

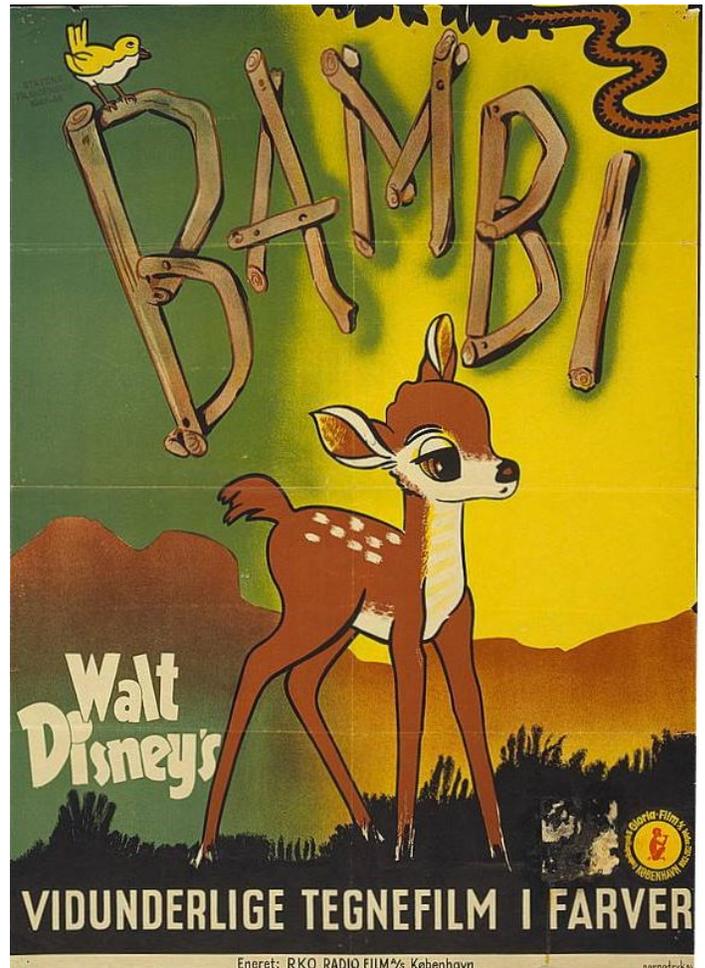
Bambi

By John Wills

An emotive tale of a young deer's life in the forest, Disney's fifth full-length animated feature "Bambi" is widely considered one of the studio's best movies and a veritable 'nature classic.' The film is based on "Bambi, A Life in the Woods" (1923) by Austrian Felix Salten that offered a sentimental yet critical take on human-nature relations for a largely adult audience. Taken as an allegory of Jewish persecution, Nazi Germany banned the novel in 1936. In April 1937, Walt Disney acquired rights to the title from MGM director Sidney Franklin, who had failed to turn the story into a working live-action movie. Walt recognized huge potential in "Bambi." Fascinated by the forest drama and range of animal characters, he enthused, "It's a story that that's going to have a tremendous amount of appeal."

The task of animating a European folk tale was familiar territory for Walt Disney Productions. The studio had already experienced spectacular success with its first animated movie, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" (1937), based on the German fairy-tale by the Brothers Grimm. Walt Disney collected a wide variety of European stories in the 1930s with the idea of conversion, including "The Adventures of Pinocchio" by Italian Carlo Collodi, which quickly became another feature project.

Walt Disney personally oversaw the making of "Bambi." He edited dialogue, added humor, and guided overall production. While Perce Pearce and Larry Morey directed the story group, Walt himself maintained ultimate control. The studio founder remained loyal to the Salten text and committed to the idea of seeing the world through Bambi's eyes. On viewing early animation of the fawn encountering a butterfly and leaping a log, Disney cried with emotion, "This is pure gold." The studio set about producing a movie far more realistic in tone and aesthetic than its previous ventures. Walt explained, "To retain the charm of these creatures, our animated drawings must fully capture the natural movements and attitudes of living animals." Dubbed 'nature realism,' the studio crafted an immersive and richly detailed cartoon forest. Painter and sculptor Rico LeBrun lectured staff on how to sketch wildlife, while real-life animals were brought into the studio. The dedication to realism left one animator frustrated, "He [Disney] might as well have gone out and taken pictures of real deer." The studio in turn committed huge resources to recreating Bambi's forest on film.



A 1947 Danish poster for the film. Courtesy Library of Congress Online Prints & Photographs Collection.

Interrupted by worker strikes, wartime projects, and financial issues, the production of the film slipped from June 1939 to mid-1942. Costs rose to \$1.7 million. Released on August 9, 1942, the film met with mixed reviews. "Variety" enthused over the breathtaking aesthetic of the animation: "Bambi is gem-like in its reflection of the color and movement of sylvan plant and animal life." However, a reviewer for the "New York Times" fretted that, "In search for perfection, Mr. Disney has come perilously close to tossing away his whole world of cartoon fantasy." Disney's "Bambi" garnered a disappointing \$1.64 million on initial release. Some years later, Walt lamented, "when we released that picture and there was a war on... nobody cared about the love life of a deer." The financial failure of both "Bambi" and "Fantasia" (1940), an experimental Mickey Mouse feature, led the studio to prioritize less artistic and more commercial pieces in the years to follow.

"Bambi" was nonetheless timely and significant. In its portrayal of "Man" the hunter as the merciless enemy

to *Bambi*, the movie challenged viewers to consider the broader state of humanity. Released at a moment when civilian bombings and mass destruction marked World War tactics, "*Bambi*" denounced all violence and aggression.

Disney's "*Bambi*" also stood out as one of the first environmental movies. As well as capturing the wonderful ecology of forest life, the picture forwarded a noticeable animal rights agenda. Shot off-camera, the death of *Bambi*'s mother proved a poignant and exceptional moment in cinematic history. The film highlighted from an animal's perspective the huge emotional and physical impact of game hunting. The American hunting lobby denounced the scene and the picture. "*Outdoor Life*" labeled it, "the worst insult ever offered in any form to American sportsmen and conservationists." The movie led to a questioning of national hunting practice. Historian Ralph Lutts labeled the lingering impact of the movie "the *Bambi* Syndrome."

"*Bambi*" also highlighted the growing sophistication of the Disney studio. Musical scenes such as 'Little April Shower,' whereby creatures playfully hide from rain, showcased a company highly adept at matching movement with music (a technique labeled 'Mickey Mousing' after the studio's early animation shorts). The movie received nominations for 3 Academy awards in the category of music: Best Sound, Best Song (for 'Love is a Song'), and Original Musical Score. Along with "*Snow White*," "*Fantasia*" and "*Pinocchio*," "*Bambi*" established Walt Disney as a truly iconic artist of the twentieth century. The project

also helped refine a distinctly Disney-like presentation of nature and the great outdoors. The corporation cultivated its own brand of nature with "*Bambi*" creating a 'Disney Nature' built around pretty, naïve, harmonious, and cute talking creatures.

The "*Bambi*" project encouraged Walt Disney to acquire the rest of Felix Salten's back catalogue and explore new manifestations of Disney Nature. As part of Walt Disney's True-Life Adventures documentary series of the 1950s, film crew transformed Salten's story about the squirrel "*Perri*" (1938) into an intriguing mix of wildlife documentary and abject fantasy. The Disney film, released in 1957, featured likely the only existing (and fabricated) recording of a 'squirrel dream sequence.' Salten's "*The Hound of Florence*" (1923) meanwhile inspired the hilarious live-action comedy "*The Shaggy Dog*" (1959).

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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