son that both defines and drives him, the main character, Marlin, is represented emotionally as precisely 'dying every minute'. As Bachelard later puts it, 'for the materialising imagination, death associated with water is more dreamlike than death associated with earth: the pain of water is infinite' (ibid.: 6).

The tone of Bachelard's remarks may appear at first too serious to match with the lightness of comic touch that pervades *Finding Nemo*. But, in fact, this comedy has a persistently darker edge. Marlin's progress towards rescuing his son is marked by a series of near death experiences, including the archetypal Jonah-like episode of being swallowed by a whale. And the cumulative effect of these experiences is indeed to enact subtle changes in the substance of the central protagonist's being. These changes take place within two main dimensions. They bring out the character's capacity

for heroism, a capacity that cross-fertilizes imaginatively with the efforts of other sea creatures to rescue Nemo; and they loosen the hold of Marlin's anxiety driven protectiveness, allowing a more receptive, flexible set of characteristics, that can adapt to new environments, to be developed. Perhaps the most palpable evidence of imagery embodying such changes in states of being is provided by the journey the animals undertake along the East Australian Current. This natural phenomenon is itself an exemplar of the transformative energy associated with flow, of course. In this instance, the flow not only assists the turtles, who use the current as a kind of natural freeway in their migration from breeding grounds, but also brings Marlin and Dory closer to their goal of finding Nemo. 'Hey, that was fun!' exclaims Marlin, as he eventually breaks clear of the current and the migrating stream of turtles accelerated through the ocean in its sway. It is the first time Marlin has expressed pleasure at the adventurous aspects of change with which his journey has engaged him and the moment signals his gradual release from the defensive burden of fear he has carried since the film's opening.

These psychological features of narrative development are thoroughly human in orientation, but they are rooted in the material qualities of the marine environment that the fish – and film – inhabit. One might argue, moreover, that it is precisely the distinctive qualities of this watery realm that facilitate the film's drawing what Braudy calls 'the repressed values of nature' into its underlying message. Andrew Stanton has spoken of an unexceptional personal experience that provided him with part of the rationale for his script. Walking along a pavement with his son one day, he became aware that most of his interactions with the child were directed towards preventing the possibility of his son's encountering danger from the passing traffic (Disney DVD 2004). So absorbed was he in these protective responsibilities that he felt he had no time to respond in more natural, creative or playful ways. This common realization became the basis for a plot in which the fish hero learns, eventually, to let go of his protective anxieties and allow his son to live. But the range of implications of this lesson becomes extended in the film to reach far wider than personal values affecting childcare and families. What is at stake here, ultimately, is the whole ethos that drives a society that increasingly attempts to eliminate risk in all possible contexts. The film draws implicitly on a distinctive embodiment of core 'values of nature' – fluidity, the acceptance of death and danger as inherent within growth – to contest a set of social assumptions that, while apparently benign in intention, have begun to undermine a fundamental sense of freedom in western society.

As in many other narratives of wild nature, this precarious sense of freedom – together with the anxieties associated with its potential loss – is projected onto images of the natural world. *Finding Nemo* is remarkable, however, in developing a parallel narrative to its wild ocean odyssey, within the confines of a marine aquarium. Here too the central issue is the desire for freedom, as the fish seek a means to escape. But whereas the natural environment of the ocean is staged largely as a forum within which key social values can be contested and explored, the aquarium becomes a space where the human craving for carefully regulated proximity to animals is examined in a fresh ways within a contemporary urban setting. The fish-eyed view from inside the glass-boxed mini-ocean is a rich source of comic gags and one-liners. The aquarium inmates' interest in the precise details of dental procedures taking place on the other side of the room from them is worked up as

a particularly effective running joke; the animals' command of specialist canine terminology is both witty and adds another element to the quasi-scientific discourses that, as we noted earlier, curl so effortlessly around the action of this movie.

But the deeper significance of the aquarium based plot lies in the way it configures human interactions with nature, rather than animal commentaries on humans. Some strands of this interaction appear to draw on motifs that have long histories within children's literature. The brattish girl, who anticipates being given Nemo as her own pet with expressions of sadistic glee, comes from a line of animal tormenting figures within narratives for children dating back to the eighteenth century. Her most recent forebear is the redoubtable young toy torturer from Pixar's earlier comic masterpiece, *Toy Story*. The scenario of the wild animal's escape from human captivity is likewise very familiar within recent narratives for children, from the *Orca* series to DreamWorks' *Spirit*. But *Finding Nemo* does not simply endorse the creatures' right to freedom in a wild natural environment, contrasted with their present conditions in captivity. To begin with, the aquarium tank, though constraining in terms of space, has its own kind of slightly garish beauty, so that it represents a rather attractive environment, at least from the perspective of the human viewer. One reviewer, indeed, was led to ponder whether the film, rather than increasing respect for fish in the wild, might actually 'fuel an upsurge of interest in salt water aquariums' amongst young, would-be pet owners (Berardinelli, 2003). Another reviewer suggested that the dreamlike visual quality of the whole film evoked both 'the reverie of scuba diving' and the 'hypnotic beauty' of 'fish in an aquarium' (Ebert, 2003). Rather than simply endorsing the value of a nature independent of human interests, in other words, the appeal of *Finding Nemo* derives from its links to the experience of water sports within the tourist and leisure industries, as well as giving a not wholly negative spin to commerce in fish as pets. The latter dimension acquires a more favourable slant through the film's representing the majority of the aquarium animals as having been bred in captivity. Thus, while it is true that there are satirical thrusts at the pet owning culture of urban modernity – particularly as expressed through the rather chilling, robotic efficiency of the aquarium filtration system and the gloating nastiness of Nemo's prospective child owner – the fish tank is in many ways set up appealingly for viewers. Visually, it stands as much in a complementary relationship to the wild environment of the ocean as it does in a contrastive one.

Finding Nemo as a whole, indeed, does not attempt to establish a picture of a pristine natural world, free from all negative signs of human intervention, as many earlier animations involving wild nature had sought to do. The underwater world around the reef is plied by scuba divers who capture fish, while the wider reaches of the ocean floor reveal the vast hull of a sunken ship surrounded, as though this were a macabre and still lethal memorial celebrating war, by mines that float at the end of their weed-festooned chains, with all the sardonic gaiety of party balloons. Closer to mainland Australia, Nemo's escape route from the dentist's surgery into Sydney harbour takes us through the drainage system that pours human waste products daily into the ocean. The awareness this creates of the continual flow connecting human cities to wild nature is, unwittingly, made more vivid by the director's decision to cut a scene which detailed episodes showing how Nemo slips through the machinery of Sidney's waste water filtration system. In the event, Nemo appears

to emerge into the bay area from a pipe bearing raw sewage. Once in the ocean, the full joy of Nemo's reuniting with his father is delayed once more, by a last near catastrophe that focuses dramatic attention on the ruthless efficiency of the modern fishing industry. There is enough source material here to fill several textbooks on the effects of human interaction on the ecology of the marine environment. Although most of the images depicting such interactions in the film have a dark edge to them however, the emotional force behind these images is deflected from ever becoming a full-blown critique of modern environmental practices that may be leading to disaster. The incidents, though compelling in themselves, are isolated from each other in discrete episodes, while the images of the vast ocean as a whole retain a limpid and mysterious purity. The inferences that a viewer may draw from this multilayered plot thus remain relatively open and it is left to additional material, included on the DVD of *Finding Nemo* that was released in 2004, to make potential connections to environmental issues more explicit. Within the more sober context of a short documentary on the world's fast disappearing coral reefs, Jacques Cousteau makes an impassioned plea for concerted action to counteract the effects of global warming. Even here though, the authoritative status of Cousteau's brief jeremiad is undercut by a stream of garbled, jokey interruptions, issuing almost continually from the seemingly irrepressible images of animated fish that are superimposed on the documentary footage of the reef. Even within its ancillary products it seems, *Finding Nemo* is committed to a thoroughly post-modern aesthetic.

The overall effect of *Finding Nemo*, in terms of the images of nature it deploys, is thus complex. The film eschews – perhaps wisely – engaging viewers emotionally by using what Greg Garrard has called the 'rhetorical strategies' of 'apocalyptic narrative'. These strategies, Garrard suggests, have arguably 'provided the green movement with some of its most striking successes' (2004: 85). The images that *Finding Nemo* offers, by contrast, are more localized in effect and multivalent in terms of their implied meaning. In this respect, the film also differs markedly from *Bambi*, where the closing episode of the forest fire is precisely apocalyptic in its overtones. *Finding Nemo* refuses such totalizing gestures however, incorporating different strands of human interaction with wild nature in a more piecemeal fashion. Although the artistic flair with which this is done makes for a quite exceptional movie, the film does not have the direct emotional impact of *Bambi*. It would be unimaginable to claim that viewing *Bambi* might encourage hunting interests in its viewers, in the same way that some commentators have suggested *Finding Nemo* could stimulate desire for aquarium ownership and the capture of marine fish. The view of wild nature that emerges so powerfully in *Bambi* is of a realm that needs protecting from human depredation. It is not surprising that the film has been seen as a source of inspiration for young viewers who would later become passionately involved in conservation work and environmental politics. *Finding Nemo*, by contrast, is more dispassionate. Its images of the natural world characteristically incorporate unfeeling humans or are edged with menace. And the darker nuances of such scenes undoubtedly connect with contemporary anxieties and environmental guilt. But the various forms of human interaction with this strange underwater world appear, ultimately, to be accepted as much as established fact as is the presence of terrifying natural predators there. The ocean in *Finding Nemo* is represented as a

source of wonder and excitement; but the film offers an imaginative stimulus for different modes of understanding the strange otherness of this watery zone of nature, rather than a sustained, impassioned plea to protect it. Knowing, light on its fins and aware of strands of contradiction inherent within our complex feelings towards the natural world, *Finding Nemo* is a fable for our time.

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PART 4
New Developments

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Chapter 7

WALL•E: Nostalgia and the Apocalypse of Trash

> 'In the new ecological conflict … what is at stake are negatives: losses, devastation, threats … The longer the shadows of progress grow, the more the industrial perpetrators tend to lose their own shadows.'
>
> Ulrich Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment*

WALL•E, released in 2008, is, with the possible exception of *Bambi*, arguably the most significant film connecting with the theme of nature in the entire Disney repertoire. Indeed, *WALL•E*, in many ways, brings the themes we have been considering in this book full cycle, since it returns, in a more overt and sustained way than any of the other Disney animations, to *Bambi*'s troubled preoccupation with an idea of nature as both resilient and supremely vulnerable to the destructive forces unleashed by human beings. It is a very different kind of film from *Bambi*, of course – indeed it marks a highly innovative and significant change of direction in a number of important respects from other films in the Disney-Pixar canon generally – but it is worth stressing the thematic parallels with Disney's most nature-focused film of the 1940s, because *WALL•E* risks engagement with controversial elements in the environmentalist agenda in more overt ways than any previous animation. If the effects of this engagement are not straightforward (it is perhaps significant that Andrew Stanton has tried to distance himself in public from any perception of the film as having a strong political message), they remain potentially powerful. Whether the film will become a touchstone and motivating force for the young, in the way that *Bambi* appears to have been for some viewers on its re-release in the 1950s, remains to be seen.

Although the staging of nature as both resilient and supremely vulnerable revisits *Bambi*'s central preoccupations, *WALL•E* is in many ways the precise negation of *Bambi*. Where nature in *Bambi* was fecund, Arcadian, innocent and harmonious, in *WALL•E* it appears diminished to the point of extinction. *WALL•E*'s opening premise is of a future world where rampant consumerism has exacted such a toll on the earth's ecosystems that it has become an uninhabitable wasteland – a landscape shaped by mountains of trash and empty skyscrapers, where dust storms scour the surface daily and organic life forms appear to have been virtually eliminated. Where the space that constitutes the animals' home in *Bambi* is the archetypal region of the forest – the richest area for biodiversity outside the oceans on earth – in *WALL•E* the environment is constituted by man-made desert, desiccated refuse heaps of grotesque proportions, and the lifeless, but strangely enduring, architecture of an empty metropolis. Where the central motifs of the landscape in *Bambi* are water

(picturesquely displayed as rain, river, lake) and trees, in *WALL•E* the motifs are dust, dry waste products, and ghost buildings. The aridity of *WALL•E* contrasts sharply with the water imagery that pervades *Bambi* as the sustaining source of life. One could suggest, indeed, that the *mise-en-scène* of *WALL•E*'s opening has been constructed in deliberately antithetical mode, to engage precisely with the domain that Ulrich Beck has suggested characterizes the 'new ecological conflict' of contemporary society, wherein 'what is at stake are negatives: losses, devastation, threats' in contrast to the conflicts over the positive rewards of the earth's resources that characterized earlier human societies (1995: 3).

Both the plot and primary genre developed in *WALL•E* are also the antithesis of *Bambi*. *Bambi*, as we saw, developed its narrative around the idea of the life cycle, with strong co-ordinates in natural history. Although *Bambi* contains a characteristic Disney mix of song, comedy, romance and melodrama, it also shows an unusually strong alignment with the genre of the nature documentary, which Disney was to develop so successfully in the late 1940s and 1950s. By contrast, *WALL•E*'s genre affiliation is to the dystopian science-fiction movie, particularly in its classic Hollywood form in the 1970s. The central protagonists of *WALL•E* are neither animals nor humans, but rather robotic machines, the eponymous WALL•E and his high-tech, feminine counterpart whose acronym is EVE. Although, as we shall see, the film's conservative allegiance to a traditional Disney mix of song, romance and comic melodrama remains significant, the mode of dystopian science fiction marks a radical new point of departure, with no real precedents in the Disney canon. The dystopian element, in particular, represents a substantial creative risk, one that could be seen as a break with the Disney tradition, since it is hard to reconcile a dystopian stance with core Disney values of innocence, broad family appeal and optimism. The way the film does this – its doubleness, if you like – is of central significance for its exploration of the theme of nature in a contemporary context where older attitudes have come under increasing stress. This will constitute the underlying focus of much of the chapter that follows.

The plot of *WALL•E*, like that of most mainstream animations, is relatively straightforward. WALL•E, whose name is an acronym for Waste Allocation Load Lifter•Earth Class, is a robot programmed to tidy up waste materials. He was left behind on earth when humans abandoned the planet they had rendered uninhabitable, 700 years before the time in which the film is set. Powered (ironically) by renewable solar energy, WALL•E continues his lonely mission of clearing up waste centuries after his human creators have deserted him. In the process, though, he appears to have acquired aspects of human emotion, collecting odd pieces of waste that appeal to him aesthetically as well as functional items he can use for self-repair and maintenance. While collecting a range of anachronistic manufactured products (many with a nostalgic aura from the mid-twentieth century), he happens upon a live seedling. The young plant, the only living vegetation that we see till the end of the movie, is growing in a remnant of soil amongst the rubbish; he stores the plant with his other collectables. When a probe named EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) arrives from the space station Axiom, where all the evacuated humans continue to live, WALL•E strikes up a romantic, if somewhat fraught (given EVE's predilection for blowing up any potentially suspicious object in proximity) rapport

with her. EVE is programmed to collect any form of vegetation that is still alive and, like a high-tech Noah's dove, to return it to the spaceship 'ark' of the exiled humans. Here the evidence of sustainable life is designed to act as a sign that it is possible for the humans to return to dwell once again on their earth home.

The program ensuring return to earth when life begins to regenerate has been over-ridden, however, by the mega-corporation Buy N Large, which effectively runs human society. When the two robots return to the space station with the newly discovered plant, WALL•E and EVE have to fight a protracted battle to overcome the effects of the bloated, inert human inhabitants' programming. Freed at last from the corporation's destructive control, the station returns to earth and the closing scenes show cyborgs and humans together, actively re-engaged in farming and the restoration of life on the planet. In outline then, the storyline has a clear function as a parable, warning against the destructive potential of unchecked consumer capitalism and suggesting an alternative, restitutive set of values that work more closely and respectfully with nature.

This clear, straightforward parable is rendered complex in texture, however, as the film engages in different ways with many of the key issues that have exercised environmental writing and criticism over the last twenty years particularly. Perhaps the most fundamental of these has to do with notions of place. At one level, the iconography of place in *WALL•E* operates around a clear dichotomy. The dystopian space of a bleak, post-apocalyptic earth contrasts with the more colourful, but ultimately also sterile, anti-utopian space station. There, as the captain observes in a trenchant epiphany, it is possible to survive comfortably, but not to *live*. The greening of earth, through replanting vegetation at the end of the film, offers the possibility of transforming dystopian space into a significant *place* that sentient beings can reclaim as their home.

Although this contrast is indeed clear, the way the film renders space and place actually sets up more subtle and complex forms of emotional engagement for audiences, at least in the sequences set on earth. The abandoned planet is rendered more strangely beautiful, for instance, than a strong, simple dystopian message might seem to require. Co-producer Lindsey Collins acknowledged that the post-apocalyptic landscape 'was potentially very ugly and gray and monochromatic' (Hauser, 2008: 36). The production team had to think very hard about how to make the landscape interesting for viewers. In the process they considered different ways of looking at neglected spaces such as wasteland, abandoned buildings, and refuse dumps.

'We were looking for designs that were extremely dirty, yet organized in an almost subconscious way and not offensive or repulsive. Because trash can be offensive,' Anthony Christov determines. 'It looks dirty, but just enough that a kid would still want to go there and play.' 'It was super-challenging because we had to make it recognizable as Earth and not have it look like Mars. We also had to make it look like a trashy, destroyed planet with more of a monochromatic feel,' says Daniel Feinberg. 'We don't see blue sky ever. A hint of it every now and again, but really you don't see blue sky.' Ralph Egglestone adds, 'It took a long time to get there. Because of the palette, it was hard for us not to make it look like a desert, which would be dismal' (ibid.).

In the process of struggling to find a visual register that was strong enough to carry the dystopian message but also subtle enough to engage viewers affectively, the design team evolved techniques that discovered beauty in neglected spaces. Noah Klocek, sketch artist Daniel Holland and shading director Bert Holland, for instance, all found a visual appeal in trash: 'Real garbage can look pretty cool … Like stacked tyres. They are beautiful' (ibid.). Likewise Jeremy Lasky became fascinated by 'the beauty of decay … like when you go into old buildings that have been left abandoned'. He was drawn to photographs of derelict factories where 'you really do get the feeling of this kind of peaceful, beautiful place. A little guy in this empty, quiet world. You want to explore it' (ibid.). The phrasing suggests potential for a spiritual connection to the landscape, a space that encourages childlike exploration, but also contemplative reflection.

Although this aesthetic, emotionally open approach to dystopian space might be held to blunt the edge of the film's cautionary parable, it may be better to see the images of a projected future as connecting interestingly with key environmental perspectives that are being explored within current debates. Indeed, one might argue that the best dystopian narratives are always engaged in this double mode, the fictional intensification of current tendencies pushing their implications into clearer definition within the more extreme context of a futuristic scenario. A significant theme of contemporary environmental writing, for instance, is how we perceive the relationship between urban space and the natural; *WALL•E* probes this issue in a context where nature appears to have been almost completely eliminated at a literal level. The film's aesthetic response to this landscape resists a simplified perception of its extreme sterility, however, and reinvests the world with nature's primordial drive towards adaptation. This drive is projected primarily onto WALL•E, blurring the boundaries between animal and machine, but it is also invested in his cockroach companion Hal. Indeed, the cockroach is perhaps the ultimate symbol of survival through adaptation to changed environments, having existed for over 300 million years on earth, 300 times longer than human beings (Copeland, 2003). Again, the familiar contrast between rural simplicity, rooted in a sense of place, and urban sophistication, detached from nature, mobile and essentially rootless, has been questioned by a number of important thinkers in recent years. The question of what 'dwelling' (with its Heideggerian overtones) might mean in the context of urban experience and the revaluing of marginal, neglected spaces that exist either on the edges of cities or in enclaves within cities have become major preoccupations for environmentalists working in many different disciplines. The imagery of earth in the first part of *WALL•E* connects with these preoccupations in some fascinating, and often subtly probing, ways.

Consider, for instance, in more detail what characterizes the space that WALL•E inhabits on the devastated surface of the earth. He is not shown as dwelling within the city environment, though he makes regular excursions into the destitute roads and buildings that define the space occupied historically by the metropolis. Rather, his base is on the margins of the city, an area that some contemporary theorists now describe as 'edgelands'. Indeed the film's central trope of incursive waste makes it look as if the whole of the earth has been covered with the detritus of civilization, so that nearly everywhere outside the city centre road network now looks like an

edgeland, constituted by rubbish heaps. The long establishing shot at the start of the film implies the totality of this vision, the camera tracking over seemingly endless vistas of waste with hardly any bare ground, and this view is later confirmed by the epigrammatic finality of an ancient newspaper headline, which states baldly: 'TOO MUCH TRASH – EARTH COVERED.' Within this space, however, WALL•E is shown to have evolved a form of dwelling, consisting of a 'home' and an adjacent territory, where he explores, works and forages. The space of WALL•E's home itself offers fascinating connections to edgeland archetypes of modern existence. He has taken up residence in a large, customized container. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts have argued that such containers have a special, though largely unrecognized, significance in our society and that they have contributed substantially to the whole changing shape and texture of contemporary experience:

> In part, containers made the edgelands, because they changed the way our manufacturing bases related to our ports. They dismantled an older means of production and transportation, but created a new one in the process. Places outside of our larger urban centres could take advantage of cheap transportation, as containerisation changed the complexion of the entire global economy. (2011: 48)

The authors note how many contemporary artists have been drawn to these metal boxes 'perhaps … because the container carries a hidden charge of displacement and immigration, while at the same time being ubiquitous and unremarkable'. Moving up through the gears in exhilarating style, they ask: 'Is the container, that essential image of our epoch, becoming a meme?' (ibid.: 50).

In a slightly more down-to-earth way, one notes that the container is not only a transportation device for new manufactured goods and materials, but also offers storage for used items people do not want to throw away. Farley and Symmons Roberts note how self-storage warehouses are 'like hotels for *things*, places where people unload their belongings … stack them on trolleys and push them into the sterile light and down the aisles to their allotted room. They are the opposite of going shopping' (ibid.: 55). WALL•E is involved in a daily round of activities that could also be described as the opposite of going shopping. Like those engaged in contemporary movements such as Freeganism and Freebay, who seek alternative modes of operating within the remorseless cycle of consumerism, WALL•E is shown picking up items he wants or needs that have been discarded by others as waste. The space of his container home is organized precisely like a storage warehouse, with stacking shelves on rotating cogs arranged on all sides, carefully systematized and customized to suit his own particular needs and preferences.

But if the personalized space of the container that WALL•E occupies is like a miniature warehouse, then it is also like a home, where the 'sterile light' of the outside world is replaced by decorative lights and the candle-like flame of a cigarette lighter. Indeed, one could argue that WALL•E's home resembles Bachelard's concept of the nest (discussed earlier in relation to *The Jungle Book*) in some respects, translated into a visual idiom that matches WALL•E's physical identity as a robot. The mechanical movements of the shelves in his home match the robotic armature of WALL•E's own moving parts (perhaps especially the caterpillar tracks and wheels

on which he negotiates uneven ground), while WALL•E's cuboid design 'nests' within the rectangular shapes of the holding container in an equivalent manner to the way Bachelard describes the bird as moulding the nest's interior to its body form. Perhaps even more important, the container functions as a den for WALL•E, in a way that appeals to the audience's childlike (as well as animal) instincts. It is a protective, found structure in an environment that offers exploratory interest, adventure and danger in equal measure. And, like the dens that children and marginalized adults continue to construct within contemporary edgeland environments, the container home imposes a kind of makeshift, temporary order in microcosm on a world that appears neglected, messy and feral in its wider domains. The den relates to a need for security: 'the nest-like space is all the more cosy and secure for having some darkness or threat that it needs to keep out' (ibid.: 42). But it is also a site of transformative power, of imagination, and play, where identity may be developed with a sense of freedom. As Farley and Symmons Roberts recall: '[T]he edgelands provided a space of abandonment out of the watchful eye of the adult world, and also provided all of the terrain and materials a child's imagination needed to physically make its own world and reinforce a new sense of itself' (ibid.: 39). Like a child in its edgeland den, WALL•E also fashions a new and vital sense of self from his surroundings, engaging creatively with the apparently negative 'space of abandonment' that the film projects.

Before we explore the strands of identity that are developed through the figure of WALL•E in more depth, however, it is worth considering some other dimensions of the refuse tip environment more closely. Refuse tips are located on the outskirts of towns and cities, but what is most striking in this film is the way the boundaries between these two normally distinct categories have been blurred, so that they leach into each other. Or rather, to put it more accurately, the refuse tip has leached into everything, so that, as in images of urban environments where civic organization has broken down, or refuse workers are on strike, the uncollected waste material threatens to redefine both the literal and symbolic functioning of the city, as well as the world beyond. Indeed, the film's art director, Anthony Christov, cited exactly this experience as a parallel to the imagery developed in *WALL•E*:

> I'm from Bulgaria. The city of Sofia has a major trash problem. It's a huge issue. They don't know where to put the trash. So they moved it from one locality and then they had to move it to another and kept going and going. They ended up bringing it in a bale and stacking it in piles. That's exactly what we're doing in *WALL•E*, having him stack the trash, the cubes, one on top of the other. They had pictures of it on the online news from Bulgaria. Reality is stranger than fiction. (Hauser, 2008: 71)

The difference between this real-life correlative and the film, however, is that the waste is imagined as so incursive that it has entirely taken over the edgelands, as well as the city. In effect, it has defined the nature of the surface of the whole earth, with which it has become co-extensive.

This hyperbolic imagery – the literal apocalypse of trash – is clearly the most striking single aspect of the film's dystopian vision, embodying its powerful warning against the excesses of consumerist culture. But the imagery also carries other, less obvious, symbolic associations. The imagery of refuse tips has powerful connections

with outsiderness, for instance. The artist Jimmy Durham, a Cherokee who grew up in Arkansas during the 1940s and 1950s recalls that:

> when I was young towns still had edges, no-man's-lands, that were not yet the surrounding farms. This was where the city's refuse was casually dumped, so that the edge of the town was not a 'natural' place. There lived racoons, opossums, rats, snakes, bobcats, skunks, hobos …, families of African Americans and displaced Indians. All of us, shunned by the city, used the city's surplus. I so loved the dumps, where one could find the products of civilization elegantly, surrealistically juxtaposed with pieces of wood, bones, and wild flowers, that they have remained the metaphor by which I define myself. (Quoted in Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2011: 62)

Durham's aesthetic and self-fashioning response to the mélange of detritus thrown up on the unofficial refuse tip area where he lived as a boy reclaims a strong sense of his identity as an outsider, with his own alternative roots and values. Although cast aside by the dominant culture, he retains a clear vision of his integrity and difference, one that is founded on the way the 'products of civilization' and the organic forms of the natural world are remixed, forced into new forms of proximal relationship, and creatively juxtaposed in the abject environment of the tip. This forging of a strong, alternative identity through creative association with an abject environment has strong parallels to *WALL•E* and helps bring the film's more subversive, resistant elements into focus. Audiences are encouraged to form an empathetic link with the figure of WALL•E through what is perceived as the existential loneliness of his situation. The dominant, human culture that formed him has abandoned him to pursue its own interests, and there is an implicit indictment in this image of a self-serving society that has lost touch with the interdependencies that constitute the real basis of ethics, responsibility, and care. But WALL•E evokes sympathy because, like all machines and animals, he is himself incapable of self-pity. And, like Durham, he is actually depicted as receptive, in creative as well as practical ways, to the opportunities that new kinds of proximal relationships between manufactured and organic forms set up within the apparent mess of the world reconstituted as rubbish heap. WALL•E, in other words, is also depicted as forging a strong, alternative identity and value system. It is not possible to see him simply as a victim; he is actively involved in remaking his world from the inside as something other than a site of destitution.

Clearly the most significant organic form that WALL•E encounters in the process of this reclaiming is the plant that he finds hidden amongst the mountains of manufactured items. The plant is the residual, symbolic equivalent of the 'wild flowers' Durham had found sprouting up all over the refuse tip in his boyhood. The significance of the plant in *WALL•E* is founded, of course, on its uniqueness within the environment of the film. The film's director, Andrew Stanton, has described the plant as 'the key image for me in *WALL•E* … It's actually what I've used to recenter myself when I'm lost in story land' (Hauser, 2008: 57). Unlike the proliferating plant-life on real, contemporary refuse tips, however (which Richard Mabey [2010: 252] has described as a veritable 'forcing bed for weeds'), the plant in *WALL•E* stands out because of its isolation. Indeed it is notable that there is so very little organic material depicted in the film as a whole, even amongst

the debris. The manufactured objects that WALL•E collects include no items made of wood or leather, with the exception of the boot which he uses as an improvised plant pot, while rare remnants of food, such as the biscuit WALL•E feeds to his cockroach companion Hal, are heavily processed. The waste in *WALL•E* consists almost entirely of metal, plastics and other synthetic products derived from oil, a telling commentary on a society that has decoupled itself from natural forms to an extreme degree. The retreat of nature is imagined even in what is left discarded, the memory of a formerly fecund world reduced to a kind of vestigial kitsch, as in the plastic talking fish that WALL•E has retrieved as a welcoming device for his container den.

But, if the image of a uniquely surviving plant sings out in this environment of manufactured waste and kitsch memorabilia, then one should note that the figure of WALL•E appears as connected to the real life forms he collects around him. It is noteworthy that he finds the plant locked inside a container, for instance, which he has to cut open with a laser device. While the container may be used to suggest a protective environment, where remnants of humus-rich soil have a chance of surviving the drastic erosion that has reduced the rest of the ground outside to arid dust, it is also the space of WALL•E's own home and establishes a metonymic link between the two key figures in the film. WALL•E doesn't appear to attribute much more significance to the organic life form of the plant, at first, than he does to the manufactured items he takes into his care. Indeed, this refusal to sentimentalize life or to abstract it from other, non-organic forms in the surrounding environment is one of the film's great strengths. Yet WALL•E's instincts are towards care for all things he is drawn towards – he is, after all, the sole custodian of earth and in many ways reverses the throwaway values that a careless civilization has bequeathed him. The meticulous attention he bestows on the act of lifting the plant with sufficient soil to avoid disturbing its roots is profoundly touching in its dramatic context. Placing it in the makeshift boot-pot moves the plant metaphorically towards a new embedding within the domain of a future humanity that has its feet more firmly on the ground, but the sequence also plays delightfully with the kitsch image of plant containers shaped like boots that are sold in garden centres. There is a lightness of touch in this sequence, but also a kind of inherent poetry in the richness of its suggestive interconnections that is similar to what the Elizabethans used to call a 'lively turning' (Mabey, 2010: 111).

WALL•E's programmed function on earth has been defined for him by the mega-corporation that has created the alternative world of the space station Axiom for humans. His mission is to clean up the surface of the earth so that it will sustain life again and make feasible the return of humans to recolonize it. Since all the other machines programmed to support this mission appear to have become defunct long ago, however, WALL•E's isolated, continued adherence to his Herculean task is now pitched somewhere between the absurd and the mythic-heroic. While his unswerving, but also unreflective, loyalty to his design function embodies his machine identity in a touching, but also limited, mode, mythic associations may enlarge the context within which this is perceived. WALL•E is a Sisyphus-like figure, allocated a task which can never culminate in fulfilment, and condemned to repeat a daily round of activity that, with no possibility of achieving its goal, appears ultimately meaningless.

Yet the protagonist's machine-like consciousness enables him to configure his tasks solely in a local context, within which he is able to achieve a degree of satisfactory order and to avoid the existential despair that a human in an equivalent situation would inevitably encounter, needing validation within a larger domain. The paradox that the film exploits here is that this myopic concentration on activities within a locally defined consciousness begins to facilitate longer-term adaptations that lead beyond deadlock. It is as if the film sets out to fulfil the terms of the Greens' axiom that, through acting in a concerted way at a local level, one learns to think, and make connections, globally. If the model for this path to wisdom is clearly evolutionary at one level, it is also, in some important senses, an ecological one. For WALL•E is shown to have adapted his initial design function of collecting waste in piles to include attentiveness to the interactive potential of his environment. This interaction includes the collection of items that help develop a consciousness receptive to the symbolic significance of artefacts, like that of humans. But the interaction with his surroundings also includes attentiveness and communication with other life forms. He is a model for animate being that is attuned and reactive to the specialist ecology of its environment at many different levels.

The most obvious manifestation of ecological attunedness in *WALL•E* is perhaps his relationship with the cockroach Hal. It would be easy to dismiss the significance of this relationship as simply another version of the buddy pairing between humans (or humanized larger creatures) and smaller animals that has been a stock feature of Disney animation since Jiminy Cricket first sallied forth with Pinocchio in 1940. Although clearly developing out of this tradition, the cockroach in *WALL•E* is distinctive in a number of important ways, however. To start with, Hal's body is depicted with minimal anthropomorphizing features. This is highly unusual in relation to Disney-Pixar representations of animals at the lower end of the evolutionary scale; it is generally felt to be difficult to render non-vertebrate animal forms in emotionally appealing ways to viewers without assigning to them extensive human features. Jiminy Cricket, in fact, has only the lightest of facial modelling to evoke any residual sense of his affinity as a real insect – in all other respects he is purely human in form – while the crab Sebastian, in *The Little Mermaid*, is given a human head and sufficiently ambiguous body features to provoke a lively debate between young viewers on Yahoo about whether he should really be considered to be a lobster. It is true that Andrew Stanton – in *A Bug's Life* and *Finding Nemo* – had already moved the Disney-Pixar aesthetic closer towards the naturalistic rendering of non-mammalian creatures. But the ants in *A Bug's Life* still walk on two legs and the insects are all given stylized human faces, eyes and mouths. By contrast Hal, in *WALL•E*, takes the naturalistic styling of insects into a new dimension within the domain of the family-orientated animated feature: the cockroach keeps its six legs firmly on the ground, has a thoroughly insect-like carapace for its body, and no enlargement of head or eyes to suggest human affinity. Indeed, with his long antennae and realistic detailing of body shape and texture, Hal is clearly identifiable through comparison with images in natural history books (Copeland, 2003; Marren and Mabey, 2010) as a domestic cockroach. There is a degree of aestheticization to suit human taste – the long antennae are gracefully extended slightly, the legs are shortened, and

the unattractive bristly spikes that protrude from them are airbrushed away. But the cockroach is recognizably a distinct insect species and no characteristically human features have been added.

Keeping the cockroach more real in appearance may be seen as a way of honouring the integrity of its animal otherness in the film, albeit whilst retaining the playful licence and exaggeration that are inherent within the animation mode. Pocahontas's animal companions, the hummingbird Flic and Meeko the racoon, act in ways that show virtually no resemblance to the behaviour of wild animals, other than the racoon's instinct for filching human food products. They are essentially pets, designed to showcase Pocahontas's credentials as a character attuned to the natural world in a purely emblematic way. *WALL•E*, by contrast, develops the relationship between protagonist and animal through sight gags that bear much more closely on the cockroach's real life aptitudes and behaviour. Some of these gags are based primarily on a human point of view: the human perception of cockroaches as being virtually – and horribly – indestructible, for instance, is reprised in the gag where WALL•E runs over his companion, thinks he has squashed him to death, and then discovers the roach has merely made use of his species' facility for flattening himself out and is perfectly all right. Other characteristics are seen from less androcentric angles, however. The domestic cockroach's association with dirt and its ability to eat almost any organic matter make it a perfect choice as the last surviving creature in a rubbish tip environment. It is itself an animal associated with abjection, a loathed outsider. Moreover, the insect's remarkable ability to flatten itself out so that it can get through the tiniest of gaps into dark nooks and crevices becomes transformed into a site of play in the film, as Hal insinuates himself inside almost every section of WALL•E and EVE's robotic bodies, tickling them to delighted squirming glee in the process. The joke here relies on a reversal of ordinary human responses, where the feeling of an insect on, or inside, the body would produce irritation or even horror. Indeed, one of the reasons cockroaches appear to have generated such loathing is that, *en masse* and in confined spaces, they have been known not infrequently to feed on the nails and hair of humans while asleep. Displacing the human form with machines, which contain no dead organic matter such as hair or nails, makes it safe for more intimate and responsive forms of interaction with lower animals to be imagined. Human feelings are also gently challenged and extended in this way, by being playfully reconfigured in what might be described as a post-human context.

Perhaps the most distinctive and original way in which an ecologically attuned version of environmental attentiveness is modelled for audiences in the film, though, is through the almost complete absence of verbal language and dialogue for the first half hour. This aspect of the film drew immediate recognition from critics and viewers alike. It was generally considered to be something of a *tour de force*, a technical challenge in terms of maintaining young viewers' interest and attention (their screen culture having habituated them to bombardment with constant verbal stimuli) that was pulled off with impressive brio and finesse. The filmmakers prided themselves on going back to the visual repertoire and slower pace of films from the silent era, turning to Chaplin and Keaton for inspiration, and relishing the opportunity to explore the expressive potential of pantomime acting. For animators,

it has been suggested: '[D]ialogue tends to dictate the timing of a scene, anchoring animation to the pre-recorded tracks and rhythms of voice talent. With pantomime acting, the animator has more freedom to create, to blossom in full performance' (Hauser, 2008: 13).

But the lack of dialogue does not result only in relatively longer shots and more sustained concentration on the subtleties of the characters' actions, creating new kinds of expressive opportunity and challenge for the animators in the process. It also emphasizes a range of communication modes that are in non-verbal and often non-human forms. This aspect of the way humans relate to the natural world and the environment has received increasing attention recently. Human language, it is argued, although a highly distinctive and in many ways extraordinarily powerful communicative mode, has played a crucial role in our 'losing track of nature' (Price, 1999). Modernity has rendered human beings less mindful of the communication modes adopted by other species in the world, reinforcing what Val Plumwood defines as 'the sense of being apart from a separate, inferior order which is passive and malleable, and which impinges only in minor (and often annoying) ways' (2002: 120). One strategy for repositioning ourselves within, rather than above or separated from, nature that has attracted many environmental writers recently has been to reconceptualize the nature of communication, so that it is less exclusively centred on human, verbal language and more attentive to the many different forms in which sentient beings express themselves. Plumwood summarizes this stance as developing 'openness to the non-human other as potentially an intentional and communicative being … listening to the other (attentiveness stance)' (194) and cultivating 'sensitivity to communicative capacities *within species* as well as their capacities for communication with humans' (193). Although, as she recognizes, it is important not to overidealize 'the communicative model', it is interesting that film appears to have an extremely strong capacity for embodying this ideal. Adrian Ivakhiv argues that film's ability to show 'us things that see, sense and interact, and that therefore appear animate' generally may be construed as manifesting its '*biomorphic* or *animamorphic*' tendencies. He notes that film produces 'the sensuous texture of what appears to be life, that is, the interperceptive relationality of things, which span a continuum from the barely alive to the recognizably social' (2011: 3). This 'interperceptive relationality of things' is precisely what *WALL•E* models so subtly and thoughtfully. Ivakhiv observes that 'with their speaking animals and monstrous hybrids, the animation and horror genres, in divergent ways, specialize at a kind of "animorphism" which blurs the boundaries between humans and living or life-like non-humans' (ibid.). The relegation of human verbal communication to a diminutive role in the first section of *WALL•E* surely takes this generic propensity further. In the process, viewers become subtly decentred from normal human perspectives, perhaps to the extent, as Sean Cubitt has put it, that we are rendered aware of human communication as 'only comprehensible in relation to the universe of communication that enfolds, contains and speaks with it' (2005: 145).

How relevant is Cubitt's rather beautiful exposition to *WALL•E*? Perhaps the first point to make here is that pantomime acting, by its very nature, directs the audience's attention towards the subtleties of communication through body language. Since body language is the dominant form of communication between

most – at least of the vertebrate – animals, the absence of verbal dialogue inherently moves us closer to more 'animamorphic' perceptual modes. The actual forms of body language interaction are not particularly realistic in the film: the squeaks, scurrying motion, and expressive angling of Hal's antennae are only very loosely related to the behavioural signals real cockroaches give out, while WALL•E's and EVE's movements owe more to silent film acting and R2-D2 in *Star Wars* than to what was gleaned from the robotics conferences the animation team earnestly attended. But in modelling communication through non-verbal forms, *WALL•E* distances itself from the more sentimental 'animamorphic' aspects of talking animals in other mainstream animation and evokes a different quality of environmental attentiveness. It is significant, in this respect, that WALL•E has learned to differentiate and pick out objects within his environment that appear initially as undifferentiated waste matter to the audience, and that his 'cross-species' communication is conducted with a supposedly primitive animal, through the medium of touch, as much as through the more distanced mode of observing movement and gesture. These characteristics, I would argue, move us closer to the apprehension of a 'universe of communication that enfolds … and speaks with' human language.

The way the film repositions human language is then, in itself, significant. Words, on earth, have become scattered remnants of the past, now merged with other forms of archaic detritus, their previously ubiquitous functioning within human society held up for fresh scrutiny by the audience. Words are left to communicate with us from shots of archaic scraps of newspaper, half buried in the general waste; from billboard advertisements, whose rhetoric bizarrely stokes the fires of consumer desire in a world long bereft of consumers; and from gargantuan video screens that extol the merits of the alternative civilization Buy N Large has created on the Axiom space station. In other words, verbal language is situated in contexts where its everyday functions are rendered strange for the audience, and this estrangement encourages a critical stance towards forms of mass communication to which we have become habituated. When we reach the anti-utopian world of the Axiom, it is significant that the blob-like human 'gels' have atrophied to the extent that they barely communicate with each other. Whisked around the space station environment on floating plastic bath chairs, they have lost the use of their limbs almost completely and are locked into communication with screens rather than the sentient beings next to them. The dystopian critique of the dangers inherent in a contemporary, technology-dependent culture could hardly be clearer. Nor could the contrast with the slower, touch-orientated, unmediated, inter-species attentiveness of WALL•E's post-human earth be made stronger. Communication on Axiom positions the effete humans as passive consumers within a controlled, solipsistic world; WALL•E, by contrast, is engaged in a range of communicative practices, interacts dialogically with other beings, and is responsive to what his apparently terminally degraded environment still has to offer, its residual potential for life.

Thus far I have been arguing that *WALL•E* models a form of being – all the more vivid for being enacted on a drastically impoverished earth – that manifests many of the ecologically attuned qualities espoused within important strands of recent critical environmental thinking. But *WALL•E* cannot be positioned simply as an exemplary environmental narrative in this way. Its ambivalent, contradictory aspects

are as important as is the richly imaginative form in which it projects the survival of necessary, alternative values. Nowhere is this more obvious than in relation to the ambiguous position the film adopts towards consumerism. On the one hand, the attitude towards consumer culture that is projected in *WALL•E* could not be clearer; as a cautionary tale about the dangers of consumer excess, the film remains exemplary. But in other, more subtle, ways the film may be seen as exploring the nature of consumer identity with a strong sense of attachment, at the same time as the ramified consequences of consumer culture on a wider scale are powerfully critiqued. The contradictory attitudes promoted through the film are obvious at an extra-textual level, of course: the film's imagery – its charismatic protagonists and evocative settings – has been sold on to franchises in toy production, product branding, and game and theme park development with a market-orientated efficiency that matches the rest of Disney's enterprises and shows no trace of ironic consciousness in relation to this particular film's inherent values. But, in fact, ambiguities exist within the texture of the film itself, not just in Disney's exploitation of the film's full commercial potential.

In selective ways that effectively mask their full significance, *WALL•E* is in fact in love with the consumer culture that it so effectively critiques. This is not immediately obvious to viewers because the aspects of consumerism that are so lovingly recycled in the film are distanced and made acceptable through their historical provenance. But we need to recognize that nostalgia is also a central aspect of contemporary consumerism and forms a substantial part of the layered identity that we imaginatively construct for ourselves when we buy or possess things. Timothy Morton has argued that the origins of consumer culture's connections with subjectivity and identity formation may be traced back to Romanticism, suggesting that 'Romantic consumerism produced subjective states that eventually became technically reproducible commodities' (2007: 113). Following Pierre Bourdieu, he identifies an aesthetic function in contemporary consumerism, where 'the purpose is to have no purpose' (112). In many ways, this equates to the apparently random objects that WALL•E picks up in his literally post-consumer world, where a kind of subliminal aesthetic connection seems to be the only criterion for his selection of certain items within the general debris.

However, on further examination, this apparently random aesthetic connection actually has a strong historical grounding. The items that attract WALL•E nearly all have a provenance from the 1950s through to the 1970s; they evoke an era of consumer technology prior to the intensive development of the microchip-based culture that has so profoundly shaped contemporary consciousness; and in this respect, from the audience's point of view, the items carry the nostalgic charge of the slightly antiquated. This might seem to be of marginal significance in developing the film's central themes – an artistic patterning of imagery that is itself more aesthetic than meaningful. But, in fact, this device models one of the fundamental practices of contemporary consumer culture: the emotional allure that is signalled by commodity styles of an earlier era is very much to the point. Daniel Harris has suggested that 'the aesthetics of consumerism are full of nostalgia', the ultimate effect of which is 'to shore up the consumer's sense of selfhood and individuality, which have been deeply compromised by the conditions of urban society'

(2000: xxi–xxii). As he goes on to observe, 'manufacturers have learned to play on our contempt for consumerism' (50), producing goods with retro styling that 'preserve the consumerist status quo by restoring to our lives an artificial sense of the passage of time' (37). In the process we are offered an illusory connection to the values of a supposedly more authentic past. Even the collecting of used items is not immune to this psychology of retrieving a chimerical authenticity, beyond the spell of consumerism's hegemonic charms; the collector vainly attempts to recharacterize 'materialism as an activity of higher magnitude, not a selfish act of purchasing a product but a custodial one of salvaging the past' (33). WALL•E's custodial role in relation to the bric-a-brac of the 1960s generation has a gently affectionate charm about it, which is seductive, of course. But it plays to the audience's psychological yearning for reconnection in the same way as advertisers use retro styling and the aura of the past to sell their products.

The items that WALL•E is drawn towards collecting are nearly all manufactured, as we have observed – kitchen utensils, a metal hubcap, a Rubik's Cube, plastic toys, a 1950s style toaster, a video player. Collectively they evoke a lifestyle based on a simpler technology than that of our present, one in which parts are replaceable and mechanical engineering, rather than micro-electronics, is still the presiding genius. WALL•E's own 'body', clunky, accessible for repair, all moving parts and armature visible, epitomizes the mid–twentieth-century phase of mechanical development and this quaintness is a substantial part of his appeal. But the film's deeply ambivalent love affair with the machine, viewed through the lens of consumer culture, cleverly juxtaposes this quaint aura of the past with the appeal of smart, futuristic styling of the present. WALL•E may be affectionately attached to the manufactured products of the mid-twentieth century, but he falls in love with EVE, all smooth surfaces and no moving parts, a machine that epitomizes state-of-the-art micro-electronic design functions of our own age. The film thus plays cleverly to both polarities of contemporary consumer imagery – the nostalgic and the futuristic – at the same time. Zoe Jaques has pointed out that the imagery of the robot protagonists in *WALL•E* disrupts gender stereotypes: 'while WALL•E is the caring, effeminate musical-lover, complete with womb … EVE is a super-slick ultramodern probe with … an aggressive tendency to blow things up' (2009: 119). But the film's enchantment with the form of the machine *per se* is perhaps even more fundamental than this play with gender expectations, given *WALL•E*'s primary focus on the crisis of the techno-consumerist culture. Ulrich Beck has noted how humanity's collective imaginative enchantment with the machine appears impervious to any of the catastrophic scenarios this may be causing: '[R]eligions may decline, cultures may collapse, nature may be dying – industrial-society man is virtually hypnotized by the machine. In it his creativity becomes tangible' (1995: 39).

A fantasy fable in which machines save humanity from its seemingly inexorable journey towards self-destruction might be seen as a way of maintaining this hypnotized allegiance against the most palpable evidence of its dangers. The film's undoubted imaginative vitality is ultimately a hymn to the creativity we invest in machines. Cynics might add that the allure of EVE's futuristic design – which is wedded so strongly to the trademark qualities of Apple-Mac computers – will have

done nothing to harm sales in the late Pixar president Steve Jobs's other company either: does this represent the ultimate sophistication in product placement?

These charges need to be taken seriously if we want to see clearly how *WALL•E*'s imagery is positioned within contemporary culture. But I want to argue that these contradictory elements in the film do not cancel its potential as a medium within which audiences may be provoked into questioning attitudes. Fundamental to this argument is how we understand the function of enchantment in an industrialized society. Following Max Weber, the disenchantment of the modern world – the increasing dominance of secular, scientific rationalism over earlier modes of religion and popular magic – has been widely perceived as one of the hallmarks of industrialized societies. Within critical sociology, indeed, residual elements of enchantment in late industrial societies tend to be seen as manifestations of potent ideology, as in Marx's concept of commodity fetishization. Indeed, one might speculate that one reason Disney's films have received such stringent judgements from academics in recent years is because their vaunting claims to offer innocent enchantment to the young have seemed a thin cover for the kinds of ideological manipulation that critical sociology and its offshoots have brought into sharp focus.

More recently, however, some environmental writers have seen this critical tradition as itself founded on a hyper-rationalist stance that positions enchantment too one-dimensionally – solely as the product of illusion. Jane Bennett, for instance, has argued that enchantment retains a crucial role, even in modern societies, potentially opening us up to the full significance of the world around us and activating the affective energies necessary for us to sustain ethical behaviour:

> The modern story of disenchantment leaves out important things, and it neglects crucial sources of ethical generosity in doing so. Without modes of enchantment, we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects, or to contest ugly and unjust modes of commercialization, or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities. These enchantments are already in and around us. (2001: 174)

Could *WALL•E*'s love affair with the machine – together with its underlying affiliation with aspects of consumer culture – be perceived as enacting forms of enchantment that function in the radical mode that Bennett suggests here? Or does the film's doubleness simply betray what appear initially to be its core allegiances? And how should we adjudicate between these interpretive options?

In order to pursue this idea further, I should like to explore how imagery of the dance is developed in *WALL•E*, since this makes the case for alignment with a positive version of enchantment in its clearest form. The dance, in various manifestations, is the richest and most complex thread of imagery running through *WALL•E*. Dance is alluded to implicitly from the moment of the film's opening, when an extract from the song 'Out There' in *Hello, Dolly* (1969) is used as a backing soundtrack for a dazzling sequence of shots that move in swiftly from outer space through to the film's localized setting on earth. This song, reprised several times in well-worn video sequences with its accompanying musical dance ensemble number, sets up a number of thematic parallels from *Hello, Dolly* that act as a subtle form of

commentary on *WALL•E*. Indeed, *Hello, Dolly*, with its lush, nostalgic nineteenth-century sets, may itself be seen as drawing on the utopian energies of the musical to heal the increasingly strained rift between materialism and sentimental attachment experienced by its 1960s audience. The matchmaker Dolly is 'a woman who arranges things for the pleasure – and the profit – it derives'. The nostalgic evocation of romance in *Hello, Dolly*, orchestrated by a heroine who is highly conscious of her gendered role in a material world, sets up a series of inter-textual ironies with *WALL•E*, whose cumulative effect is to ensure that sentimental aspects of desire are rendered complex, and often tempered by dissonance. If WALL•E is fascinated by courtship rituals that are imbued with nostalgic, old-world charm in *Hello, Dolly*, then his attempts to re-enact these rituals in his own degraded environment produce a heady mixture of poignancy and laughter. His efforts to reproduce the lover's touch in holding hands, first with himself and then with a recalcitrant and overly streamlined EVE, are as hilarious and affecting as any of the gauche romantic exchanges that Chaplin perfected in his film roles as a childlike lover. And, in many ways, they serve a similar purpose, re-enchanting audiences through the naïve expression of innocent desire in a world that is emotionally impoverished. In the more developed form of the courtship ritual, however – the dance where grace and reciprocity must eventually replace more clumsily solipsistic expressions of the romantic impulse – this re-enchantment becomes increasingly profound**.**

The first of the dance-like sequences performed by the protagonists in *WALL•E* is a solo number, enacted by EVE just after the spaceship has departed and left her, supposedly alone, on earth. Pausing for a moment from meticulous engagement in her programmed task of seeking out terrestrial life forms, EVE looks up as the spacecraft that has just delivered her departs. Momentarily conscious of her estranged aloneness, she seems to sense an obscure impulse towards inner freedom, and launches herself into a dazzling series of loops, swooping dives and pirouettes above the burnt-out surface of the earth. It is a beautiful image – a natural, birdlike rendition of the jet aircraft's aeronautical display – that culminates in a graceful, twisting return to earth at the end. This spontaneous, joyous dance through the air clearly counterpoints the mechanistic rigour demanded by her programmed directive to search continually for signs of vegetation. Yet it is performed solo, and the equally spontaneous blasts from a laser cannon delivered casually en route – though exuberant and funny – also serve as a tacit reminder that developments in technology are inexorably annexed to militarist functions in modern societies (Haraway, 1991: 58). The sense of wonder generated in this scene retains complex, potentially critical, undercurrents.

Subsequent images of the dance develop, extend and revise these inherent meanings, both in comedic modes (as when WALL•E uses the cue of his *Hello Dolly* video to lead EVE towards a disastrous experiment in dancing *à deux*) and in more lyrical forms. The consummation of these sequences occurs in the fully reciprocal movement of the pair's dance in space, after WALL•E has been expelled from the Axiom and almost destroyed. This is an astonishing sequence, a poetic blending that simulates both organic and mechanical kinds of movement and acts as an imaginative spur for the inhabitants of Axiom to recover a fuller sense of their suppressed humanity. Two of the human 'gels', watching from the spaceship, touch and seem to recognize each other for the first time in direct

response, while the associations of the dance trigger a new ethical resolve in the captain of the space station, who becomes determined to restore the damaged earth.

The dance in space therefore functions as a kind of epiphany in the film. The blue-and-white flight paths traced through the starry blackness by the two robots weave together different kinds of form and agency. EVE's flight paths are all graceful, mathematically controlled parabolas, straight lines and elliptical curves – the ordered movement of the universe in thrall to gravity and the laws of Newtonian physics. Hers is the flight of the machine, interpreting human joy in perfected formal patterns. WALL•E's flight patterns, by contrast, appear haphazard, darting, irregular – like sperm, swimming with blind optimism through the mysterious space of the body to achieve a hazardous union with the ovum. Or a butterfly, all checks and swerves and fluttering. It is the movement of organic nature, also beautiful in its own way, but here conceived as complementing, and responsive to, more orderly mechanical motion. Robert Graves captures the intrinsic value of this more organic (and indeed poetic) principle of motion evocatively in his poem 'Flying Crooked':

> The butterfly, a cabbage-white,
> (His honest idiocy of flight)
> Will never now, it is too late,
> Master the art of flying straight,
> Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
> A just sense of how not to fly:
> He lurches here and here by guess,
> And God and hope and hopelessness.
> Even the aerobatic swift
> Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Lurching forward – in a spirit of 'honest idiocy' that is guided by guess and God, hope and hopelessness – perfectly describes the appeal of WALL•E's unsteady progress through the film. But the scene's harmonization of these two principles of motion also suggests the utopian possibility of reinstating the technocratic order of human society within the alternative rhythms of organic nature, and it is this which gives it the power of epiphany.

I have been arguing thus far that the poetic richness of significance that accrues around imagery of the dance in *WALL•E* harnesses utopian energies in complex, imaginatively compelling forms. The question of how we should assess the relationship between this fully artistically realized sense of wonder and the allure of commodities in a consumer culture remains only partially answered, however. Jane Bennett has persuasively argued that there is 'a moment of affinity between commodity fascination and wonder at the world' (2001: 123) which earlier theories failed to discern sufficiently clearly. *WALL•E* is particularly successful in connecting this commodity fascination, characteristically embodied in both nostalgic and futuristic forms, to larger, more philosophically attuned, kinds of enchantment. Bennett goes on to assert that 'demystification is not the only response to commodification' (ibid.: 126) and to question whether the 'animation

of artefacts that Marx, Horkheimer, and Adorno lament might not be all bad'. What we understand to be the effect of this 'animation of artefacts', including machines, is precisely and centrally germane to *WALL•E*, of course. Bennett argues that the animation of artefacts might properly be conceived as having:

> all of the following incompatible effects – pressing people to submit to the call to consume, distracting them from attending to the unjust social relations embodied in the product, reminding them that they share the world with non-human forms of agency, drawing them to the wonders of material existence, and opening them to unlikely ecological connections and political alliances. (ibid.: 126–7)

The recognition of these 'incompatible effects' requires the development of a more flexible theoretical position that 'would call sometimes for demystification, sometimes for an appreciation of the ability of non-human things to act upon us … for a deliberate receptiveness toward, even an active courting of, those "fetishes" among whose effects can be counted surprise, wonder, even enchantment' (ibid.).

The functions of enchantment in commercial products may be differentiated, however, according to whether the effect is simply to generate amusement, which 'disables systemic thinking', or richer, stronger affective modes, which contain 'rebel energies' that delight but also unsettle (ibid.: 127). Enchantment, in this latter sense, is conceived as 'a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience' (131): it is charged with ethical – even political – undercurrents. This gives us precisely the critical tool we need to discriminate and debate the effect of *WALL•E*'s undoubted artistry. For the film's childlike optimism, its faith in a loving principle that has the capacity to restore agency and reciprocity within nature, are worked through in a context that does not simply generate amusement and naïve wish fulfilment. The experience of enchantment that is offered clearly goes deeper, including rebel energies that delight but also unsettle. Indeed, the pervasive image of a world whose ecosystems have collapsed completely is in itself so unsettling that it would be hard to argue that any amount of delight in sentimental comedy could completely close the lid on *WALL•E*'s potential to enable critical, systemic thinking. But the film does so in ways that go beyond appeals to our rational self-interest, by allowing what William Blake called 'contrary states' to be held in imaginative correspondence with each other, rather than closed off and compartmentalized. This applies to the contradictory aspects of consumerism that are held in play, as I have suggested, and even extends to the larger, cosmic imaginary within which we are invited to explore identity. David Abram has argued that one of the most striking extensions of our collective imaginative reach in the modern world has resided in our technologically engendered capacity to see our own planet, from outside, in space. Yet this radical extension of perspective on the site of our collective identity has come at a cost:

> In order to obtain the astonishing and unifying image of the whole earth whirling in the darkness of space, humans, it would seem, have had to relinquish something just as valuable – the humility and grace that comes from being fully part of that whirling world. We have forgotten the poise that comes from living in storied relation and reciprocity with the myriad things, the myriad *beings*, that perceptually surround us. (1997: 270)

Within its radically reduced vision of a dystopian future, *WALL•E* keeps audiences in touch both with the estranged power of that astonishing image of earth in the darkness of space and with the humility and grace that comes from intimacy with other life forms and things. Indeed, in large part through its subtle dramatization of images of touch and through the metaphor of dance, the film produces a storied relationship between modes of construing our identity that we normally keep apart. No doubt this is not, in itself, enough to heal our fractured lives or redeem our future. But we clearly need fables of enchantment of this imaginative quality if we are to develop the kind of ethical generosity and grounded vision that are necessary (as the film puts it) to live fully, or even perhaps to survive.

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Conclusion

New Directions?

> 'Nonetheless, the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos … Whether sounded on the tongue … or shimmering on the screen, language's primary gift is not to *re*-present the world around us but to call ourselves into the vital *presence* of that world – and into deep and attentive presence with one another.'
>
> David Abram, *Becoming Animal*

In this book I have argued for an ecologically grounded view of Disney animated films that many people may find contentious, and some surprising. My central proposition is that there exists, within the whole oeuvre of Disney and Disney-Pixar animated features, a rich tradition of films that are engaged with the question of how we relate to and understand the natural world of which we are ourselves a part. Implicit within this proposition is the view that we have been insufficiently aware of the strengths of this tradition hitherto, and that it should be seen as an emotional and aesthetic resource that may help draw the young towards the kinds of connection, understanding and debate that are vital if we are to come through our current environmental crisis and to learn from it. I realize that many people who have been deeply involved in the cultural politics of environmentalism will see this view as insufficiently critical and will want to argue against it, some vehemently. As adults, we have been used for some time now, particularly in academic circles, to seeing Disney as the enemy of progressive forces and perhaps the chief promulgator of a gaudy, synthetic and sentimental view of the world that we characterize pejoratively as 'Disneyfication'. How could the products of this corporation possibly help move audiences towards a more authentic, respectful and engaged relationship with nature?

And yet, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding chapters, there exists a core group of films within the Disney canon that are clearly focused on the issues, questions and concerns that have exercised philosophers, environmentalists and activists over succeeding generations, since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was first released. Of course these issues and concerns are dramatized in a very different mode from that adopted within environmental writing, where the form of engagement offered is generally earnest, deeply knowledgeable and sometimes lyrical. Disney films, by contrast, are comic, playful and sentimental in unashamedly populist ways. But the best of the films are also subtle and exuberant and exhibit their own kind of lyricism at key moments. Like the fairy tales on which so many of the early films were based, they are also optimistic – a double-edged quality in this context perhaps, since their detractors see this optimism as a false commercial attribute that sugars over the audience's perception of more troubling difficulties in the issues that are presented. I have argued here that troubling issues maintain a more

active, if sometimes covert, presence in the best films of this tradition than is often recognized, however, perhaps similarly to the way good comedy, more generally, often allows darker, disturbing shadows to circulate beneath the gaiety of its surface.

The most substantial part of my argument though rests on what I hope is a careful discrimination of the quality – as well as the qualities – of the films involved. If one were to sit down and watch in a sequence the films that I take to be the cornerstone of this mini-tradition – *Snow White*, *Bambi*, *The Jungle Book*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Finding Nemo* and *WALL•E* – one would, I think, be struck by the extraordinary consistency with which ethical and emotional questions about how humans should relate to animals and the environment come up. One would also be struck by the imaginative variety and artistic quality of many of the moving image sequences through which the sensuous world is evoked. These films, I would argue, constitute a unique mini-tradition, a subset, whose achieved quality within different genres offers a touchstone for assessing possible influence, alternative directions and differences in other animated films.

Looking towards the future rather than the past, I should like to conclude now with a brief overview of some significant developments within animation generally since the millennium that relate to the way the environment is staged and understood. Let us begin with the fairy tale, where there has been a renewal of creative interest from Disney in the last few years with the release of two major animated features, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (2010).

What distinguishes Disney's (in some ways quite surprising) return to the classic form of the fairy tale nearly 20 years after *Beauty and the Beast* is perhaps less a response to a major shift in cultural perceptions of nature than competition from other major animation companies in the United States. The remarkable success of DreamWorks' *Shrek* series moved the animated adaptation of the fairy tale forms decisively in a new direction, and one that was in many ways antithetical to core Disney values of innocence, enchantment and optimism. Like many post-modern narratives, *Shrek* manages to keep its feet in two camps at the same time. The storyline clearly embraces the dissonant energies of disenchantment, ironic detachment and the appeal of the grotesque, reconfiguring the rival claims of romance and sentiment in the process. The aesthetic mode *Shrek* developed was the very antithesis of *Snow White* (indeed imagery reflecting Disney's *Snow White* is consigned to the function of toilet paper even before the opening credits have started to roll). In response, Disney's fairy tales of the new millennium may be seen as reclaiming the values of its own tradition, whilst also building in some elements of *Shrek*'s smart, deconstructive style (Crandall, 2004) – a kind of counter-reformation in the cultural sphere of children's animation.

The attitude towards the natural world that is dramatized in *Shrek* is stridently anti-pastoral, as well as anti-romantic. The slime-filled swamp is its heartland, rather than the woods and open fields. Indeed, when the characters venture forth along more conventional sylvan paths they appear as predisposed towards pumping frogs full of air to bursting point as they are towards contemplating the beauty of the firmament at night. The connection to nature is made to twist and turn within *Shrek*, always alert to the comic energies embodied in substituting grotesque or degraded conceits for more traditional forms of harmonious affiliation to human identity. The mordantly ironic

handling of *Snow White*'s sentimental pastoral, in particular, positions the viewer in a mode of detached ambivalence towards nature, with Shrek's own penchant for the slimy pleasures of his abject swamp domain inviting appreciation through the comic reversal of normative values, rather than through fuller identification.

Interestingly, Disney's first riposte to *Shrek*, *The Princess and the Frog*, also uses the swamp as a primary setting and, like *Shrek*, turns on a love story in which the romantic protagonists are turned into grotesque, non-human forms. Also as in *Shrek*, the romantic couple learn to love and accept each other in their grotesque other forms as frogs (although *The Princess and the Frog* is less radical in eventually restoring the frog pair's humanity). As in Disney's earlier *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Mermaid* films, however, the storyline shows a strong interest in the central characters' affiliation to animals and the natural world that is largely absent in *Shrek*. The frog/humans learn from their journey through the swamp, which is represented more in terms of its inherent vitality and natural beauty than as an abject region. In this sense the film suggests continuity with the earlier Disney fairy tales, though updated, both in terms of tone and in the positive presentation of African-American racial identity. This view is borne out by the film's return to the traditional Disney form of the musical, and by the decision to employ Ron Clements and John Musker (who had worked on *The Little Mermaid*) as directors and co-writers. Despite some differences in perspective, there is a strong sense of a continuing tradition.

Disney's next fairy tale, *Tangled* (2010), an adaptation of the tale of Rapunzel, is less richly engaged with themes and images of wild nature. However, it does offer one or two distinctive, new perspectives. Rapunzel's escape from the tower in which she has had to live for the whole of her childhood and adolescence, for instance, is conceived in a spirit of intoxicating joy at the prospect of reconnecting to the sensuous world of grass, trees, wind and wild animals. In a different reworking of the fairy tale material, one could see this image offering thoughtful, or even critical, perspectives on the conditions of modern childhood, where free play in the outside world has become increasingly curtailed and circumscribed (Louv, 2005). Within *Tangled*, this never really becomes part of the core agenda that the film is exploring, but it is interesting that Rapunzel should have been conceived as one of the most physical of all Disney's heroines. She not only embraces the earth with exhilaration on her escape from the tower, but also charms and dominates a powerful stallion in the manner of Crocodile Dundee, and moves with a vitality and confidence rivalled only by Pocahontas from earlier Disney movies. *Tangled* and *The Princess and the Frog* indicate, in different ways, that the connection between traditional fairy tales and nature is still present in the modern era. The vitality of this connection is perhaps even more in evidence in significant animated films outside the Disney tradition, such as Hayao Miyazaki's most recent foray into the fairy tale mode, *Ponyo* (2008), and Michel Ocelot's *Kirikou* (1998), a particularly compelling and original adaptation of a West African oral tale.

Although it is perhaps rash to make generalizations without the benefit of full historical hindsight, the imaginative space occupied by the North American wilderness seems to have offered little scope for significant development by animators in the Disney tradition over the past decade or so. Only *Brother Bear* has fully used the

North American wilderness as a scenario, and the mediocre artistic quality of this film limits the degree to which it can engage with the issues we have been exploring here with any real depth. Other recent Disney animations with settings in rural America – *Chicken Little* (2005) and *Home on the Range* (2004) for instance – have been largely genre movies in which the anthropomorphized animals play essentially human roles with little or no connection to environmental ideas or sensibilities. There has been rather more interest recently, though, in playing with scenarios in which aspects of wild nature are situated within urban settings in North America. Some of these films explore the relationship between wild energies and urban space to some extent, a theme which has also exercised thinking within a significant strand of recent environmental writing. Indeed, the increasing incursion of wild animals into urban environments and animals' adaptation to the opportunities afforded by cities more generally has been widely documented in many parts of the globe (Louv, 2005: 245–70). Seen from this perspective, the central theme of Pixar's *Ratatouille* (2008) may be conceived as the renewal of creativity (in this case creativity in cooking in a famous Parisian restaurant) through the absorption of neglected or suppressed wilder imaginative energies associated with animals. This may be a slightly strained, allegorical reading of the role played by heavily anthropomorphized rats in the film, but the imagery of human and animal realms interacting with each other in forms that challenge the ossified rigidity of a dominant, official regime has some parallels with the subversive function of the mice in *Cinderella* (1950). In *Ratatouille* this theme is transferred to a resolutely metropolitan, now European, setting. Other recent American animations from non-Disney studios have explored the interface between city environments and wild animal nature in more sustained ways. DreamWorks' *The Bee Movie* (2007), for instance, uses the widely rehearsed fear of a complete collapse in the world bee population to drive an – at times rather flimsy – plot about a bee that becomes integrated into human society in New York. Although not wholly successful, the film includes some good gags based on parallels and differences between human and bee societies. The film also has an educative potential for young viewers, promoting more general awareness of possible environmental crisis and of our interdependence with other bio-communities. *Over the Hedge* (2006) takes as its founding premise wild animals' dependence on humans as a source of food in urban environments. It is not nearly as searching a film as the playful but incisive Japanese animation *Pom Poko* (1994), however, in its exploration of the implications of such dependence. One or two other recent films, DreamWorks' *Madagascar* (2005) and the more derivative *The Wild* (2006), which was distributed by Disney, have developed plotlines around the escape of wild animals in city zoos. These have been used both to showcase other wildlife that has adapted to urban environments (such as alligators in New York sewers) and to develop comic scenarios around what happens when caged animals are returned to natural environments – in these instances within Africa. This is an increasingly significant issue for conservationists as attempts are made to reintroduce extinct species to areas where they have died out or to enhance the stock of endangered animals in the wild. It will be interesting to see to what extent the imaginative scope for developing such themes is taken up in the future. The evidence at the moment would seem to be that these themes are present within contemporary animated features, but are not usually invested with sufficient

imaginative force or specificity to connect in any substantial way with analogous issues in the real world.

In part, this detachment may be due to the increasing erosion of a distinctive sense of place or localized affiliation within contemporary globalized societies. Perhaps related to this tendency, it is remarkable how many recent animated films move their animal protagonists between radically different locales, often abandoning any shred of verisimilitude in the process. In *Happy Feet* (2006), for instance, the penguin hero Mumble sets off on a quest to discover the source of the environmental degradation affecting the survival prospects of his fellow penguins in the Antarctic and ends up in the middle of the Pacific, whence he is taken to a California zoo. In the gently environmentally attuned Belgian animation *A Turtle's Tale* (2011), the tropical marine protagonists make an even more unlikely journey in the reverse direction, nearly dying when they reach the frozen seas of the Antarctic. The caged New York animals in *Madagascar* (2005) cross the Atlantic to reach the titular African island (which David Attenborough's nature documentaries have done much to lodge in the popular imagination), while the zoo animals in *The Wild* (2006) journey to another African landscape, one that is threatened by a volcanic eruption. Species' relationship to locale, the long-term product of Darwinian evolution and adaptation to particular ecological niches, is being reconfigured as protean, provisional, subject to transplantation across the vast reaches of oceans that separate continents. Nature, viewed from the perspective of the fantastical licence of animation, appears everywhere to be on the move, displaced in direct proportion to the global contraction of land that might still be characterized as wild. One might, indeed, legitimately conceive of *WALL•E* as exemplifying an even more hyperbolic version of this recent tendency, with life forms moving between hostile environments across space, rather than between continents.

It may be possible to detect some significant changes also in the degree to which the burden of environmental concerns has become more overt in many instances within recent animation, even in settings that were previously playgrounds for exploring archetypal fantasies. *WALL•E* is clearly much more powerfully and openly engaged with environmental ethics than the slightly earlier *Finding Nemo*. Outside the Disney canon, *Happy Feet* and *The Bee Movie* both offer fables within which environmental disasters are averted through humans and animals learning to co-operate. There is also an overt, didactic message in *A Turtle's Tale*, which contains images relating to human activities in the ocean environment that are similar to those found in *Finding Nemo*, but show destructive effects much more clearly. Though varied in artistic quality, such films appear to have taken up the environmental legacy of Fredric Jameson's imaginative view of history as 'that which hurts' as well as 'that which inspires' (quoted in Stam, 2000: 19).

Alongside this tendency towards more overt environmental didacticism, there also appears to have been creative interest in featuring the oceans (as opposed to tropical rain forests and savannahs of earlier films) more prominently as domains for animal fantasy narratives. This is true both of the tropical oceans that are the primary setting for *Finding Nemo*, *The Reef* (2006), *Shark Tale* (2004) and *A Turtle's Tale* and of the partially frozen Antarctic seas in *Happy Feet*. The frequency of recent animators' fascination with such locales may be in part

because the oceans and the polar regions have begun to feature so greatly in our environmental imaginations: they are regularly invoked in the news and within documentaries as offering early, dramatic indications of the effects of climate change. But the oceans are also a potent symbol of change, strange transformations, and rebirth generally, as Shakespeare reminds us so richly in *The Tempest*. The sea's transformative power, its role in the genesis of life, and its function as the great reservoir through which the cycles of nature are enacted, serve as the imaginative spur for the mythological handling of the Gaia-like guardian spirit of ecological balance in Hayao Miyazaki's recent *Ponyo* (2008). Indeed, there are elements of these richly symbolic functions of the sea in play even within Disney's own earlier version of *The Little Mermaid* fairy tale.

Finally the more distanced setting of the prehistoric past seems to have generated imaginative energy more frequently recently, as the *Ice Age* films, *Brother Bear* and *Dinosaur* bear witness. Even though *Brother Bear* does not achieve the artistic quality of *The Jungle Book*, its ethical stance, urging greater humility within humans and embracing a regenerative kinship of the most extreme kind with animals, resonates strongly with contemporary animal rights philosophies and aspects of post-humanism. Pixar's recent film *Up* (2009) also explores animal rights and human responsibilities in relation to prehistoric creatures that have survived in a strangely isolated habitat, locked away from human interaction until rediscovered by rival explorers. *Dinosaur*, whose primary setting is within tropical forests at the end of the Mesozoic era, features a group of animals attempting to survive the sudden onset of environmental catastrophe on a slightly diminished scale to that which wiped out the dinosaurs in historical reality. The central question driving the plot forwards – how may a group survive the most intensive environmental threat imaginable? – has implicit parallels to our own age. In the film's fantasy resolution, the dinosaurs curb their aggressive individualism and survive the ecological disaster by learning to co-operate with each other. The underlying urge to shape the narrative around a set of contemporary ethical concerns and environmental anxieties is clear. *Ice Age 2* (2006) also features a journey by a group of animals attempting to survive the effects of sudden environmental change, in this case the melting of the glaciers at the end of the Ice Age. The distant past remains a place where animators can give full rein to archetypal fantasies, but one where analogies with the environmental vulnerabilities we are experiencing in our own age appear to exert increasing ethical pressure.

The engagement of key Disney films with environmental concerns at a thematic level is very clear, when the films are examined together in the ways I have explored in this book. A central question, perhaps, remains, though, about the extent to which these films – or at least the best of them – can also be seen, as David Abram puts it rather grandly, as 'a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos' (2010: 11). Disney has generally been credited with moving animation closer to realistic modes of configuring the world, centring the action on character-based, comic melodrama that retains much of the affective power of live action films. The technical expertise and artistry expended on realistic dimensions of Disney animated films is important in the context of environmental awareness, as realism can give us the illusion of feeling closer to the world as it is, and thereby deepen our ethical concern for it. But animation only ever approximates to our perception of

the real world: it creatively – and often fantastically – refashions the world, rather than re-presenting it directly. Whether Disney films' refashioning is really capable of singing us 'into the vital *presence* of that world' (ibid.) with the sensuous, imaginative force that Abram argues is necessary for us to reground ourselves ethically and ecologically, is a judgement I must leave readers to determine for themselves. My own view is that this depends as much on the culture, experience and sensitivities that we bring to the experience of watching the films as it does on the qualities of the films themselves. No one would pretend that watching Disney films is going to compensate for what Richard Louv (2005) has characterized as the 'nature-deficit disorder' that looms so large within modern childhood, nor that any form of art is a substitute for the understanding that comes from direct experience. But art can foster our rich imaginative engagement with the world in surprising forms; it can provoke reflection by making us see the world afresh from strange, new or even fantastical angles; and it can bring our daydreams out into a peculiar kind of refracted light, wherein we see and feel things more intensely and pleasurably for a while. In a medium that involves moving image, sound and music, art may even be able to sing us into a distinctive kind of lyric receptiveness. Although it may not (at least in Disney films) conjure the vital presence of the world with the depth and intensity Abram calls for, the most imaginative animation may at least enhance our potential openness to that experience. Perhaps Disney films are ultimately like a kind of weed in the garden of children's cultural experience. Like many of the gaudy, resilient invader species that exist in nature, they have successfully colonized a significant area within the affective domain of contemporary childhood. Richard Mabey (2010) has argued that we should appreciate the role that weeds play in brightening odd corners of the ground, bringing colour to derelict sites, securing the earth we live on from further erosion, and preparing the way for other life forms. I think perhaps we could learn to appreciate the ecological role played by Disney films in similar vein.

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