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THE BAMBI PORTAL

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Bachelor of Fine Arts

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Art

Washington University in St. Louis

2018

ABSTRACT

An investigation into the multiplicity of Walt Disney's 1943 film *Bambi* — including both the content generated as a result of the film and the way in the film exists ephemerally in mass memory — develops into an investigation into the film's use of appeals to “nature” to reinforce the gender roles of the traditional American nuclear family. Through the creation of an interactive “portal” utilizing distorted video, these themes are pulled out from the usual world of the film and presented in an alternate format for critical consideration. However, a tension between this critique and genuine sensory enjoyment of the film persists.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BAMBI PORTAL

*if, one night, alone in my bedroom, I arranged all of the symbols just right,
and phoned all of the right gods with all of the right questions,
and turned the television to just the right static, looked myself dead in the eye,
and wished
and wished and wished and wished
could I manifest something called a Bambi Portal,
and if,
(hypothetically)
I leaned in towards it nose first,
and kept leaning, past the shimmer, until I found I had pushed my head straight
through,
what would become of me ?
what would I have to share with the others, if I came back ?*

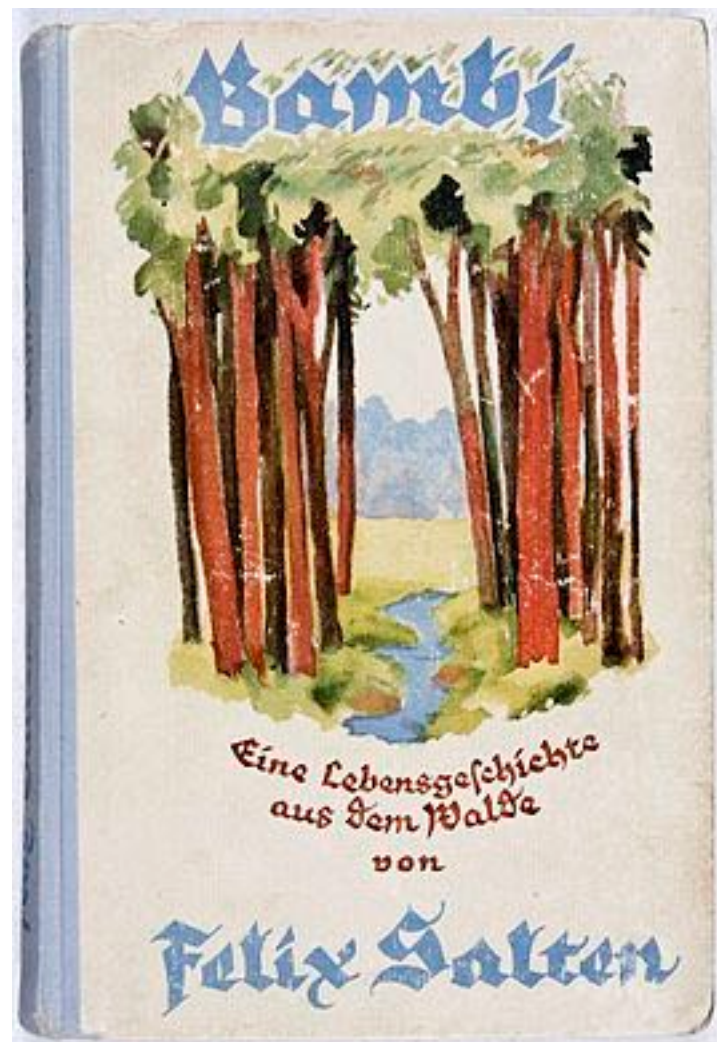


Figure 1: The first edition cover of Felix Salten's 1923 novel



Figure 3: The most current iteration of the Bambi Portal, “The Thicket”

THE BAMBI PORTAL

“So we have a fake tree holding a fake treehouse, representing a fake story told in a different medium from, but alluding to, a classic piece of literature, in an amusement park visited by 30 million people a year, most of whom are, like myself, enchanted.

What is going on here?”

- Stephen Fjellman, on the Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse at Disney World

In the opening of his book *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*, Stephen Fjellman takes a moment to wonder at the layers of the Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse attraction — the world of distortion bubbling just below its surface, and the massive scale at which those distortions are happily consumed. The treehouse is a sunny bundle of illusions and contradictions, a site of unnatural nature, and, above all, beloved.

So it is with Walt Disney’s *Bambi*. Felix Salten’s acclaimed 1923 novel, which attempts to describe the frequently cruel reality of nature from a deer’s perspective, notable for its many gory deaths and exploration of the relationship between man, beast, and God, becomes a beautiful, glossy animation showcase, tragic but ultimately saccharine. Walt Disney’s *Bambi* is a bit of a “boys club”, with mostly male creators and characters. It is a father-figure driven coming of age film, “a great love story” to quote its posters, but also

most often remembered and spoken about in terms of either cutesy femininity or dead mothers.

And more so than the somewhat unwieldy Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse, the iconic image of Bambi multiplies itself, into a wide-eyed flurry of merchandise, fan art, costumes, songs, and colloquial word use. The category of “Bambi” may have started with a single sobering nature novel, but it is now host to a bevy of unruly spawn.

Although these Bambi-oids are sometimes authorized by the Walt Disney Corporation in the form of sequels and souvenirs, they are more often mutations beyond the company’s control, landing solidly outside the realm of wholesome Disney imagery. These mutants have a lot to say — about *Bambi* as a text, but also about the context in which that text was made, and in which it reproduces itself. A Google search for “bambi halloween costume” reveals a slew of “dead female Bambi and male hunter” couples grinning for the camera in suburban backyards, a dizzying gateway into potential analysis of the relationship between gender and violence in American heterosexuality. However, all possible analysis (and potential mundanity) aside, there is still something mysterious, almost mythological or supernatural, about the film, and about the way Bambiness unfolds at a cultural scale. No amount of cultural critique thrown at Bambi makes my encounters with the film less enchanting. A child who has perhaps not even seen the movie points to a deer standing on the side of the road, its eyes glowing in the night, and says, “Look, Mom, a Bambi”. To again quote Fjellman —

“What is going on here?”

Many artists have asked this question. In his multimedia work “Streamside Day”, Pierre Hughye uses imagery referencing the young deer (as well as other Disney films) as part of his creation and documentation of a new holiday for a suburban neighborhood still under construction. As the deer walks over from the idyllic woods into an empty house, there is a feeling of both irony and hope, of the strange things that happen at the edges. Other artists subject innocent young Bambi to grotesque distortion and violence — Nicole Eisenman scrawls him with gnarled insect legs, Paul McCarthy throws him mercilessly into a sculptural blender with Snow White until many-headed monstrosities emerge, and Arturo Herrera chops him up, tacking his rear end up against a gallery corner. Beni Bischof’s “We Must Go Deep Into the Forest” is a particularly relevant contemporary work, as its array of drawings and paintings deal in the many potential meanings of the film itself. Bischof watched both *Rambo II* and *Bambi* over and over again while making small works about both their content and related personal thoughts. In a statement about why he chose *Bambi*, he says:

Bambi has long been a cross-cultural symbol: birth, life, death, rebirth, the endless circle of life. Bambi became synonymous and moral pioneer for the good and pure in man (*PLUS-ONE*).

Some of Bischof’s works are direct interpretations of scenes from the film, but among them are bigger questions, such as a haunting painting featuring an abstracted Bambi in a warped forest captioned “do we have to be simpler to progress as a species?”



Clockwise from upper left:

Beni Bischof, from *We Must Go Deep Into the Forest*, 2017

Nicole Eisenman, *Bambi Gregor*, 1993

Paul McCarthy, *White Snow, Bambi*, 2014

Pierre Huyghe, *Streamside Day*, 2003

Arturo Herrera, *Still*, 2000

The story of *Bambi* does have a kind of adaptable broadness, lending itself well to reflection, elaboration, and personal interpretation. It is a particularly useful portal, a piece of media to travel to and through other cultural ideas with, because over time, much has become folded up inside of it. The work of “The Bambi Portal” project and its current video installation iteration “The Thicket” is to both unfold *Bambi* through analysis and to fold my own experiences with the film back into *Bambi* through art making. I aim to investigate, magnify, and distort meaningful scraps of Bambi-ness — to dissolve them in my memory and then try to make them tangible again.

In Laura Mark’s theory of Unfolding/Enfolding, she explores the constant flow between “Experience”, “Information”, and “Image” — the way in which experience is interpreted and unfolded by information or image, the ways in which information and image might describe and unfold each other, the way in both information and image are perceived by the senses and folded back into experience. In the words of Marks:

Realizing that your perceptible world is merely the tips of imperceptible, information icebergs, you may well cast around for something that just Is. Maybe you'll hear your neighbor singing, you'll catch a whiff of asphalt from the road construction, you'll see your dog come into the room. What a relief. This is raw experience, right? But wait - what's that pop song she's styling? Why was your neighborhood scheduled for development? How much did your dog cost? (Marks 2008)

The image of “Bambi” is “merely the tips” of the massive iceberg that is all that is related to it, and folded within it is the lived experiences of the creators and animators of the film, every time somebody has called deer a “Bambi”, and the economic systems which

allow bootleg Bambi merchandise to be mass produced. Even by just viewing the film, “Bambi” is slightly changed, all of the tears over dead mothers folded inside.

But what does “Bambi” even indicate? There is *Bambi* the book, *Bambi* the film, Bambi the character, “Bambi” as a more generic term for deer and deer-like cutesy-ness. Perhaps a good place to start is with Walt Disney’s 1943 film. Walt Disney was sold the rights to Bambi by Sidney Franklin of MGM in 1938, who had bought them from Felix Salten in 1928. Upon the film’s release, Walt announced that it was the best film he had ever made, and the best to come out of Hollywood (Rothman). During its production he had developed an “obsession with appealing to nature for an affective and aesthetic authority”(Riffel 13), setting up a small zoo of wildlife models in the building and even demanding that animators dissect real deer in the studio so that they might better understand their musculature. At the same time, human models were used for facial expressions and gesture. Animators faced the difficult task of seamlessly melding human voice actors with their anatomically studied animal counterparts on screen.

It is perhaps because life in the animated forest is so convincingly both “natural” and charged with human emotion that associations with its characters have carried over out of the movie and into the woods themselves, with people referring to deer broadly as “Bambi”. Some sportsmen and ecologists accuse the film of contributing to what they have called “the Bambi Effect”: people feel empathy for certain “cute” megafauna such as deer and want to protect them at all costs, even to the detriment of the wider ecosystem during times such as overpopulation, or when a forest fire may be beneficial (Lutts 165). There is no animal predation in the entire film — creatures live and die at the hands of Man. Part of the Bambi Effect is an invocation of innocence, that Bambi

and his cohort did nothing to deserve death, that hunters must be heartless. The construction of animals as just, pure, and innocent, living lives that shouldn't be disturbed by Man, is relatively new, a product of post-industrial society, where the different categories for animals have become increasingly separate. John Berger discusses in "Why Look at Animals" that "Animals" are no longer a centralized group — some are treated as raw material for the food industry, while others are adopted family members in the form of pets, and others still are "zoo" animals, captive symbols of the spectacle of the wilderness. All types of animals, however, are subject to use as symbols and puppets. Berger says of Disney productions: "In such works the pettiness of current social practices is universalized by being projected on the animal kingdom."

And so: Bambi walks like a deer and talks like a toddler, and eventually, a distant and dominating American father figure. One of the primary effects of the film's appeal to "nature" as authority while meanwhile replicating 1940s mainstream visions of romance and family life on screen is to validate the presented gender roles — it appears to be the law of the forest and the circle of life that the father must be absent and aggressive, that the wife must be won as property and protected as such. The process by which the characters grow into these roles is, by virtue of the setting and attention to natural realism, shown to be "the way nature intended" as well. The gender attitudes embedded in this film often have a sinister tone upon second glance, especially when expanded on by adjacent cultural phenomena such as the "Bambi and hunter" Halloween costume photographs (see figure 4). The work I produced for *The Thicket* focuses upon these gendered themes, as they are at the heart of most of the film's strange contradictions. I

am also interested in the ways in which mass-produced products, fan produced content, and animation history echo these themes.

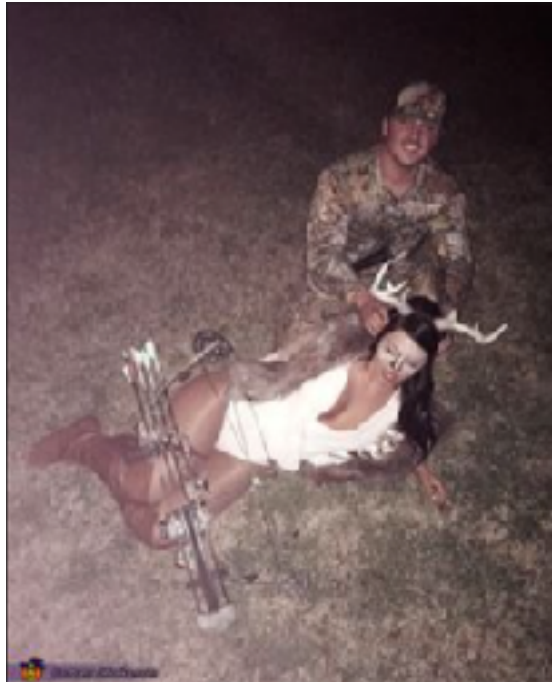


Figure 4: “Bambi Halloween Costume” Google search result

The list of uncomfortable and even violent gender implications in the film is long, but a few stick out as particularly central. In *The Thicket*, each of five small Bambi dolls can be presented to a strange stage set resembling a young girl’s desk to trigger a distorted video remix of part of the film, and each remix correlates to a theme regarding gender. In the video *MOTHER*, for instance, rotoscoped versions of Bambi’s mother — formal shells used for background interest by Disney animators of later decades — flicker hauntingly in and out in the moments before her death. Despite being one of the most-mentioned characters in recollections of the film, Bambi’s nameless mother is completely void of character — she exists mainly in the film so that she may die, a

sacrificial offering made in the interest of Bambi having a backstory and the audience understanding the threat man poses to peaceful nature. His mate Faline is similarly peripheral, a pretty doe existing mainly so that Bambi can fall in love and then stage a spectacular fight with his rival Ronno during his journey to manhood, and so that Bambi can become a Great Stag like his father. His father does not participate in family matters, handles Mother's death coldly, and is mainly shown commanding other bucks around or posing majestically. The cuteness that causes many people to remember Bambi as a girl — shown in the video *CUTE/PATHETIC* as an affect constructed out of helplessness and Bambi's tendency to fall down over and over as a child — is something that male animals grow out of on their way to better things, while female animals like Faline, though capable of seduction or distraction, remain "cute" and ultimately helpless. In the image of costumed women lying "dead" and adorable in her partner/hunter's arms, shown in *FATHER*, there is not only a frightening message about the equivalency of women and animals as consumable prey, but also some violent reverberation of Walt Disney's decidedly masculine attempt to dominate nature.



Figure 5: Still from *CUTE/PATHETIC*

All of this reads as rather dire — what about the enchantment? I had predicted when I began this project that I would quickly grow to dread the film, and that the deeper I went into the woods, the darker they would become, until *Bambi* became irredeemable. Instead, this process, which began with an admittedly somewhat arbitrary proposition of emotional investment in the film, developed my relationship with *Bambi* into a strange twisting creature that feels as though it has a life of its own, sickening and redeeming all at once. Something which I joked about in early proposals for the project — dreaming that I was Bambi at night — began, startlingly, to actually happen. I cannot shake the feeling that *Bambi* will haunt and delight me for as long as I live, and yet, it also feels the opposite of special, or rare, a film dumped into the bargain bin at the Goodwill.

There is something miraculous in the fact that I can sit alone on the floor in a dark room with an obsolete dumpster-dived television, watching a commercially produced film that is 76 years stale, and still feel at times that I am the sole receiver of the film, blessed to see the creamy colors gliding like a sweet butter across the screen. I have watched this movie countless times and when I see that Bambi's legs move as though they really have bones inside of them I am still dumbstruck — I forget any argument about gender violence, opportunistic branding, or the creative superiority of Looney Toons animators Tex Avery and Chuck Jones. However, a minute later I begin analysis again. The whole movie proceeds this way — for a stretch I walk across its surface, pacing with thoughts of the American nuclear family and the constructed-ness of nature and the historical influence of the multi-plane camera, and then I slip on some coy baby talk, some rustle of animated grass, and sink down into the movie, lost in the

liquid movement and the expressions on the faces. For whatever stretch of time, Bambi and I are just happening to each other, in a kind of lucid dream. And then some manly posture or some cloying 1940s musical number jerks me back up above, and I start pacing again — morality, mating, death — and it goes on like this, other bits and pieces from my memory and worry mixed in throughout, until the credits roll. When I think about how many other people have gone on their own strange private trips while watching the cartoon forest pass by, I am electrified.

Investigating the domestic yet deep mystery of this kind of slipping in and out of critical consciousness is a large motivation for the work. There is a psychological space in these viewings where, for a moment, cynical criticism and genuine wonder seem to coexist, or even amplify each other, and I want to know what happens when that space becomes physical — a space you can step into, run your hands over, share with another person. When thinking about Bambi, I realized that instead of dampening the enchantment, the multiplicity of distortions only made the moments of unencumbered sensory involvement with the film more transcendent, as if I was briefly granted a chance to be one with this strange spirit I had heard and read and thought so much about. However, the increased intensity of my interactions with Bambi seemed to bring up new kinds of darkness also, as my emotional attachment to Bambi made crude depictions and nasty implications so much more wounding. By treating both my enchantment and disgust with equal visual weight in the videos and their armature, I hope to create a shared multi-sensory experience that reveals some strange and maybe even spiritual truth about the role of mass-produced popular media in our most private moments.

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