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Invisible Culture

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Man is in the Forest: Humans and Nature in *Bambi* and *The Lion King*

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In his 1986 book, *Biophilia*, E.O. Wilson explores the idea that the love of nature – or, more specifically, of “life and lifelike processes” – is in our genes. He admits that the “evidence for the proposition is not strong in a formal scientific sense,” [1](#) and despite efforts to substantiate it, the “biophilia hypothesis” remains more an exercise in poetic imagination than in hard science. Wilson, hopeful that humans have the capacity for redemption usually attributed to their souls, puts his faith in the nearest sociobiological equivalent, their DNA. If he’s right, the selfish gene contains its own antidote, though even Wilson admits that this may be wishful thinking. “The conclusion I draw is optimistic,” he writes. “To the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves.” [2](#)

Whether rooted in genes or not, nature love is fraught with ambiguities that challenge simple optimism. Like other, clinically diagnosed “-philiias,” biophilia can produce perverse results: loving nature and violating it are often bound up with each other.

Some biophilia theorists, in fact, point to the American suburban landscape, a grassland dotted with occasional trees, as an expression of our desire to recreate humankind's natal savanna environment. Biophilia here leads not to conservation – Wilson's hope as he marvels at the number of species of bacteria contained in a single puddle in the rainforest – but something approaching its opposite.

Similar ambiguities arise when one examines the Disney animation tradition. The Disney studio may have been unmatched in the rationality of its factory-like production, with finely graded ranks of workers producing the thousands of drawings necessary for each animated feature, but from the start its output revolved around "life and lifelike processes." Silly, stylized animals gave way to more realistic portrayals in films like *Bambi* (1942), *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *The Lion King* (1994). On the one hand, there is nothing more biophilic than the work of animating nature, which requires not simply filming animal movement, for instance, but being able to reproduce it realistically by hand. By necessity, Disney artists became naturalists. On the other hand, in representing nature, Disney transformed it into something else. This was most striking in its stock characters, the Mickey Mouses and Donald Ducks, who eventually became cuddly, large-headed pseudo-infants. But even when Disney attempted to be true to nature, its main interest lay somewhere else, in using nature as a metaphor for human society.

Biophilia's chief perversion, then, may be narcissism. To paraphrase Claude Levi-Strauss, nature is a useful tool to "think

with” about ourselves. Even in Romantic thought, which professes to love nature for itself, dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of civilization and artifice lurk in the background. Indeed, in the modern era, the natural world has frequently functioned as a “magic well” (to use a phrase of Wilson’s) that artists and thinkers have returned to time and again to supply what they fear contemporary civilization lacks. This implicit critique of modern society certainly appears in the Disney tradition in films like *Pinocchio*, which preceded *Bambi*, through *Bambi* itself and its loose “remake” fifty years later, *The Lion King*. The substance of the critique, however, varies in these films, indicating that what people draw from the “magic well” changes with the times.

Darwinism, Social and Antisocial: *Pinocchio* and Felix Salten’s *Bambi*

In many of the films of Disney’s classic era – *Snow White* (1936) and *Fantasia* (1940), most notably – the use of nature is almost wholly theatrical. If there is any idea of nature in *Snow White*, it is that it is as temperamental as its conflicting feminine archetypes: sweet and innocent as Snow White one minute, stormy and threatening as the evil Queen the next. In *Pinocchio* (1938), on the other hand, a more overt ideology arises, one rooted in ideas about nature popular through the first half of the century as thinkers grappled with the “softening” effects of civilization. These thinkers, Theodore Roosevelt foremost among them, insisted on the importance of preserving nature. In a variant of perverse biophilia, however, they felt that nature should continue to exist primarily so that it could be perpetually reconquered.

In *Pinocchio*, this theme is expressed as a tug-of-war between nature and civilization. While the title marionette ostensibly has to learn to choose between right and wrong, his ultimate task is to avoid becoming either too civilized or too natural – in other words, to make the shift from artificial creature to real boy without overshooting and becoming a dumb beast. The Alpine village where Pinocchio begins (and ultimately ends) his journey represents a perfect balance between nature and artifice: clear mountain air and starry nights, on the one hand, and the lovingly handcrafted marvels of Geppetto's workshop on the other. As the puppet ventures out into the world, however, the forces of under- and overcivilization work in tandem to upset the balance.

On his way to his first day of school, Pinocchio is snared by the dandyish Fox and hooliganish Cat, who promise the puppet instant celebrity. If they represent familiar pitfalls of modern life, however, the traveling Gypsy to whom they sell *Pinocchio* is a more ambiguous figure. Some have seen Stromboli as Disney's caricature of a Hollywood mogul: flamboyantly egotistic, money-grubbing, and stereotypically Jewish in appearance. In other words, he is too civilized, at least in its decadent sense. Taken more at face value as a Gypsy, however, he is also a nomad whose wandering is traditionally tied to the seasons. His way of life contrasts with Geppetto's settled existence. In this sense, he is too natural. The seeming contradiction is central to Rooseveltian thought, however: civilization weakens people not only in the physical sense of debilitating them, but in the moral sense of making them easily overpowered by the

more barbaric aspects of their own nature.

This idea appears more starkly when, after Pinocchio escapes from the Gypsy's clutches, the Fox and Cat – now in league with an evil Coachman – lure the puppet to Pleasure Island. Here, in a dark raucous atmosphere, gangs of boys literally “make asses” of themselves. ³ Once they metamorphose, the Coachman sends them to the salt mines for lives of hard labor. Pleasure Island is thus a vision of urban hell, transforming strapping country boys into degraded proletarians through canonical city vices: pool, beer, smoking, amusement park rides. The specter of anarchy and communism, associated in the late-19th and early 20th with urban riots, also shows up when gangs of boys, flouting both private property and bourgeois propriety, gleefully demolish a “model home.” By the time Pinocchio escapes Pleasure Island, he has been partly corrupted by it, and, strikingly, the donkey ears and tail he sprouts are not puppet facsimiles, but the real things. For Pinocchio, there is more than one route to “realness,” and city life brings out the bestial in him.

Becoming fully human, on the other hand, requires a strenuous battle against nature. Learning that Geppetto has been trapped inside a giant whale, Monstro, Pinocchio sets out to save him. Entering the whale himself, becoming engulfed by nature, Pinocchio ultimately saves his father by using artifice – in this case the most primordial of human technologies, fire. Pinocchio also displays physical bravery and self-sacrifice as he is propelled from Monstro when his fire's smoke causes the whale to sneeze. He seems to die, but is

finally resurrected as a real boy.

To mature as a human being, then, a boy (and this largely a masculine ideology) must conquer nature but, by the same token, never completely eliminate it for fear that it not be there for future generations of boys. This was a core idea of Rooseveltian Social Darwinism, which was simultaneously insecure about nature's permanence and Western man's dominance. Earlier schemes of natural theology posited that everything was given its rightful position in the great chain of being at the time of creation – including, by analogy, the classes of society – while Darwinism portrayed nature as a contest of perpetually changing beings that resulted (but never with finality) in the “survival of the fittest.”

If many members of the American establishment were confident that they would come out on top in history's “struggle of races,” 4 others felt anxiety about the degeneration of Anglo-Saxon America. As Harvey Green shows in *Fit for America*, by the turn of the 20th century, Protestants worried that they had grown weak, neurasthenic and constipated. With a decline in the birth rate of the “Puritan Stock,” some even feared that they were committing “race suicide.” 5 This was largely chalked up to the debilitating effects of modern urban life, which undermined health through its decadent luxuries and hectic pace. Roosevelt himself advocated the “strenuous life,” a substitute for the rigors of frontier life that had toughened earlier generations of Americans. 6 In this variant of Darwinism, the natural world did not select for fitness so much as provide a means to instill it in those who could then compete successfully for dominance in

society. 7

If Roosevelt believed that nature could reinvigorate the upper classes, other social reformers saw it as a way to moderate the vices and revolutionary impulses of the lower classes, thus curbing the animality that erupted in urban environments. As Paul Boyer argues in *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*, this idea was an underlying motive for the initial creation of urban green space in the form of parks and playgrounds. These efforts indicate a lingering sentimentality about the natural world, but some reformers were more straightforwardly Darwinist. Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children's Aid Society, arranged the migration of poor children to the West. Unlike Roosevelt, Brace felt that city streets had an admirable toughening effect, at least on "street Arabs" (i.e., poor immigrant children). The problem was that they became immoral and potentially revolutionary. Having "read Darwin's *Origin of Species* thirteen times and prais[ing] the theory of natural selection as 'one of the great intellectual events' of the age," 8 he was opposed to the asylum movement, which sought to reform urchins in institutions such as Sunday School. Instead, he put his faith in the purifying effect of the frontier: "Out there, he believed, the 'rough, thieving New York vagrant' would be transformed into the 'honest, hardworking Western pioneer...'" 9

If Roosevelt and Brace ultimately reconciled Darwinism with the project of social progress (as they saw it), the source material for *Bambi* drew bleaker conclusions from Darwinist thought. *Bambi* the book stresses the absence of either an

overarching spiritual order or an ultimate goal to history. At the same time, it nonetheless continues to use nature to critique civilization, in this case the hypocrisy and conformity of polite society. Call it “antisocial” Darwinism.

Viennese author Felix Salten originally published *Bambi* in 1924. Matt Cartmill describes the book as radiating “a cold aura of Schopenhauerian pessimism” [10](#) with its steady drumbeat of carnage. Cartmill tallies the death toll, from a ferret killing a mouse in the first chapter to the mass slaughter of animals during a pheasant hunt. Man, always referred to as “He,” is the predatory god of this harsh world. Bambi first encounters Him, shrouded in myth, in storytelling sessions *cum* theological debates: “They listened tirelessly to everything that was said about Him, tales that were certainly invented, all the stories and sayings that had come down from their fathers and great-grandfathers.” During the discussions, a young doe named Marena offers the Christian viewpoint that “sometime He’ll come to live with us and be as gentle as we are...and we’ll be friends with Him.” [11](#) The bankruptcy of this thinking is later demonstrated when Gobo, a meek buck who is captured and domesticated by humans, returns to the forest preaching His benevolence, only to be shot in the gut as he trustingly approaches a hunter. “Then they heard Gobo’s wailing death shriek,” as the chapter’s final sentence matter-of-factly puts it. [12](#)

Bambi’s path contrasts starkly with the domesticated Gobo’s. Mentored by a magnificent old stag, presumably his father, Bambi eventually reaches a clear-eyed

state of Nietzschean solitude. He learns from the stag that all social attachments are fraught with peril. In their first encounter, the old stag scolds the fawn Bambi as he cries for his absent mother. “Of all of his teachings this had been the most important; you must live alone, if you wanted to preserve yourself, if you understood existence, if you wanted to attain wisdom, you had to live alone.” [13](#)

If the old stag’s initial lesson applies to cutting the apron strings, a necessary stage in any individual’s social development, Bambi next learns that it applies equally to mature sexual relationships. When an amorous Bambi pursues the siren song of Faline, his mate, the old stag rescues him from what turns out to be a hunter mimicking a deer call: “He was so terrified that he began to understand only by degrees that it was He who was imitating Faline’s voice [and] calling ‘Come, come!’” [14](#) Man, a god who takes many forms, traps animals in the snares of their own instincts. Bambi ultimately abandons Faline and his own children. [15](#)

As he learns the hidden paths of the forest and the tricks of survival, Bambi gradually embraces an antisocial isolation, becoming a mysterious presence in the woods alien even to other male deer. Animals who “knew-him-when” are constantly surprised to find him still alive. And, gradually, the book adopts Bambi’s view of the other citizens of the forest. The polite society of animals, which at first seems so charming – as it will later on in the Disney version – thinly veils a harsh reality of competition, violence and death. The animals blind themselves to this reality, or hypocritically

deny it, or natter on about their petty obsessions. Bambi shuns this ship of fools entirely, concerning himself with his own survival and with transmitting the lessons of the old stag to his son, whom he meets in the final chapter.

The culmination of the stag's teachings comes when he shows Bambi a dead hunter in the woods. In what Cartmill characterizes as a resolution of the conflict between man and nature, man is shown to be "only another dying animal."¹⁶ Bambi concludes that "there is Another who is over us all, over us and over Him."¹⁷ Possibly tacked on to soften the bleakness of the book's outlook, this piety is double-edged. If Man is a sadistic predator, the "Another" likened to him is perhaps similarly cruel. Alternately, this epiphany might be Salten's way of proclaiming the death of God. This is arguably the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from Darwinism. If natural theologians proclaimed that the order of nature was an expression of Divine thought, the absence of an overarching order – that is, beyond the struggle for survival – implied the absence of a Divine thinker. Salten, who continued to hunt despite the horrors he vividly imagined it inflicting on the animals of the forest, embraced a nihilistic naturalism in which meaning was ultimately trumped by the brute fact of death. If this is love of nature at its most clear-eyed, it may again illustrate how biophilia can turn strangely perverse.

Nature as Nurture: Disney's *Bambi*

By mid-century, Fascism had taken up strands of both Social and "antisocial" Darwinism and had monstrously amplified

them. During the long period of *Bambi's* development as a film (1936-1942), war loomed, broke out, and finally enveloped America. At this point, the "softening" effect of civilization seemed no longer to be its most obvious defect. Rather, the unbridled technological power of nation-states was the new means of civilization to destroy itself. In the face of this, *Bambi's* writers dipped into the magic well in search of a more humane ideal and found it in a vision of nature that emphasized family, community and peaceful coexistence. If *Bambi*, like *Pinocchio*, is ultimately called upon to fight, it is in defense of these things, threatened this time by Man rather than an outsized avatar of Nature. *Bambi* would ultimately popularize a form of nature-love that insisted that the governing principle of nature is, in fact, love.

Bambi's final shape was a long time in coming. Walt Disney originally envisioned the movie as a grand pastoral spectacle that would be heavy on vaudevillian shtick, including the slapstick pairing of a squirrel and a chipmunk. ¹⁸ Many of the animators had likewise been "raised on gags and funny sequences." ¹⁹ Some of this original vision remains: the squirrel and chipmunk are still there, getting in each other's hair in brief sequences. Sidney Franklin, the American filmmaker who originally optioned the story – and who finally determined that a live-action version would be untenable – argued that Disney should instead attempt to "duplicate the emotional experience of the book." ²⁰ There were writers who agreed, and who wanted to make the film a somber allegory about human violence as World War Two got underway. At the same time, many Disney artists wanted an opportunity to get away from "cartoonish"

animals and create something more realistic. For “the story to be...moving,” they felt, “the audience had to be convinced that the animals really existed, as animals.”

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The *Bambi* animators’ pursuit of realism is now legendary: the exhaustive photography of Maine woodlands “in summer, fall, winter, and spring, not missing Indian Summer; in rain, heavy snow, light snow, and sleet; on gray days and on bright, sparkling days”; 22 the travel to zoos; the lessons in animal anatomy provided by Rico Lebrun, “probably the greatest draftsman of animals in the country”; 23 the observation of two deer, Bambi and Faline, kept as pets on the Disney lot; and the dissection of splashing water through slow-motion filming (ultimately put to good purpose in a forest-storm scene). The portrayal of realistic animals – as opposed to the round, squishy creatures that inhabited cartoons up to then – also required innovative techniques. As Matt Cartmill notes, “the precision needed to maintain the illusion of constant slow movement in those long, thin, rigid legs” required the elimination of tracing errors. 24 Likewise, to make the movement of the old stag’s magnificent antlers convincing, rather than “rubbery,” involved the use of wooden models and mirrors. 25 In the opinion of animation historian John Culhane, all of the effort put into *Bambi* paid off: “The power of it was that it was *real*. It was there. You could walk into it and live with those animals.” 26

The single-minded pursuit of realism ended up not working artistically, however. Highly detailed backgrounds, in which every leaf and twig was rendered, contrasted

awkwardly with the deer in the foreground, whose bodies were flat, unrelieved areas of color. [27](#) The solution to this problem arrived with Tyrus Wong, a frustrated Chinese-American “in-between” who grabbed the opportunity to make a career move into background art. He introduced a new style to the film: “His grasses were a shadowy refuge with just a few streaks of the actual blades; his thickets were soft suggestions of deep woods and patches of light that brought out the rich detail in the trunk of a tree or a log.” [28](#) His “East-meets-West” approach introduced a note of Edenic lyricism.

Wong’s less-is-more approach also operated on the level of narrative. This was not entirely voluntary: in the wake of the lackluster box office of *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, the film’s budget was tightened and its planned length cut from 8,500 feet to around 6,200. Writers cut lengthy, ponderous dialogue. Bambi’s father’s original speech after the death of Bambi’s mother – “Man has taken her away. I know it’s hard to understand, but that’s the way of life in the forest. Now you’ll have to be brave and walk alone.” – became simply, “Your mother can’t be with you any more.” [29](#) On another level, the studio’s economic concerns also put a new premium on entertainment value, rather than artistic purism. Bambi’s mother’s death itself was recognized as deeply disturbing and was progressively more attenuated until it finally disappeared from the screen. Other deaths from the book, from the ferret at the beginning to the hunter at the end, were taken out altogether. Ultimately, writers and artists on the film would see this paring down as salutary: “Possibly the picture worked better without the additional

opulence.... Maybe we were chipping away the husk, the outer layers, the excesses, until we found the core.” [30](#)

At the same time, however, worries about *Bambi*'s audience appeal remained. The solution came from an unexpected quarter. *Bambi*'s young rabbit friend, Thumper, was originally written as a minor character, but the lively and engaging voice of four-year-old Peter Behn begged for an expanded role. Thumper's new prominence in turn drew the story away from adult animals: “The problem of how to make the adults convincing and interesting disappeared, for they were now supporting players, reacting to the intriguing personalities of the youngsters.” [31](#) The adult *Bambi*, with his longer, less expressive face, didn't have to fully engage the audience – that work was done by the baby *Bambi*. Accordingly, while the book is primarily about the stag, the Disney film focuses on the fawn, who quickly became the canonical *Bambi*.

Viewed from 60 or so years later, the centrality of childlike animals in *Bambi* seems natural, because animation has long been seen as primarily geared toward kids. At the time, Walt Disney felt differently, commenting that the studio didn't “cater to the child but to the child in the adult.” [32](#) Whatever its cause, however, the shift in emphasis welded a vision of nature to a tone of innocence and nostalgia. The mature animals in the movie itself participate in this, gazing with parental indulgence on *Bambi*'s first shaky steps. Nature has become part of the domestic sphere.

The realm of nature is accordingly purged of

violence and death. The wise owl gently admonishes a chipmunk, where one of Salten's owls would have torn it apart and devoured it. All of the animals are part of a charming, Capra-esque community full of recognizable American types, including a working mole tunneling his way to work. The principle that now permeates nature is love. Even the notoriously traumatizing murder of Bambi's mother barely disrupts the gentle narrative: the scene has barely had time to register when suddenly it is Spring, and Bambi and his friends, freshly adolescent, become "twitterpated" as they frolic with new-found mates. 33 Maternal love has made way for erotic love, which is followed in turn by a new cycle of maternal love as Faline has fawns of her own.

Sometimes this peaceful realm is threatened. As he faces deprivation and danger, Bambi's life cycle in fact echoes that of the canonical "Greatest-Generation" male. When young Bambi complains of hunger during a winter scene, this may have resonated with an audience familiar with life during the Great Depression. Later, Bambi is called to service: when dogs and hunters threaten Faline and fire engulfs the forest, he struggles heroically to save his mate and friends even after he is shot. At the end of the movie, he is a distant masculine figure, perched high on an outcropping of rock. Unlike the solitary wife-deserter of the book, however, Bambi is vigilantly protecting his family.

If the deprivation of winter is part of nature itself – though an impermanent, cyclical part – the real peril in *Bambi* comes from outside of the forest, much as international threats would preoccupy Americans throughout the second half of the 20th century. The

external source of violence and terror is Man. At one point, when Bambi asks his mother why they have fled to the safety of their little clearing, she says simply, “Man was in the forest.” Even if humans are a byword for danger, however, *Bambi* does not categorically exclude them from grace. Rather, it sets ground rules for attaining harmony with nature. Don’t hunt. Don’t set fires. In other words, treat the natural world as an extension of domestic space. Rather than present nature as a realm of vigorous struggle or meaningless death, *Bambi* depicts it as a homey refuge, a symbol of everything that seemed worth protecting from America’s enemies. The meadow in particular – a sunny, open space to which mothers take their children and which allows the unfettered consumption of plentiful grass and succulent flowers – prophesies the postwar suburban landscape.

Both as metaphor and practice, this domestication of nature had a history before *Bambi*. Keith Thomas describes a centuries-long tendency to increasingly see animals as pets, a tendency reinforced in the case of wild animals by zoos and national parks. [34](#)

Jennifer Price highlights the domestic themes in the anti-bird hat crusade earlier in the century: “The ground is strewn with the mutilated corpses of mothers!” one activist wrote about the scene following the harvest of plumes from a colony of Snowy Egrets (ignoring the actual behavior of the species, in which fathers share parental responsibility.) [35](#) *Bambi* itself would contribute to the trend, igniting crusades of its own. It influenced a whole generation of the anti-hunting activists, disdained by hunters as sentimental “nature fakers.”

This is arguably another perverse biophilia:

a love of nature so fervent and sentimental as to be willfully blind to most of what goes on in it. In fact, this is not a fair assessment of the generations influenced by *Bambi* who would contribute to the maturing science of ecology, and who would be devoted to the in-depth examination of life processes. Ecology, in turn, would lend many of its insights to Disney's next large-scale animated essay on nature. Even so, however, it would only contribute to yet another instance of humans thinking with nature about themselves.

Neocon Savanna: Disney's *The Lion King*

The Lion King (1994) was conceived as a *Bambi* for the 1990s, [36](#) and the similarities are numerous. Both films are inhabited entirely by animals: humans, though consequential, are on the periphery of *Bambi*; there is no indication of humans in *The Lion King*. [37](#) Pride Rock, the Lion King's "throne" overlooking the Pridelands, is a rocky ledge that resembles the outcropping that Bambi's father stands on. A parent dies in both movies, though it is a father in *The Lion King*. Simba, the hero of *The Lion King*, has an adult romance with a childhood friend. Finally, both stories climax with a threatening pack of predators (dogs or hyenas), a fire, and the ultimate triumph over physical danger.

To be sure, the writers who created Disney's first "original" story drew from other sources as well. In one popular gloss, *The Lion King* is *Hamlet* on the Serengeti: the devious Scar usurps the throne of his brother, Mufasa, whose neurotic son at first fails to avenge his death. Disney may also

owe an unacknowledged debt to Japanese animator Osamu Tezuka, who created a similarly plotted feature, *Kimba the White Lion*, in the 1950s. [38](#) But the chief source of inspiration remained self-consciously the Disney tradition itself, which is why the differences between *Bambi* and *The Lion King* are especially striking.

Visually, of course, fifty years and a generous budget make a difference. The suggestive brush work of Tyrus Wong is gone, replaced by dazzlingly detailed and vividly colored landscapes. The opening sequence is a montage of different groups of animals making their way to Simba's birth ceremony. At one point, in a dazzling imitation of a telephoto lens, the focus suddenly shifts from a close-up of carpenter ants on a tree branch to bounding antelope in the background. In place of *Bambi's* modest soundtrack, [39](#) the *Lion King* features lavish musical numbers composed by Elton John. Simba's oedipal wish, for instance, gets its own showstopper: "I Just Can't Wait To Be King!" The expanded scope of the movie extends to the exoticism of its locale – their field trips this time took Disney artists far away from the Maine woods – though the nature-film tradition of filming animal wildlife reaches back to 1928's African lion movie, *Simba*. [40](#)

The Lion King's biggest break with *Bambi*, however, is that its main characters are predators. [41](#) This drastically changes the context of even those scenes that are superficially similar to *Bambi's*. In the earlier film, forest animals gather around and praise the newborn "prince," but this quaint scene does not unsettle the theme of convivial and egalitarian life. In *The Lion*

King, Simba's birth ceremony involves serried ranks of zebras, antelope and other ungulates bowing down in unison beneath a prince who would one day actually grow up to rule – and, in fact, devour – them. Even given Disney's long-held affection for fairytale royalty, the scene's very conceit is almost as breathtaking as the animation. In making the traditional equation between lions and kings, Disney could still discreetly leave the cats' eating habits unmentioned. As it happens, the movie takes a different tack. When King Mufasa explains to young Simba that the King is responsible for all of the creatures in the kingdom, including the antelope, the cub inquires, "But don't we eat the antelope?" Mufasa concedes this, but adds that when lions die, their decomposing bodies eventually become part of the savanna's grass. "So, in a sense, the antelope eat us," he concludes, demonstrating the "circle of life" that is the movie's symbolic centerpiece. Mufasa then has Simba practice pouncing on the kingdom's hornbill vizier, Zazu, who comically tolerates this playful enactment of his own horrible death. [42](#)

Between *Bambi* and *The Lion King*, nature had evidently fallen from its state of grace. In part, this reflects shifts in the broader culture, particularly the growing popularity of ecological science among both naturalists and lay people. Ecology has long combined two somewhat uneasy attitudes toward nature. On the one hand, it emphasizes features like interconnectedness, mutual dependence, and the indispensability of even the smallest members of an ecosystem – that is, communitarian values usually associated with the political Left that counter the perceived competitive individualism of Darwinian theory.

On the other hand, ecology is entirely consistent with Darwinism at its most selfish-genish, crediting the interconnected features of the whole to the self-interested actions of individual organisms. In economics, this is called the Invisible Hand, a concept usually associated with the free-market ideologies of the political Right. At its inception, ecology was an explicit attempt to figure out the “economics” of natural systems, [43](#) so the cross-fertilization with free-market thinking is nothing new. What is interesting is its ability to combine, as *The Lion King* does, the warm-and-fuzzy “circle of life” with the vicious reality of nature, red in tooth and claw.

The Lion King ultimately elaborates its use of nature as a metaphor for society into a broad attack on welfare-state Liberalism, demonstrating in stark terms what happens when free-market principles are violated. Mufasa, a relatively hands-off king who lightly regulates the balance between the species, makes a crucial exception when it comes to hyenas. These scavenger/predators fall outside of the “circle of life” because, though clearly inferior to the noble lions, they refuse to be eaten by them. Disney thus imagines the hyenas to be a parasitic underclass poorly integrated into the economy of the savanna. And the artists and writers are not subtle about how they communicate this idea. Hyenas inhabit an elephant graveyard, a dark realm consisting of hulking, hollow structures that resemble burned-out buildings. Nearby, hot springs bubble like pools of toxic water. Mufasa forbids Simba to venture anywhere into this shadowy neighborhood. Disobeying, he finds himself confronted with a circling gang of thuggish hyenas who

speak in the quintessentially street voices of Whoopie Goldberg and Cheech Marin. There is no question about it: Simba is in the ghetto.

Once established, the fact that hyenas symbolize the American underclass adds a socioeconomic dimension to the evil machinations of Mufasa's brother, Scar. When Scar successfully murders Mufasa – simultaneously driving Simba, who thinks he caused his father's death, into self-exile – he welcomes his unholy allies, the hyenas, into the sunlight of the grasslands. Scar pushes the lionesses to hunt enough to feed the newcomers, in essence putting the hyenas on welfare. The lionesses, grumbling, overhunt the savanna and the game disappears. In fact, the very rain stops falling, and Mufasa's erstwhile kingdom becomes a barren wasteland. In other words, the burden of the welfare state cripples the economy and causes business to dry up. The ecological concept of "carrying capacity," an upper limit to the population that an ecosystem can support, merges with the concept of an insupportable "tax burden." In any case, where Bambi's forest was threatened from the outside by a metaphorical *wehrmacht*, Simba's savanna is undermined from within by liberal mismanagement.

Meanwhile, Simba becomes a hippie. Having, to his mind, committed patricide – the symbolic imperative of Baby Boomers – he flees to a rainforest bohemia to be raised by Timon and Pumbaa, the ambiguously gay meerkat-warthog pair who teach him the philosophy of *hakuna matata* ("who cares"). In the place of the big-ticket consumption of the savanna, Simba learns to eat small, brightly-colored insects. When

Nala ventures into the rainforest in search of game, Simba mates with her on the basis of romantic love, not family obligation.

Simba's new lifestyle seems to rule him out from recapturing the reigns of power. [44](#) In the end, however, he does just that. Prodded by Nala and the ghost of his father, he returns to the grassland and, learning that he didn't kill his father after all, gains the backbone to vanquish Scar. (Scar ultimately meets a sticky end at the teeth of his erstwhile allies, the hyenas – poetic justice, it seems, for the liberal politician.) When he presents his own son in a birth ceremony that echoes his own, however, Timon and Pumbaa are standing on Pride Rock right next to him. [45](#) In the end, Simba reconciles the free-market economics of his father with the free-thinking ways of his youth. He is, in David Brooks' coinage, the ultimate Bobo ("bourgeois bohemian").

This is a crucial clue as to what the generation that created *The Lion King* is hoping to draw out of the magic well of nature. Nature's main virtue is not simply that it abides by capitalist principles, but that it meets the challenge of market discipline by being endlessly, almost profligately, creative. To Brooks, the core values of the 1960s – self-actualization, exploration, a striving for revolutionary change, a commitment to meritocracy – are not only consistent with free markets, but necessary in a competitive global economy. The bohemian ethic keeps the American ruling class from becoming lazy and ossified. "The bourgeoisie has...revived itself by absorbing (and by being absorbed by) the energy of bohemianism." [46](#) Like a rainforest, an unbridled culture is an

ecosystem profligate in its production of forms. Most are ruthlessly eliminated, but the best survive and contribute to the overall growth of biomass or GDP.

Conclusion

As the twentieth century went its course, the vision of civilization's goal changed: from dominance, to security, to competitiveness. At every stage, however, there was a fear that its strengths might become weaknesses: its prosperity undermining the will to conquer, its technological power threatening annihilation, its ability to provide stability and security sapping the agility necessary for global competitiveness and economic progress. And at every stage, ideals of nature – expressed, among other places, in the books and cartoons intended to inculcate children with the values felt necessary for future success – have provided correctives, models to guide civilization away from self-destruction. The love of nature may be in our genes, as E.O. Wilson proposes. On the other hand, it may be rooted in our anxieties. We put our trust in the ideals of nature, even as we destroy huge swaths of it in actuality, because in the end we fear to be left to our own devices.

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1. E.O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (United States: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1986), 85. ↑
2. Wilson, 2. ↑
3. The agonizing transformation of Pinocchio's smoking buddy Lampwick into a donkey is perhaps the single-most nightmarish scene in what is now considered children's cinema. ↑
4. Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 222. ↑
5. Green, 224. ↑
6. Green, 237. ↑
7. At the time of *Pinocchio*'s production, of course, ideas about the "strenuous life" and racial revitalization were even stronger across the ocean in Germany, whose own tradition of physical culture influenced and was influenced by America's. The connections between Pinocchio's ideology and fascism are, in fact, a bit eerie. With its mitteleuropean setting, its demonization of Gypsies, and its abhorrence of mercantile urbanism (that is, Jewish corruption), it is almost possible to imagine Pinocchio as a Hitler Youth hygiene film. ↑
8. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 103. ↑
9. Boyer, 100. ↑
10. Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 163. ↑
11. Felix Salten, *Bambi: A Life in the Woods* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1928), 126. ↑
12. Salten, 233. ↑

13. Salten, 268. ↑

14. Salten, 190. ↑

15. For those familiar with the movie, this may come as even more of a shock than the book's graphic violence. ↑

16. Cartmill, 165. ↑

17. Salten, 286. ↑

18. Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, *Walt Disney's Bambi: The Story and the Film* (New York: Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1990), 115. ↑

19. Johnston and Thomas, 140. ↑

20. Johnston and Thomas, 107. ↑

21. Johnston and Thomas, 142. ↑

22. Johnston and Thomas, 122. ↑

23. Johnston and Thomas, 138. ↑

24. Cartmill, 170. ↑

25. Johnston and Thomas, 165. ↑

26. In Johnston and Thomas, 141. ↑

27. Johnston and Thomas, 151. ↑

28. Johnston and Thomas, 151. ↑

29. Johnston and Thomas, 174. ↑
30. Johnston and Thomas, 183. ↑
31. Johnston and Thomas, 148. ↑
32. Robin Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 43. ↑
33. This includes the bashful male skunk, Flower, the one who giggles and blushes every time Bambi so much as glances in his direction. The fact that Flower ends the movie a proud father doesn't save him from the contemporary viewer's skepticism about his sexual orientation. Whether the gay subtext – not just in *Bambi*, but in virtually every Disney feature – was intended is a knotty hermeneutic problem. There's no smoking gun like Gore Vidal's proud confession to camping up *Ben Hur* – until perhaps Nathan Lane declared *The Lion King's* Timon and Pumba Disney's first "openly gay" characters.] ↑
34. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 117; Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 94; Elizabeth Hanson, *Animal Attractions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 54. ↑
35. Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 91. ↑
36. Christopher Finch, *The Art of the Lion King* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 166. ↑
37. The closest we get is a primate: the baboon shaman named Rafiki, voiced by Robert Guillaume. He is also the only character who is culturally African, the others ranging from Shakespearean to vaudevillian. ↑
38. "Lion' Born in Japan? Some Say Disney Pirated Film Idea," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 June 1994, 10E. ↑
39. Featuring the sweet "Little April Shower," sung over a scene of a rainstorm: "Drip, drip, drop / Little April shower / What can compare / To your beautiful

sound...” ↑

40. Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 32. There is no indication as to whether the name of *The Lion King's* hero is a coincidence. ↑

41. This certainly made the mega-successful marketing tie-in with *Burger King* less problematic. Imagine having to sell “Bambi Burgers.” ↑

42. Later, Nala (the movie's Faline) pursues Simba's warthog sidekick, Pumbaa, in deadly earnest. This sort of thing has long been at the center of Warner Brothers cartoons, of course, but there these are always clearly on the side of the prey. The predators are always fools tripped up by their own cruelty. ↑

43. Jane Jacobs, *The Nature of Economies* (New York: Random House, 2000), 9. ↑

44. Meanwhile, the apparently pre-feminist lionesses are unwilling to simply take matters into their own hands. ↑

45. Putting the “pride” back in Pride Rock? But then what about Scar? Voiced by Jeremy Irons, he was effete and prissy. He notably failed to produce any heirs. His sin may not have been so much that he was gay, however, but that he was a closeted, power-grubbing, Roy-Cohnish homosexual. He was the opposite of Timon and Pumbaa, who provide cultural pizzazz without demanding actual political power. ↑

46. David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000), 139. ↑

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