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# Constructing Nature Through Cartoons: Cultural Worldviews of the Environment in Disney Animated Film

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# CONSTRUCTING NATURE THROUGH CARTOONS:

Cultural Worldviews of the Environment  
in Disney Animated Film

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4-25-14

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*Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a major in the program  
in Science, Technology, and Society (STS)*

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# INTRODUCTION

## *A Perplexing Disjuncture Between Environmental Science and Society*

Although this thesis will ultimately explore how the idea of nature is depicted in the animated feature films of the Walt Disney Company, I'd like to begin with a related question, which has certainly concerned (and tormented) me throughout my studies of environmental science. Modern scientific evidence suggests that human degradation of the environment is catastrophic, and it predicts that if we do not halt our current course of action, we will potentially damage the planet to the point where it is not conducive to non-human and human life, as we know it.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as I will later discuss in more detail, current human actions that harm the environment have continued, with little change. Despite the utmost urgency that science has expressed in regard to the anthropogenic environmental crisis, human actions—on the level of policy, as well as most individual actions—have overall ignored this perspective. Particularly in the United States, which has a tremendous impact on the environment itself, even with the increased popularity of environmentalist sentiments that take heed of these ominous scientific perspectives, human degradation of the environment has but little halted (for instance, carbon dioxide emissions have changed little in the United States over the last twenty years,<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Rockstrom, et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Ecology and Society* 14 (2):32.

<sup>2</sup> Environmental Protection Agency, "Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2012," (Washington, D.C.: NSCEP, April 15, 2014): 2-1, <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/Downloads/ghgemissions/US-GHG-Inventory-2014-Chapter-2-Trends.pdf>

global atmospheric carbon levels have continued to rise<sup>3</sup>). What accounts for this apparent disjuncture between science and society in regard to the environment?

This is a difficult query to answer, and indeed where Science, Technology and Society studies (STS) come to play. As a student of STS, I will attempt in my discussions to offer some insights that can bridge this evident disconnection between scientific and social realms. I will offer a cultural constructivist approach to understand these continued forms of human environmental degradation, despite incompatible scientific environmental knowledge. Certain cultural worldviews, rather than scientific knowledge or biological intuition, have defined humans' understandings of the environment. Much of this paper will be devoted to exploring in depth the cultural and historical bases for the worldviews of dominion, conservation, and consumerism, which have defined how Americans understand, and treat, the natural world.

Furthermore, being cultural, our worldviews of nature are thus at liberty to be affected and shaped by people, groups, companies, and media products. This is where Disney comes in. My analysis will look at the Walt Disney Company as a powerful force which has reflected and influenced culturally predominant worldviews of nature. Indeed if how we conceptualize our own humanity and the "natural" world is culturally learned, then how the vastly influential Walt Disney Company portrays nature is certainly of pertinence.

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<sup>3</sup> "Trends in Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide," last modified April 8, 2014.  
<http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/gmd/ccgg/trends/>

## *The Power of Disney to Tell Us About Nature*

If our understanding of nature is indeed not scientific, then how do cultural worldviews become defined, propagated, and challenged? Although numerous pathways exist to inculcate culturally accepted viewpoints, one in particular that has become prominent over the past century is that of animation film. Film already has been credited as a medium that can powerfully shape our understanding of nature.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, animated film is a particularly potent force for transmuting, and potentially challenging, cultural conceptions of nature. The ideas, values, and perspectives that people form during childhood form the basis for how they understand the world for the rest of their lives. Thus animation film, a medium that has been particularly targeted towards children for various reasons, is in a very influential position.

Walt Disney innovated the technology of feature-length animation film with the creation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and since then, his company has profoundly shaped the American consciousness, and the world. The “magic” produced by the Walt Disney Company has no doubt held a uniquely enchanting power in many Americans’ childhoods. Arguably unlike any medium, and undoubtedly unlike any other animation company, Disney has had a strong grip on the American consciousness and despite that many Americans grow out of their Disney phases when they become adolescents, it is hard to deny the imprint that Disney has made upon American psyches. Powerful sentimentality, beautiful animation, and iconic comical anthropomorphic characters in Disney animated films

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<sup>4</sup> Gregg Mitman, *Reel nature: America’s romance with wildlife on films*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

have captivated young audiences for almost a century, and have led to the multinational mass media conglomerate becoming the top earning entertainment corporation in the world.<sup>5</sup> Disney's position as such a powerful force in children's media in particular, places it in a position to strongly influence the perceptions of young Americans.

Because Disney is in such a privileged position to shape young American minds, the themes it explores should be looked at with a critical stance. Disney has largely played off popular culturally sanctioned values in its productions, and its animation features have relayed similar themes to its young viewers, regarding family values, morality, romantic heterosexual love, liberty, and also nature. Indeed a subject of striking recurrence in Disney films is that of non-human nature: almost all iconic Disney animation films incorporate anthropomorphisms where stylized animals are given distinctively human voices, emotions, and American values, and many of these films further utilize natural, non-human landscapes as central subjects in their stories.

Scholars have investigated how Disney portrayals of nature are biologically deterministic, in that they imply prescriptions that certain oppressive cultural attitudes and behaviors are "natural."<sup>6</sup> They posit that in certain Disney animation films, such as the *Lion King*, *Aristocats*, and *Lady and the Tramp*, subtle social statements are implied through the attribution of certain anthropomorphized

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<sup>5</sup> "Fortune 500 2013: Full List," CNNMoney, accessed January, 2014 [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2013/full\\_list/](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2013/full_list/).

<sup>6</sup> Noël Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in popular culture: gender, race, sexuality, and the politics of the natural* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 111.

animals with characteristics, behavior, and voices, easily associated with race or class.<sup>7</sup> While these analyses are certainly relevant and fascinating, I would like to instead explore how Disney addresses the human relationship with “nature,” in its particular meaning of non-human life forms and the landscapes that they inhabit. This aspect of “nature” is particularly salient in that it reflects how Americans understand their own humanity, and the world around them. Furthermore, in the wake of the increased realization of the catastrophic damage that human beings are causing to Earth and the life-systems that operate it, how we understand this non-human “nature” has particular significance for how we treat it.

Disney’s engagement with natural landscapes and non-human life forms in its animation features has been linked with our cultural understandings of nature, in different time periods throughout the company’s history. As I will show, Disney’s portrayals of “nature” are largely derivative of certain cultural heritages that understand specific relationships between humans and the natural. As Euro-American culture has morphed, shifted, and changed throughout time, different worldviews of nature have become popular, while others have receded; indeed multiple worldviews may exist at one time, reinforcing or challenging one another. Depictions of non-human life forms and landscapes in Disney’s animated films are closely linked with these cultural understandings of nature that are predominant at different times. Focusing on the cultural worldviews of nature that I highlighted earlier, dominion, conservation, and consumerism, I will explore how Disney has vacillated in its depictions of nature. Even sometimes within a relatively short

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<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan. *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).



period of time, certain Disney animated films have evoked conventional damaging worldviews, and others have portrayed progressive ones that challenge traditional assumptions.

Before I discuss the expression of specific worldviews of nature in Disney's films, I will more thoroughly introduce some concepts outlined here, in Chapter 1. I will attempt to unravel the concept of "nature," addressing it as understood in science and culture, and placing it in a cultural constructivist perspective. I will further address the current relationship that humans possess with the environment and its connection with cultural conceptions, as a starting point for my analyses in the following chapters.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I will focus on two films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) and *Bambi* (1942), produced during the early "classic" Disney period, as Disney was first exploding in popularity, and while Walt Disney himself oversaw the company. While *Snow White* evokes the age-old worldview of dominion, *Bambi* challenges that stance with a land ethic conservationist worldview. My analysis of these two films hopefully will demonstrate that Disney films from this early period both reflected traditional cultural worldviews of nature in the late 1930s to early 1940s, and sought to challenge them.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will bring my attention to two more successful Disney films, *The Little Mermaid* and *WALL-E*, which have been made in the last twenty-five years, since the "Disney Renaissance."<sup>8</sup> Albeit released some years apart, these two films reflect a cultural preoccupation with the idea of consumerism that sustained

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<sup>8</sup> Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 89

the time period. While *The Little Mermaid* advocates a worldview of superficial consumerism, *WALL-E* challenges that worldview and advocates a deeper awareness of the negative environmental externalities of consumerism.

Thus while Disney animation films have propagated cultural worldviews of nature to children that are implicit in environmental degradation, they have also advocated more progressive understandings. While most media production companies may have limited license to challenge the status quo of cultural sentiment or risk commercial failure, Disney's enormous power and knack for engaging childhood fascination enable it to express positive, progressive environmental views that can be both commercially successful, and culturally influential.

In *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, Whitley briefly discusses two prevailing responses to the environmental crisis and the role that Disney could potentially have in shaping the future of human action. He takes the position, vocalized by others, that rather rely only on technological pursuits to save humans and the planet from environmental disaster, there needs to be a "whole revolution in sensibility and value systems that underpin [human] lives." Specifically he suggests that Disney, a powerful media force that very effectively speaks to audiences' emotions in its output, could have a vital role in changing human worldviews to become more environmentally conscious. Rather than simply practicing "straightforward transmission of social ideologies," Disney could use sentiment to change people's understanding of the environment.<sup>9</sup> Disney's

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<sup>9</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E*

engagement with the morality and emotions of young audiences could be especially effective for inculcating potentially productive worldviews of nature.

# CHAPTER 1:

## Unraveling “Nature”: Human Conceptions And Relationships

### *The Origins of “Nature”: Cultural Constructivism*

The concept of “nature” in the English lexicon is elusive, and indeed scholars have looked at the multitude of meanings that the term can invoke, including descriptions of what is “natural” or “unnatural.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, my concern with “nature” is more specific, that is, its meaning as non-human life forms on our planet, and the landscapes they inhabit. Yet, this specific meaning of the concept “nature” is no less ambiguous and arbitrary. A walk on a trail in the woods might invoke going into “nature” to some people, but of course that illuminates various questions, such as what makes “the woods” or animals you might encounter there count as “nature,” but not our bodies, homes, or cities? Are other life forms (such as the chipmunk you see on your walk) any more of “nature” than humans? As I will address in more detail later, the understanding of “nature” in our society often is based on a binary, evoking life forms and physical spaces that are uncorrelated with humans or human activity. Thus, our understanding of “nature” indeed seems to hold certain assumptions, but from where do these assumptions originate? Science?

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1976), 186.

The observation, scrupulous methodology, and peer review inherent in the scientific process has ensured reliability and a degree of accuracy in describing the world around us that has been extremely useful to society. One might expect that in a so-called “modern” society, our understanding of nature would derive almost, or entirely, from scientific knowledge. After all, rational scientific thought underlines much of Western social values and customs, and all the while, the entire world seems to be moving in the trend to increased secularism and acceptance of scientific ideals. Especially in regards to nature, science has unearthed an enormous amount of knowledge in the biological, medical, and environmental sciences that has been instrumental in our modern-day conceptions of nature. Evolution, cell theory, gene theory, and germ theory have all immensely informed our modern consciousness, and biological research is among the forefront of quickly developing natural sciences over the last fifty years. Akin to the tremendous change that the physical sciences were undergoing in the early twentieth century, the biological sciences have exploded, from the discovery of the molecular structure of DNA in the 1950s to modern-day molecular biotechnological research<sup>11</sup> that is on the cusp of developing advanced neurological drugs, tissue engineering, and genetic manipulation that could have profound effects on how humans live.<sup>12</sup> Environmental sciences too have seen increased attention and research over the last forty years, since the first Earth Day, as scientists and policy makers have tried to come to terms with the

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<sup>11</sup> Ian Hacking, Introductory Essay to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 4th ed., by Thomas S. Kuhn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), ix.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 8-9.

looming threat of human-induced global climate change, among other pertinent environmental issues.

Despite these trends, I would like to argue that our understanding of what we call “nature” does not simply originate from scientific knowledge, but is much more sociocultural. Certain widespread and underlying beliefs for understanding nature are not scientifically based, nor inherent in any right. Finis Dunaway defines a cultural constructionist framework of nature, such that “ideas of nature, like those attached to race, gender, and other categories, do not originate in the supposedly timeless realm of nature and biology, but rather emerge out of a tangled history of human values and the ongoing contest over meaning in the cultural sphere.”<sup>13</sup> Since humans have lived in cohesive social systems, our understandings of the world around us have no longer been able to be solely attributed to biologically inherited traits. For millennia, humans’ understandings of the natural world have been powerfully influenced by the beliefs, values, and customs of different cultures to which they belong. The relationships between human beings and nature are necessarily mediated by culturally defined worldviews and practices (often themselves attached to certain worldviews). The cultural worldviews I explore in subsequent chapters, those of dominion, conservation, and consumerism, are some of the central worldviews of American culture, and they indeed all are products of complicated social histories. Nonetheless, before I discuss these in detail, it will be useful to more fully address the concept at the very core of these worldviews, and of this entire thesis, that of “nature.”

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<sup>13</sup> Finis Dunnaway, “Cultures of Nature: Twentieth Century,” In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 267.

### *The Human-Nature Dualism And Specific Cultural Worldviews of Nature*

Ideas central to the Western conceptions of “nature” reveal its nonscientific roots. The epistemological separation of non-human life forms and landscapes, “nature” or the “environment,” from humans and their inhabited environments is not a given, as scientific discourse shows, but it is a prevalent and deeply entrenched cultural worldview. Indeed humans are an extraordinary species. During our relatively short time on the Earth, we have populated all corners of the planet, created complex systems of communication and understanding, and innovated technologies out of the materials around us that are unlike anything any other single species has accomplished.

While there is a great deal that has distinguished us from other life forms on this planet, as scientific understanding has demonstrated, we are nonetheless biological creatures, sharing physical and behavioral characteristics, as well as a common evolutionary past, with other organisms.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, common Western cultural worldviews tend to emphasize the distinction of humanity from the other biological beings, as well as the division between human habitats and those occupied primarily by other life forms. Perhaps you’ve heard someone say “You’re an animal!” or “She’s wild,” potent examples of expressions that signify the distinctions people are accustomed to making between culturally acceptable human behavior and that of other uncivilized, “wild” life forms. Often those non-human

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<sup>14</sup> Lynn Margulis, “Life (biology),” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed November, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/340003/life>.

biological life forms on this planet, as well as the physical landscapes that they inhabit (typically those that are minimally affected by humans) are relegated to the realm of 'nature', or the 'environment.' Civilization, society, and culture, associated with humanity, have often been viewed as the antithesis of nature. Culturally hierarchical theories, such as those developed in early Anthropology, have even tried to position certain cultures and races considered less 'civilized' (i.e., unlike them) as being closer to nature.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, when humans physically mold, or chemically alter Earthly materials, we understand them to move from their 'natural' state to enter the realm of 'man-made artifacts.' The nature/humanity binary is deeply embedded in American (as well as some other cultures') thought, and evidently manifests itself in many different ways.

However, this polar dualism is not easily defensible. Despite what distinguishes humans from other organisms, there are many factors that suggest the boundary between humans and other forms of life is not an easy one to establish. Human beings are animals, classified as *Homo sapiens*, and eat, sleep, fornicate, suffer, and experience pleasure like many other animals (albeit in different degrees and ways). Biological understanding underscores how similar human beings are to other life forms. With the exception of viruses, all life forms, including humans, are "composed of one or more minimal living units, called cells, and [are] capable of transformation of carbon-based and other compounds (metabolism), growth, and

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<sup>15</sup>Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810," In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 216.



participation in reproductive acts.”<sup>16</sup> Comparative genomic studies reveal that despite obvious differences in physical appearance, humans have striking similarities in DNA sequences to other animals—for instance, humans and fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*) share about sixty percent of the same genes.<sup>17</sup> Humans share about Ninety-nine percent of the same DNA with chimpanzees and bonobos.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the theory of evolution further reveals the arbitrariness of the nature-human binary. The theory has often been unjustly (and inaccurately) applied in a biologically deterministic way, as a validation of human beings’ supposed evolutionary superiority to other life forms,<sup>19</sup> and as a justification for hierarchical boundaries to be placed upon humans of different culture, race, ethnicity, and nationality.<sup>20</sup> However, in its most direct sense, the theory implies that humans and all other life forms share an ancestral past,<sup>21</sup> and that we are in some sense, cousins to *all* other life on this planet (and more like brothers to some life forms, such as primates). Furthermore, modern biotechnologies, including “cloning, stem-cell research, in-vitro fertilization, and genetically modified foods,” also problematize the dualism between the natural and the synthetic.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lynn Margulis, Carl Sagan, and Dorion Sagan. "Life (biology)." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. n.d. Accessed November, 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/340003/life>.

<sup>17</sup> "Background on Comparative Genomic Analysis," National Human Genome Research Institute, accessed November, 2013, <http://www.genome.gov/10005835> (accessed November, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Science/AAAS News, "Bonobos Join Chimps as Closest Human Relatives," accessed April 1, 2014, <http://news.sciencemag.org/plants-animals/2012/06/bonobos-join-chimps-closest-human-relatives>.

<sup>19</sup> I.G. Simmons, *Interpreting Nature: Cultural Constructions of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 1993), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Noël Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in popular culture*, 2009, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Francisco Ayala, "Evolution (scientific theory)," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, accessed November, 2013 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/197367/evolution>.

<sup>22</sup> Noel Sturgeon, *Environmentalism in popular culture*, 2009, 18.

Nonetheless the perceptions of this dichotomy are deeply embedded in our culture, and other human cultures. Taken out of context, the dichotomy itself could have both positive and negative implications for how we treat non-human life and the planet. However, we cannot fully discuss this binary outside of its specific cultural contexts. This widely pervasive dualism is difficult to isolate out of its various manifestations and worldviews, in and across cultural boundaries. Furthermore, it is not neutrally understood. It has various different forms, each of which has strong implications for how humans understand and treat non-human life and their environments.

Three important American cultural worldviews I discuss in this thesis are those of dominion, conservation, and consumerism. Derived from Judeo-Christian and Stoic roots in Western culture, the worldview of dominion has emphasized the ultimate superiority of humans over nature, and the ability or obligation of humans to transform nature. While this viewpoint has been increasingly separated from its religious roots, or replaced by more pro-environment sensibilities, it is still particularly relevant.

Conservation, on the other hand, is largely a response to the dominion worldview in varying levels. Unlike the worldview of dominion, that of conservation, which was born out of the Romantic Movement in the late eighteenth century and achieved more widespread popularity in the United States in the early twentieth century, sought to conserve or preserve natural resources from unlimited human use or transformation. While this worldview evolved into various different forms in the United States from the nineteenth century to the 1960s, it was

revolutionary in viewing wild nature as something that was valuable in its own right, and ought to be preserved or managed. Nonetheless until it developed into the form of an ecological conscience, the conservation worldview was still based in some notions of dominion.

Finally, consumerism is a cultural system of behavior and knowledge, revolving around the economic activity of buying goods and services, which can obscure the effects of human actions on the environment, to have potentially devastating consequences. Both a cultural practice and a worldview, consumerism negotiates a specific relationship between humans and the environment, one that is mediated by consumer fetishism. Since the consumer revolution that began in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, and the industrial revolution that expanded consumerism on a massive scale,<sup>23</sup> consumerism has shaped the way people interact with, and understand the natural world. Although later I will delve deeper into the specifics of these worldviews, it is worth first acknowledging the central question, why does it matter how humans understand, and treat the environment?

### *The Pertinence of Environment*

More so than that of any other animal, human actions have transformed this planet substantially, and continue to do so. During the Holocene Epoch, an

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<sup>23</sup> Tom McCarthy, *The Black Box in the Garden*, In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 306

interglacial period that has lasted for the last ten thousand years, Earth has enjoyed an especially stable state, with “key biogeochemical and atmospheric parameters fluctuating within a relatively narrow range.”<sup>24</sup> This stability of planetary systems has in large part enabled the success of human peoples and civilizations. However, over the past few hundred years, human beings have had such a significant influence on the planet that some scientists have proposed the classification of a new epoch, the “Anthropocene.”<sup>25</sup> Human actions have induced global climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, alteration to phosphorous, nitrogen, and fresh water cycles, excessive rates of biodiversity loss, land-system change, atmospheric aerosol-loading, and chemical pollution.<sup>26</sup> For one, rates of biodiversity loss are presently so high that they characterize our time as the “sixth major extinction event in the history of life on earth.”<sup>27</sup> Scientists worry that if humans continue their current trends, and transgress certain acceptable boundaries of alteration to planetary systems, we could force the planet out of its relatively stable state and cause “abrupt or irreversible environmental changes that would be deleterious or even catastrophic for human well-being,” as well as for other forms of life.<sup>28</sup> Considering the remarkability of life itself—no where else in the universe that we have yet observed, have such precise physical conditions fostered the continued presence of life, let alone complex, intelligent life—humans should be careful of our impact.

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<sup>24</sup> Johan Rockstrom, et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” 2

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 1

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 14

<sup>28</sup> Johan Rockstrom, et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” 2

The reasons for anthropogenic degradation of the environment can easily be explained only in some instances. For instance, as uninhibited population growth increases the numbers of any species, including humans, it places increased stress on the surrounding ecosystem, particularly via the increased consumption of resources to survive.<sup>29</sup> However, much anthropogenic environmental change has occurred for reasons that exist outside of humans' capacity to survive. For instance, global climate change is largely the result of the human combustion of fossil fuels for energy that is further used for many purposes, such as transportation, manufacturing, and entertainment. Human effects on the environment can rarely be justified by our need to survive, but are instead often a result of socially sanctioned practices. We do not live in extravagant houses, buy televisions, wear designer clothes, or fertilize the lawn out of biological necessity, but because to some degree, social norms dictate that we do these. Thus how we conceptualize of the environment, and humans' relationship to it, is essential for our treatment of non-human life and the planet.

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<sup>29</sup> J., "Human Population as a Dynamic Factor in Environmental Degradation." *Population and Environment* 28 (4-5) (2007), 1, [www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com).

## CHAPTER 2:

### ***Snow White And The Ethos Of Christian Dominion***

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, released in 1937, was indeed revolutionary, as the first ever feature-length animation film. Walt Disney innovated this medium himself, taking animation into a more realist, narrative style to sustain extended engagement, all the while branding this long-format animated realism as what would become iconic to Disney, and central to its success.<sup>30</sup> The film was hugely successful—adjusted for inflation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* has been the highest box-office grossing animated film of all time.<sup>31</sup> The film further won a “Special Award” at the 1938 Oscars for being “recognized as a significant screen innovation which has charmed millions and pioneered a great new entertainment field for the motion picture cartoon.”<sup>32</sup>

Nature is indeed a central subject of the film, which follows the story of a princess (Snow White) who, upon being banished into the woods by the evil queen, befriends numerous forest animals and lodges in a small cottage where dwarves live. Later, upon being poisoned by a disguised evil queen, Snow White is revived via the kiss of a prince and they ride off towards a dream-like castle. While the

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV, and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (London: Verso, 1993), 117-8.

<sup>31</sup> Guinness World Records, "Highest box office film gross for an animation - inflation adjusted." accessed April, 2014. <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-1000/highest-box-office-film-gross-for-an-animation-inflation-adjusted/>.

<sup>32</sup> "1938(11th) Academy Awards Results Page." accessed April 1, 2014, [http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas\\_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1398663181823](http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1398663181823).

forest and most of its animals sometimes seem to be depicted in a positive light, the film's message about humanity's relationship with nature is much more sinister. The film emphasizes not only the value of segregating humans and nature, but also that of humans using or domesticating an inherently subordinate nature. As I will discuss, *Snow White*'s portrayal of this relationship between man and nature reflects and reinforces specific cultural conceptions about nature popular in the United States at the time in which it was made. The film largely expresses a cultural worldview of dominion, which believes in man's superiority and license over nature, and can be traced in European and American societies back to Greek, Judeo-Christian, and Enlightenment roots. While dominion can be expressed in various forms, the two defining features of the worldview are first, the belief that nature is separate and subordinate to humans, and that it exists to benefit man (and thus can be used indiscriminately for any means); and second, the moral conviction that man should modify nature into less "wild" forms.

I chose to analyze *Snow White* not only because it is a particularly influential film itself, but also because it is a particularly powerful indication of the worldview of dominion, a worldview that is nonetheless present in varying degrees in many Disney films, and indeed is still present in current American culture. Indeed, *Snow White* clearly portrays *both* of the central defining features of the worldview of dominion that I mentioned above. The production and success of *Snow White* further reveals a widespread acceptance of dominion as a worldview in the United States when the film was made. In this chapter I will describe the character and origins of the dominion worldview in the American consciousness, as well as how

*Snow White* particularly expresses this worldview and advocates for relationship between humans and non-human nature of dominion, one that has been so centrally responsible for the destructive behavior that Americans and others have exhibited to the natural world.

### *Is Dominion Biological?*

It has been argued that the worldview of dominion has been prevalent among humans for most of our existence.<sup>33</sup> In one sense, dominion is natural for humans. As animals ourselves, utilizing the natural world around us is integral for our survival; due to natural selection, evolutionary physiology produced early humans, our genetic ancestors, who must have been willing to use the natural resources around them to survive and reproduce, as any animal would. As Nash puts it, “[w]ith the sabretooth only a jump behind, conservation was inconceivable” to early humans.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, as human cultures and civilizations formed, and people lived according to certain lifestyles and religions, human worldviews no longer were entirely determined via natural means. A justification of current environmental degradation as natural for our species is ungrounded, because many of our values, beliefs, and actions in current times are formed via cultural ideology. Other cultures

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<sup>33</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment: Readings in the History of Conservation*, (Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1968), 3

<sup>34</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 3



indeed have been noted to have substantially more sustainable impacts on their local environments than Europeans and Americans, as a result of cultural belief systems regarding the natural world. For instance, the Makuna culture of the Northwest Amazon believes in an “ideology of reciprocity guiding their interaction with the environment [which] imposes strong sanctions against over-exploitation of forest and river resources.”<sup>35</sup> Certain Native American cultures (for instance, indigenous cultures native to New England)<sup>36</sup>, early Scandinavians, modern rural Colombians,<sup>37</sup> and rural Hindu farmers in India<sup>38</sup> have also possessed culturally based worldviews that value the environment (some which even lack the human-nature binary) and foster sustainable human-nature relationships. Thus in a world where culture has played a very prominent role in how we understand and treat the environment, the worldview of dominion must be considered as a cultural artifact, descended from a particular historical trajectory.

### *Historical and Cultural Foundations of the Dominion Worldview*

In Western thought, certain attitudes towards non-human life were made clear very early on in Judeo-Christian doctrine. In Genesis I, after creating marine and terrestrial plant and animal life, God “created humankind in his image” to “[b]e

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<sup>35</sup> Kaj Arhem, “The cosmic food web: human-nature relatedness in the northwest amazon”, in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives* ed. by Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson (London: Routledge, 1996), 199

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Dennis, “Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810.”, 229-30.

<sup>37</sup> Gísli Pálsson, “Human-environmental relations: orientalism, paternalism and communalism”, in *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives* by Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson (London: Routledge, 1996), 73-4.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>39</sup> Not only does the first creation story exalt the status of human beings as a particularly privileged life form such that they are made in the likeness of God Himself, but it also gives human beings the right and obligation to have “dominion” over other life and to “subdue” the planet. Also, later in Genesis, after the Fall of Man (when Adam and Eve lose their innocence and are exiled from Eden), man’s superiority and dominion over nature are still invoked, when God proclaims to Noah that all living things “into [man’s] hand they are delivered.”<sup>40</sup>

An analysis of certain trends in Genesis alone is insufficient to draw conclusions about the origins of dominative attitudes towards nature in Western culture. John Passmore has credited certain historical developments with allowing Christianity in particular to evoke such a dominative attitude towards nature, which eventually could be incorporated even into secularizing societies in the age of Modernity. Unlike in other Old Testament religions, where the notion of man’s “dominion” is often interpreted as a privilege to utilize nature, Christian apostles and theologians such as Calvin incorporated into the Christian belief system the views of Aristotle and the Stoics that nature existed solely to serve humans, the only rational and divine beings on Earth.<sup>41</sup> Other influential figures in Western Europe,

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<sup>39</sup> May, Herbert G., and Bruce M. Metzger. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Genesis, 1:26.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., Genesis 9:2.

<sup>41</sup> John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature; Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 12-16

including Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant also professed this inheritance.<sup>42</sup> In time, during the Enlightenment, Bacon and Descartes relied on this “Greco-Christian arrogance” toward nature to advocate and practice man’s absolute transformation of nature (through scientific, technological, and other pursuits), and “their interpretation was absorbed into the ideology of modern Western societies, communist as well as capitalist, and has been exported to the East.”<sup>43</sup>

It is important to note that Christianity is not a monolithic set of beliefs and others have countered the argument that Christianity is to blame for environmental degradation. Although Passmore acknowledges that they are only seeds, he touches upon a number of Christian interpretations, including the Transcendentalist movement that have developed more respectful attitudes toward nature. Binde has argued that a number of stances toward nature, not all dominative, have been present even within the branch of Roman Catholicism.<sup>44</sup> Attfield has gone so far to claim that the dominant Biblical message is one of advocating human respect for nature.<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, while these viewpoints and interpretations may certainly have been present in Christianity, the historical record has shown that Christian tenets have often been the impetuses, or the justifications, for dominative actions toward nature. White European colonists of America often described their motivations in

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 15

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 27

<sup>44</sup> Per Binde, "Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition," *Anthropological Quarterly* (2001), doi:10.1353/anq.2001.0001.

<sup>45</sup> Robin Attfield, "Christian Attitudes to Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3 (1983). doi:10.2307/2709172.

terms of simultaneously religious and economic purpose.<sup>46</sup> Indeed the European's Capitalist motivations had been officially adopted by Christian teachings in the late seventeenth century.<sup>47</sup> Even before that, because Christian doctrine could evidently be easily interpreted as advocating dominion and transformation over nature, as Passmore has illustrated, and because Christianity did little to prohibit these stances (Passmore acknowledges that certain developments such as Modern science and technology could not have happened if Judeo-Christianity cohesively regarded nature as sacred<sup>48</sup>), materialistic tendencies among colonists could easily find spiritual backing.

Furthermore, commercial and Christian claims almost entirely formed the motivations for White Europeans to colonize, exploit, and transform non-human nature in the "New World."<sup>49</sup> In the trend of Baconian Enlightenment ideology examined by Passmore, material and spiritual underpinnings caused European settlers and colonists of the Americas to see "the continent almost uniformly as a place demanding transformation,"<sup>50</sup> in both "conceptual[ ]" and physical[ ]" senses.<sup>51</sup> The Puritan colonists of Massachusetts Bay viewed humans as " 'sacred persons living above and apart from nature'" <sup>52</sup>, and their leader, John Winthrop expressed his belief, inspired by Genesis 1,28 that man is given the land by God to "

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<sup>46</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810."

<sup>47</sup> William Coleman. "Providence, Capitalism, and Environmental Degradation: English Apologetics in an Era of Economic Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37, no. 1 (1976). doi:10.2307/2708707.

<sup>48</sup> In his analysis of a Robert Boyle quote, Passmore explains that "science and technology...could not progress so long as nature was still thought of as 'venerable', as something which it was impious to attempt to control, to modify, or even to understand." (Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, 11).

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, " 218

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 214

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 230

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 231-2

‘subdue’” it.<sup>53</sup> Scientist Thomas Hariot of the English Roanoke settlement similarly based his observations of the New World’s natural qualities not only on its commodifiable aspects, but also according to The Great Chain of Being,<sup>54</sup> a “moral hierarchy of existence” introduced by Aquinas in the thirteenth century that became a predominant “theological...social...[and] biological model” of Western thought for centuries (as one might expect, the Christianity-based model designated humans as morally and divinely superior to other living and nonliving things on Earth).<sup>55</sup> Indeed European colonists considered Native Americans as part of this subordinate nature that needed to be transformed and dominated, since Native Americans’ “failure to transform the natural world” reflected their lack of civilization and thus inherent closeness to a subordinate nature.<sup>56</sup>

It is understandable that the European inheritance of the belief in the God-given right to dominate and transform the natural world, translated easily into the new ideals of the United States. Manifest Destiny, the motivating ideology that arguably has formed the basis of American national identity, unsurprisingly found its roots in European Christianity. Coined by John L. O’Sullivan in 1845, “Manifest Destiny” is the divine right of Americans to “ ‘overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment and federated self-government entrusted to us.’”<sup>57</sup> Even before the term was coined, Americans’ belief in Manifest Destiny motivated the United States’

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid*, 214

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*, 219-20

<sup>55</sup> Ron Tobias, *Film and the American moral vision of nature: Theodore Roosevelt to Walt Disney* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ, 2011), 3-4

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Dennis, “Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, 221

<sup>57</sup> John L. O Sullivan; quoted in Ron Tobias, *Film and the American moral vision of nature*, xiii.

significant geographic expansion of the Nineteenth Century, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803<sup>58</sup> and justifying undertakings such as the Mexican-American War in the 1840s.<sup>59</sup> To a country whose identity had been forged through our struggle for independence from colonial rule, the United States imagined the economic benefits that could be gained from Western expansion as enabling its people's "liberty" and "pursuit of happiness," while ignoring that our expansion also entailed the destruction and colonization of other peoples (Native Americans, African Americans, Philipinos, etc.), and the natural land.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless this "new" American ideology derived from European "argument[s] from design,"<sup>61</sup> which justified the subjugation of the "Promised Land" on religious grounds.<sup>62</sup>

Manifest Destiny not only justified conquest of other peoples, but also of natural environments. As Tobias points out, "As a naturally inherited right, manifest destiny depended upon an ideology of dominion that made conquering nature a precondition for conquering other nations."<sup>63</sup> The United States' God-given right to expand into new lands not only denied other humans their claim over the land and often to life, but inevitably denied non-human life forms the same rights. For instance, Dennis calls the 1780s organization of northern Louisiana Purchase territory into the Northwest Ordinance (a grid-organized system that divided the natural landscape into American territories, states, cities, and purchasable land parcels), "one of the greatest impositions of an abstract ideological system on nature

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<sup>58</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, 235.

<sup>59</sup> Kris Fresonke, *West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003), 7-8

<sup>60</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, 235

<sup>61</sup> Kris Fresonke, *West of Emerson*, 5-8

<sup>62</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, 223

<sup>63</sup> Ron Tobias, *Film and the American moral vision of nature*, xiii

in human history.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed the “frontier,” the American cultural attitude towards nature that has historically viewed pioneering and living off the wilderness as imbued with masculinity and archetypal American identity, has relied heavily on the ideology of Manifest Destiny. In the past, “frontiersmen acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God.”<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, even though it may not have explicitly Christian justifications, it could be argued that the United States’ continued exploitation of other peoples through neocolonialism and military occupation, as well as its continued degradation to the environment, constitutes a new form of Manifest Destiny. The righteous claim to dominion still seems to be central among American cultural values regarding nature.

### *Disney and Christian Underpinnings*

While Disney animation has often portrayed nature in favorable ways, it also has subtly emphasized these ancestral attitudes in the American canon that are dominative toward nature. Often in early Disney films, non-human animals are regarded as innocent, but nonetheless subservient to human motivations. The separations between human and natural worlds are made clear, with that of the human granted superiority. Furthermore, in the trend of Baconian philosophers, European colonists, and the American pioneers discussed above, Disney’s works have also emphasized the human dominion of nature through transformation.

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew Dennis, "Cultures of Nature: to ca. 1810, 235

<sup>65</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1982) 24

The presence of Christian-derived dominative attitudes towards nature is no coincidence in Disney's films. Tobias recounts early developments in Walt Disney's animation that caused him to align himself particularly with supporting American Christian morals when he began making films. While Disney's early animation shorts in the late 1920s and early 1930s involving Mickey Mouse and other farm animals gained him some fame, he experienced a significant backlash from critics against the unChristian values exemplified by Mickey's behavior.<sup>66</sup> In order for his company to be able to surpass fellow cartoonists, Walt "rehabilitated his rogue mouse: no more drinking, carousing, smoking, or making upward advances at Minnie."<sup>67</sup> Thus with his hugely successful first feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, "the Christian community celebrated Disney as an 'educator of the soul'".<sup>68</sup> The values toward nature expressed in Disney's *Snow White*, and in subsequent films, are not just reminiscent of Christian-derived attitudes, they are explicitly targeted to be American Christian.

### *Segregation and Servitude of Nature in Snow White*

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* clearly establishes this inherited worldview of dominion, in one sense through conveying the separation and subordination of animals to humans. In many ways, the distinction between natural and human realms is made very clear in the movie. For example, as Whitley points

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<sup>66</sup> Ron Tobias, *Film and the American moral vision of nature*, 183-4

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 184

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 184



out, the forest animals in the film are given a very keen sense of place, and they are unwilling to transgress the boundary separating outdoor nature and the indoor of the dwarves' cottage, if another person besides Snow White is present.<sup>69</sup> Thus the birds only assault the Queen (veiled as an old peasant) in their natural domain, when she is outside of the cottage; but when Snow White invites her inside, into the place designated as human dwelling, the forest creatures watch powerlessly from the window before running off to seek the dwarves' aid (see Appendix, Fig. 1). In another instance, Snow White emphasizes her distinction, as a human, from the animals when she professes, "I can't sleep in the ground like you!"<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, in the end of the film, Snow White's retreat from nature into the "sterile" castle in the clouds with her Prince seems to solidify her separation from nature into a "rose-tinted image of a transcendent new order."<sup>71</sup>

*Snow White* not only emphasizes the separation and superiority of humans to nature, but also evokes the subservience of non-human nature to humans. Such a portrayal reiterates the Christian and Greek sentiments that understand nature's purpose as solely to serve humans. In one sense, the dwarves' livelihood as miners expresses a view of natural landscapes as resources that exist to serve human interests, despite the consequences of resource extraction to the natural land. Mining has been well recognized as an enormously damaging activity to the

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<sup>69</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 25-6

<sup>70</sup> *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. DVD. Dir. by David Hand. (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment: 2009), 0:13:36.

<sup>71</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 32

environment, both directly, and indirectly through its links with other detrimental industrialist activities.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, and more central to the film, *Snow White* evokes the subservience of nature through its depictions of voiceless animal helpers. Similar to the mice and birds in *Cinderella* and the raccoon and hummingbird in *Pocahontas*, the forest animals in *Snow White* are relegated to the role of the heroine's servant helpers and are given little volition of their own. They help Snow White clean the cottage, they try to defend her from the evil Queen, and they rush to fetch the dwarves to save Snow White from the Queen. Furthermore, unlike in some other Disney films, the anthropomorphized animals are given no ability to speak and while Whitley credits this portrayal as allowing the animals' "species integrity—in particular their otherness from human beings—to be retained",<sup>73</sup> that seems to be a somewhat strained reading. By not allowing the animals to speak as they had in many earlier Disney cartoon shorts (such as Mickey Mouse), the film prevents viewers from acknowledging the animals' sense of voice, in a symbolic sense. The animals are sugjugated to the role of servants, without any ability to contest or have an opinion about their position (imagine or a dutiful, quiet slave, or even maid or butler who provides services politely, but must not voice his or her own opinions or thoughts about the master's affairs). Similarly, in the world today, because animals cannot speak or communicate effectively with humans, environmental activists must speak in the place of animals to prevent their unnecessary suffering, through

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<sup>72</sup> Katherine Morissey, "Mining and Environmental History," In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 398-402.

<sup>73</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 25

human degradation of natural environments, and through direct human harm to animals. Thus the anthropogenic effect of voice given to animals in other Disney films actually serves in a sense to empower them. Even if they are relegated to servant roles, if we can hear the animals speak, then it is much easier to empathize with them, and they become recognized more so as identities with valuable perspectives. But *Snow White* fails to grant animals this power, and indeed much agency at all. Despite his mostly positive critique of the film (which indeed is somewhat vexing), Whitley acknowledges that *Snow White* invokes a “central idea of nature as responsive to human needs rather than, in any sustained way, as independent.”<sup>74</sup>

The relegation of non-human characters to subservient positions in *Snow White* and other Disney films not only reflects Disney’s catering to his audience’s Christian value system, but also Walt’s own childhood experiences. Tobias points out that because Disney grew up on a farm in the Midwest, he was accustomed to an attitude towards animals that viewed them in utilitarian terms, as “objects...[whose] duty in life was to serve.”<sup>75</sup> Tobias’ condemnation of the effects of farm life on Disney may be a bit dramatic, and are not wholly supported by evidence. Indeed Disney’s time on the farm may have also fostered close relationships with animals, which could arguably have promoted a sympathetic stance towards animals, evident in works such as *Bambi*. However, his point nonetheless does help to explain the trend of animal helpers in Disney films. Similar to the roles of cows, pigs, and chickens on farms, the forest creatures of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and the

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<sup>74</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 27

<sup>75</sup> Ron Tobias, *Film and the American moral vision of nature*, 185

mice and birds of *Cinderella* serve solely as subservient helpers to whims of humans. Especially in *Snow White*, this theme of animal helper is “massively expan[ded]” from its role in the fairy tale upon which the film is based, “both in terms of the sheer number of different creatures involved and of the creative energy invested in depicting their activities”, such that “this narrative function... acquire[s] the weight of a fundamental value of central importance to the story.”<sup>76</sup> The motif of animal helpers in Disney films, especially emphasized in *Snow White*, portrays the view of nature as existing to serve humans.

#### *Domestication of Nature in Snow White*

The second central aspect of the dominion worldview, the notion that humans should modify nature into less “wild” forms, is also amply expressed in *Snow White*. Through the film’s dominant theme of domestication, *Snow White* embodies this feature of dominion, instructing America’s children to have a specific relationship with and understanding of the natural world. Prior to the conservation movement (which I will discuss in next chapter), positive sentiments for nature were primarily for forms of nature that had been domesticated into more “orderly” or “moral” forms by humans. The understanding of untamed nature as “immoral” or “uncivilized” was clearly imbued with the Western influences of Christianity and Enlightenment Modernism, which viewed nature as separate and below humankind.

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<sup>76</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 8

Even any poetic accounts prior to the conservation movement that appreciated natural beauty, emphasized that of “pastoral” nature, i.e., pastures, meadows, and gardens; such literature expressed that “benign and domesticated, [the countryside was] a place of deep, quiet joy for those who dwell[ed] there and a place of escape and refreshment for those who d[id] not.”<sup>77</sup> Central to pastoral writings was the appreciation of nature that was domesticated by humans, transformed from a wild state to one that we considered more orderly. Indeed interestingly, while the wild forest is initially presented as dark, terrifying and threatening to Snow White in contrast to the meadow and the castle courtyard, it later reveals itself to be beautiful in its own right— forest animals, plants, and fungi are displayed as untamed, yet aesthetic and peaceful. While this could be viewed as a slight departure from traditional tenets of dominion (and indeed more in line with the early anthropocentric conservation sentiments, which I go over in the next chapter), *Snow White* otherwise conveys a strong sentiment for human transformation of the environment, through the domestication motif.

*Snow White* clearly emphasizes the theme of domestication of nature, as evident in its extensive depictions of cleaning— “[i]n 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.”<sup>78</sup> One long sequence in the film consists of the dwarves reluctantly washing their bodies of dirt before supper, and another consists of Snow White tidying the cottage with the help of the many forest animals. In both cases,

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<sup>77</sup> Robert McHenry and Charles Lincoln Van Doren, *A Documentary History of Conservation in America* ( New York: Praeger, 1972), 21

<sup>78</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 29

the removal of “dirt” reflected the growth of an American sentiment for a “clean”, “ordered”, and “sterilized” home during this time period.<sup>79</sup> *Snow White*’s depiction of this ideal reflects the idea that human dwellings (already an often unnatural transformation of the natural landscape) should be further organized to be rid of natural deposits of “dirt” (dust, soil, etc.); dirt thus belongs in the realm of nature, not in that of humans, so we must transform our designated human landscape to be rid of these deposits (indeed much more of a moral outlook than a biological or utilitarian one).

The latter scene of housecleaning is especially suggestive of the domestication motif. To the tune of “Whistle while you work,” *Snow White* relegates different tasks such as washing dishes, dusting, and sweeping to the happy animals (see Appendix, Fig. 2). The animals, portrayed as naïve and innocent, proceed in doing the tasks the wrong way, and *Snow White* instructs and shows them how to properly perform them. This scene reflects the “Hegelian” tradition, that nature must be “actualise[d] through art, science, philosophy, technology...”; transformed by humans in order to be morally acceptable.<sup>80</sup> The forest animals’ natural behavior is expressed as unsuitable (and naïve), and indeed requires transformation via *Snow White*’s instruction to be considered morally satisfactory.

As my discussion should hopefully have shed light on, the worldview of human dominion over nature cannot be biologically justified. Rather, this prevailing worldview is very cultural, and must be framed in its cultural and historical foundations in order to be properly understood. The worldview of dominion of

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, 30

<sup>80</sup> Passmore, “Attitudes to Nature,” 258

nature was inherited from Christian and Stoic influences, and further translated easily into more secular ideals in the Enlightenment. Attitudes towards nature inherent in European exploration and American pioneering further were born of this heritage. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, The Walt Disney Company decidedly portrays this worldview of dominion of nature. Attempting in his first feature-length film to appeal to strong Christian value system of the United States, Walt portrayed (whether advertently or not) a conception of nature that was closely derivative of the Christian tradition. Through the dualistic organization of humans and animals in the landscape of the film, and via the motif of the voiceless animal helper, *Snow White* on one hand portrays a separation and subordination of nature from the human, a characteristic aspect of dominion. Furthermore, through the central theme of domestication, *Snow White* conveys another theme of dominion, the notion that nature ought to be transformed by humans.

## CHAPTER 3:

### Environmentalism Sympathy In *Bambi*

Released only five years after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and Disney's third animated feature, *Bambi* portrays a markedly different perspective on nature. While *Snow White* seemed to condone nature as occupying a subservient role to humans, *Bambi* forces viewers to acknowledge non-human animals as meaningful identities that are threatened by human actions. Following the growth of a young deer, whose mother gets killed by human hunters, and whose forest habitat later gets ravaged by a human-caused forest fire, *Bambi* engages viewers to be sympathetic with non-human animals and their residences, and denounces humans as the primary antagonists for these creatures. It is certainly intriguing that Disney conveyed such a different attitude towards nature in *Bambi* than in *Snow White*, especially considering that both films were released within such a short time frame (and indeed originally, *Bambi* was planned to be released earlier, as Disney's second feature, but ran into production delays<sup>81</sup>). What could explain this trend?

As I will continue to discuss in regard to later films (and later issues), the Walt Disney Company's productions are far from a homogenous collection. Rather than portray a single perspective on nature throughout their films, Disney has portrayed seemingly contradictory attitudes towards nature, even within a relatively short time frame. The company is able to do this because of the presence

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<sup>81</sup> Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 236.



of multiple perspectives toward nature existent in the ever-fluctuating American culture at a given time. So while *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* reflected the cultural worldview of dominion, *Bambi* reflected upon another ideology circulating in the American consciousness in the early to mid-twentieth century, that of conservation.

What I call “conservation” is an early pro-environmental worldview that challenged the tradition of human degradation and alteration to nature, and sought to conserve natural landscapes in various ways, from destructive human impact. This worldview often invoked sustainable resource management or the preservation of certain wilderness areas from any human development. Finding its first significant roots in the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century, conservation was grounded in a specific set of beliefs, values, assumptions, and issues that evolved and transformed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed conservation was itself a response to dominative actions and attitudes of humans over the natural world, which had existed for centuries but particularly began to concern Americans during the Industrial Revolution of mid-nineteenth century. By the early-to-mid-twentieth century when Disney produced both *Snow White* and *Bambi*, conservation had gained widespread popularity among American masses, and sought to challenge the norm of anthropogenic environmental degradation. Making an interesting leap in sentiment, Disney promoted the worldview of dominion in *Snow White*, and then shortly after expressed what would seem the antithesis of that worldview, a form of conservation, in *Bambi*.

Although *Bambi*'s illustration of conservation indeed is surprisingly progressive (especially when compared to *Snow White*), what makes the film exceptional is the form of conservation that it communicates. Conservation itself is any sentiment for conserving and/or preserving natural landscapes and creatures, but it took various forms throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the beliefs, values, and motivations behind conservation changed. As I will discuss, many forms of early conservation were still grounded in assumptions of human dominion—i.e., conservationists nonetheless wanted to preserve wilderness from human effects, but for the benefit of humans (whether that be our aesthetic or religious appreciation of lush natural landscapes, or our long-term economic stability), rather than for that of other life forms that occupied these landscapes. As I will explore, *Bambi* was revolutionary in its time period for expressing a worldview of conservation that was not rooted in dominion, and that was closely tied to ecological scientific knowledge, the “ecological conscience” or the “land ethic.”<sup>82</sup> Closely based upon the ecological concept of holism, the land ethic was introduced by Aldo Leopold in the late 1940s, but did not become widely accepted until the 1960s as a way to understand humans' relationship to nature. *Bambi*'s expression of ecological conservation was not only progressive and potentially influential to the evolution of ecological conservationist perspectives mid-twentieth century, but also to the development of ecosystem scientific perspectives.

### *The Cultural Roots of the Early Conservation Movement*

While nature had previously been almost ubiquitously understood in Euro-American cultures as an entity that ought to be dominated, reshaped, or utilized without limits, new perspectives arose in the nineteenth century. William Cronon discusses how “by the end of the nineteenth century...[t]he wastelands that had once seemed worthless had for some people come to seem almost beyond price.”<sup>83</sup> While Europeans and Americans had once understood undeveloped natural landscapes via biblical associations as “wastelands,” “places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair,”<sup>84</sup> the notion of wilderness had come to be revered by some in the late nineteenth century. The Romantic Movement of nineteenth century America invoked some new perspectives on man’s relationship to nature, and by the early twentieth century, conservation of natural resources and landscapes had become a popular ideology among American masses, increasing in popularity and purpose until the explosion of the modern environmental movement in the late 1960s.

New pro-environmental worldviews were in large part a response to the dramatic transformations that the United States was undergoing in the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution, “the process of change from an agrarian, handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture,” ushered in a drastic reorganizing of life in nineteenth century America. With technological innovations that included the harnessing of new materials and energy

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<sup>83</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996), 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3985059>

<sup>84</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 8

sources (chiefly fossil fuels) and the invention of a number of mechanical machines, factory-based manufacture came to fuel the economy, and sizeable populations moved to urban centers.<sup>85</sup> As conditions of work and lifestyle changed dramatically for Americans, now living in cities and immersed in highly organized and complex social systems, cultural values and views metamorphosed in some ways as well. These social changes that define the Industrial Revolution were largely the impetus for Romanticism, an intellectual movement born in Europe in the late eighteenth century and especially taking hold in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century. Some have likened the new conservationist sentiments about man's relationship with the natural world that arose during this time as being born out of resistance to these changing conditions of life for Americans (and earlier, for Europeans).<sup>86</sup>

What was new about the conservationist ideologies that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was that people began to appreciate "wilderness," rather than tamed "pastoral" landscapes that reflected human domestication of nature (which I mentioned in the last chapter). Although prior to the Industrial Revolution, Americans valued "pastoral landscapes, the farms that represented the reclaiming of the Edenic garden from the looming, forbidding wilderness[,]... as industrialism and commercialism expanded, wilderness came to

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<sup>85</sup> "Industrial Revolution," In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. n.d. accessed April, 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/287086/Industrial-Revolution>.

<sup>86</sup> Robert McHenry and Charles Lincoln Van Doren, *A Documentary History of Conservation in America*, ix

seem less forbidding, a welcome redoubt from modern life, as Eden in its own right.”<sup>87</sup>

Most consider the conservation movement of the United States to have begun in the nineteenth century. Certain figures such as George Catlin, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Carl Schurz<sup>88</sup> began to “challenge the dominant conception of the land’s purpose and to expose inexhaustibility as a myth.”<sup>89</sup> Transcendentalists of New England, such as Thoreau, found “spiritual truth and moral law” in nature, as expressed in their writings<sup>90</sup> and the popularity of the Hudson River School’s paintings of “sublime wilderness” indicated “the antebellum shift away from historical paintings and toward landscape as the dominant genre.”<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless the conservation perspectives of mid-nineteenth century United States were not widely popular, expressed by only isolated figures until more widespread sentiment spread at the turn of the century.<sup>92</sup>

In the early twentieth century, conservation exploded as a mainstream ideology. With the country experiencing “anxiety over...industrialization, urbanization,... a growing population” and especially, “the ending of the frontier,” which had been a the source of “abundance, opportunity, and distinctiveness of the New World,” Americans were attracted to conservation as both a solution to these

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<sup>87</sup> Louis Warren. “Paths Towards Home”, In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman, (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) , 12

<sup>88</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 5-28

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 4

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 9

<sup>91</sup> Aaron Sachs. “Cultures of Nature: Nineteenth Century.” In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Sackman (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) , 256

<sup>92</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment.*, 4; Robert and Charles Lincoln Van Doren, *A Documentary History of Conservation in America*, ix

issues and as an “individual[istic]...and moral” “new frontier.”<sup>93</sup> Framed mostly upon the issue of “resource management,” and spearheaded by figures such as Gifford Pinchot, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt,<sup>94</sup> American conservationism gained widespread public awareness.<sup>95</sup> With the increased acceptance of Progressive Era government reform, the United States created the first National Parks and National Forests during this time.<sup>96</sup> After World War I, conservation continued to develop in new directions, bringing us to the cultural climate when the Walt Disney Company produced *Bambi*.

#### *The “Land Ethic” as a Progressive, Ecological Conservation*

*Bambi*, which began production in 1937<sup>97</sup> and was released in 1942, was produced in at a time where conservation was becoming increasingly popular. After World War I, conservation perspectives increasingly shifted from utilitarian (resource management) to more recreational motives—boating, fishing, and camping increasingly became popular American pastimes<sup>98</sup> and especially after World War II, aesthetic motives for conservation of the environment became widespread. Legislation, such as the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933, reflected conservation as a priority— “[n]ot since 1908 had conservation been as important a public issue as it

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<sup>93</sup>Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 37-8

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 39-42, 46-52, 58-64, 71-4.

<sup>95</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 37

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, 37-96.

<sup>97</sup>Michael Barrier, , *Hollywood Cartoons*, 236.

<sup>98</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 97

was in the early New Deal.”<sup>99</sup> The passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937, the 1939 “Forest Service ‘U’ Regulations” in 1939, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1940<sup>100</sup> further reflected the growing sentiment for managing wildlife and preserving wilderness. Situated in time among this public sentiment for conservation, *Bambi*’s pro-environmental depictions may seem fitting.

Nonetheless, while conservationist sentiments were increasingly prevalent when *Bambi* was produced, the worldview of dominion still was predominantly reflected in society, evident in the prevalence of manufacture and industrialism (especially during World War II), and through cultural products such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Moreover, conservation sentiments themselves throughout this period were predominantly rooted in assumptions of dominion. Despite the increased prevalence of conservation of the environment for recreational and aesthetic, rather than utilitarian and economic, purposes, these outlooks were still underlined by notions that “[t]he environment [was] to be groomed for the joy of man.”<sup>101</sup> Until the 1960s, most American conservationists framed their desires to preserve or sustainably manage natural landscapes in terms of benefit to humans, rather than to non-human life forms. Whether most “American conservationists had justified their programs in terms of economics or democracy or, less frequently, aesthetics and religion[,]... [t]he emphasis, in each case, was on *man*’s well being.”<sup>102</sup> While the birth and proliferation of early conservation was nonetheless a revolutionary alternative to attitudes that favored unlimited human use and

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 127

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, 117-8, 122

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, 155

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, 105

transformation of nature (what I denoted earlier as the *worldview* of dominion), most forms of conservation nonetheless positioned non-human life forms as conceptually separate from and below humans.

Not until the emergence of the land ethic, did conservation perspectives move away from the notion of dominion. This “land ethic” was influenced by ecological perspectives in the 1930s and defined by Aldo Leopold in his posthumous *Sand County Almanac* (1949), only to gain widespread popular acceptance in the 1960s. From the late 1920s to the mid 1940s, the Society of Mammalogists, the Wilderness Society, and Olaus Murie, among others, began arguing for a “scientifically based policy toward wildlife, instead of one founded on economic criteria alone,”<sup>103</sup> as well as “communitarian ideal[s] of management,”<sup>104</sup> in response to the US federal Bureau of Biological Survey’s extermination of predatory and rodent animals in National Parks and other areas.<sup>105</sup> Although Leopold’s early work on wildlife management embodied the economic, utilitarian, and anthropocentric worldviews of Progressive Era conservation,<sup>106</sup> by the mid 1930s, Leopold had become a leader in promoting the emerging ecological sensibilities.<sup>107</sup>

The “land ethic” evoked the combination of ecological and moral concepts, rather than the traditionally economic perspectives, to understand conservation. On one hand the land ethic viewed nature via ecological scientific knowledge, such that nature could be understood holistically, as a complex and interdependent

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<sup>103</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 276

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, 282

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 270-84

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, 272-3

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, 274



system, of which humans were naturally part. Grounded in the ecological concept of the ecosystem, where each life form's livelihood is dependent on a complex number of interrelated factors, including other animals' well-being; the land ethic suggested a comprehension of humans as animals and thus incredibly similar to other life forms who commonly occupy the realm of "nature." Through suggesting an abolishment of anthropocentrism that was accepted in older conservation perspectives,<sup>108</sup> the land ethic further expanded the ethical idea of natural human rights to all life forms, and the physical environment.<sup>109</sup> Understanding humans and nature on the same hierarchical level for the first time, the land ethic recognized the need to consider the perspectives of non-human life and of the physical environment—and if humans should have inherent "natural" rights to life, why should not other life forms?

An understanding of the natural world that was first introduced by this land ethic would later form the ideological basis for the late 1960s environmental movement, and furthermore has underscored most popular and scientific environmental perspectives since then. Nash conceptualizes how in the 1960s, motivated by fear due to "the recognition of threats to the health of the entire ecosystem" (from events including the Cuban Nuclear Missile Crisis, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*), the "major rationales already existing for conservation" "converg[ed]...around ecological concepts."<sup>110</sup> While earlier conservation views had been grounded in mostly utilitarian and aesthetic motivations (with the exception of

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<sup>108</sup> Robert McHenry and Charles Lincoln Van Doren, *A Documentary History of Conservation in America*, 340

<sup>109</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 288

<sup>110</sup> Roderick Nash, *The American Environment*, 227

Leopold's ecological land ethic), in the 1960s, popular environmental sentiment became more based upon ecological scientific concepts. Situated after the birth of the land ethic in the mid 1930s, but before widespread popular acceptance of this worldview, *Bambi* was quite progressive.

### *The Land Ethic in Bambi*

*Bambi* conveys a progressive worldview of nature that largely resembles the land ethic, which Leopold and others had begun to propose just prior to the film's production. The film expresses this distinctive form of the conservationist worldview in a few different ways. For one, it portrays the revolutionary idea, suggested by the land ethic, of considering animal perspectives and rights, rather than solely human ones, as an appeal for conservation. Unlike *Snow White* and other Disney films in which animals are assigned the role of human helpers or sidekicks, the animals in *Bambi* are instead the protagonists of the film. The animals are indeed given such a central perspective that unlike most (if not all) other Disney animated films, *Bambi* does not directly depict any human characters at all. During a time when even conservation worldviews tended to view animals as either resources or aesthetic attractions, *Bambi's* portrayal of animals as protagonists (and the only seen characters) forces the viewer to consider animals as having valuable *identities*. Indeed, especially considering the prevalence of anthropogenic perspectives toward nature during this time period if *Bambi* had instead incorporated depictions of humans in the film, viewers may have inadvertently

empathized with them (indeed humans are most adept at recognizing human emotions and empathizing with our own species), rather than with the animals. However, *Bambi*'s exclusion of human beings eliminates this possibility, and instead viewers must consider the perspectives of the animals as valuable.

Once viewers are forced to psychologically identify with the animals in *Bambi*, they can see the presented issue of conservation from the animals' perspective. The psychologically powerful medium of film itself enables viewers to imagine physical reality through the characters on the screen, as a "veritable psychical substitution, a prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs [from our ego]", mimicking the Lacanian mirror as a vehicle to psychologically associate our egos with our own physical bodies.<sup>111</sup> In short, viewers of *Bambi* are able to empathize with the protagonist animals via the psychological associations that film invokes, such that by viewing the animals on the screen, they can experience firsthand the anguish and vulnerability that animals face as a result of human activity. The viewer vicariously experiences the animal's experience—joy and fascination as the young Bambi explores the wonders of the forest, resplendent with different life forms; the loving mother-child bond that Bambi has with his mother; and then, terror as the child Bambi gets lost looking for his mother amidst the scurrying animals running from the hunter's gunshots on the field; a terrible sadness when Bambi arrives home from the prairie to realize that his mother was killed by the human hunters; and a overwhelming frustration with the destructive

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<sup>111</sup> Metz, *The imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 4.

and negligent behavior of the humans, for the negative effect it has upon the animal's well being.

Indeed certain anthropomorphic elements of *Bambi* that have been criticized for being ecologically inaccurate, serve important functions to help the human viewer sympathize with the animal characters on screen. For instance, *Bambi's* characters are given voices and recognizable American values. While obviously scientifically inaccurate to actual animal behavior, the portrayal of these attributes nonetheless serves a different function, to help American viewers to more easily connect with the animals on a sympathetic and emotional level. If the animals were not given the license to speak, as in *Snow White*, or they weren't attributed with certain American perspectives, it would be very difficult, especially during the time period (when considering animal plights was far from mainstream), for Americans to sympathize with them; and then, even if the film was entirely ecologically accurate, it would fall short for not engaging any significant sentiment among viewers. Another divergence from ecological scientific perspectives in *Bambi* is the absence of any animal predators depicted in the forest. Nonetheless, in the same vein, the depiction of no predators may have served the film's conservationist message—although ecologically, predators are seen as an integrated and necessary component of ecosystems, it would likely have complicated the film's condemnation of human threats to non-human species, if carnivorous predatory behavior was shown.<sup>112</sup> As Whitley notes, “[t]he ‘facts’ may be distorted but the process of

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<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that the exclusion of predators in *Bambi* partly reflected some more traditional (and problematic) attitudes to conservation that were widespread at the time—embodied in the US Bureau of Biological Survey's systematic extermination of predators in

engagement and the sensitivity to nature that [*Bambi*] encourages have a capacity to connect with viewers in more fundamental ways.”<sup>113</sup>

While it depicts some ecological inaccuracies, *Bambi* indeed overall displays a *much* more ecologically attuned perspective of nature than that of other Disney works during the time. In many Disney animation pieces of the period, such as the early Mickey Mouse shorts, *Pinocchio*, and *The Three Caballeros*, the animals depicted did little more than serve human roles (wearing clothes, driving cars, etc.); and in others, such as *Dumbo*, *Cinderella*, and *Lady and the Tramp*, animal characters were depicted in solely domestic or human settings. The animals in *Bambi* in contrast are situated within their natural forest ecosystem; they mature, eat (albeit the lack of acting predators), reproduce (indeed sexual feelings are conveyed as natural) in a certain time of year, and some hibernate. The film’s attention to depicting a variety of animal and plant life further supports ecological influence. A number of different squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, quails, possums, groundhogs, different birds, mice, skunks, and other animals are depicted in the film. Furthermore, the forest plant life and terrain is conveyed as diverse and varied—“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...”<sup>114</sup>

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National Forests and other lands, predators were understood as “varmints” and threats to Americans’ safety (Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy*: 262).

<sup>113</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 77

<sup>114</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 63

*Bambi* is progressive in several ways for conveying alternative, more sustainable cultural worldviews of nature. In one sense, *Bambi* is an embodiment of the worldview of conservation. Born from Romantic roots in the Industrial Revolution, and garnering widespread popularity in the United States in the twentieth century, the worldview of conservation focused on challenging the tradition of unlimited human domination and transformation of the environment. In contrast with *Snow White*, *Bambi* clearly expresses this worldview, by depicting the negative effects that human influence can have upon a rich natural environment. Furthermore, *Bambi* conveys a specific mode of conservation, the land ethic, which was born recently before *Bambi* and sought to reframe our understanding of conservation. The land ethic incorporated ecological scientific knowledge to understand human-nature relations less anthropocentrically, and more holistically. Although conservationists had denounced human degradation of the environment during this time period, they had rarely done so as *Bambi* suggests, invoking the “land ethic” outlook to consider animals as valuable identities whose lives and habitats are threatened by human actions. Indeed it has been suggested that *Bambi* was a significant influence for the transformation of cultural views towards nature that culminated in the 1960s environmental movement—*Bambi* was much more widely popular in the 1950s than upon its initial release, and “those who saw the film as children in this period were exposed more radical critiques of environmental practices...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” in the

1960s movement. Indeed Bambi indicates the profound influence that an animated film can potentially have on how people understand nature.

## CHAPTER 4:

### The Little Mermaid and Negligent Consumerism

*A New Tone in the "Disney Renaissance"?*

As I have investigated, portrayals of dominion over nature seem particularly evident in Disney's older films. While these old "classics" continue to be reintroduced to new generations of children via rereleases, newer Disney films have arguably been more progressive in how they address humanity's relationship with the natural world. In 1989, under the leadership of Michael Eisner, Disney feature animations began to reengage with the subject of wild nature in films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *Tarzan*, that had largely been left unaddressed in Disney films since Walt Disney's death in 1967. While anthropomorphic animals indeed were often portrayed in the period after Walt's death, not until Eisner took leadership in 1989 did Disney animation films begin again to feature nondomestic animals and environments and to arguably engage with "the challenging social agendas that [had been] developed around race, gender and environmental politics" in the twenty years prior.<sup>115</sup> Indeed Eisner himself was co-founder of the Environmental Media Association (EMA), an organization that "promoted more environmentally friendly practices in the Hollywood film

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<sup>115</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 80



industry" ... [and] encourage[ed] environmental issues to be explored and promoted... 'in films and television shows.'"<sup>116</sup>

While Disney and Disney Pixar feature animations since this "Disney Renaissance"<sup>117</sup> have had arguably more progressive environmental approaches that often deemphasize the less popular notion of direct dominion, Disney's newer films nonetheless have had a stake in addressing a different type of relationship between humans and the natural world, that of consumerism. As I will discuss, consumerism has been indicted as a cultural force that has been implicit in the increased effects of humans on the environment over the last couple hundred years. Indeed Disney's relationship with consumerism has been important since the company's beginnings. Disney was "at the forefront of...innovations in the early 1930s" to "intensif[y] and rationaliz[e]...the process through which films were linked to consumer goods."<sup>118</sup> Since then, Disney has profited hugely through its business endeavors that have linked its media output to the merchandising of a multitude and variety of consumer goods for children.<sup>119</sup> Relevant to my analysis particularly, Disney has specifically addressed the theme of consumerism as it relates to the relationship between humanity and nature in several of its newer animation films. Particularly its depictions are worth exploring in two very successful animated features made since the "Renaissance" though twenty years apart, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *WALL-E* (2009).

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<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, 80

<sup>117</sup> Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 89.

<sup>118</sup> Eric Smoodin. *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 204

<sup>119</sup> Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden*, 136

### *Consumerism and the Environment*

Before I begin to analyze the two films, it is worth expanding upon the concept of consumerism. Consumerism is the economic process, social activity, and cultural mindset which revolves around the widespread spending of capital for goods and services that serve non-utilitarian purposes. This process is a central aspect to lifestyle in the United States and other developed nations, with consumer spending accounting for 68 percent of U.S. economic activity in 2013.<sup>120</sup> Apart from defining certain economic and social relationships between humans, consumerism also entails a certain type of relationship between humans and nature.

McCarthy notes how even the earliest human beings “had discernable impacts on the natural world,” but only for the past couple hundred years has the degree of human impact on the environment increased dramatically, due to three historical “developments” that occurred at around the same time. Coupled with the immense population growth that humans have undergone since 1800, the rise of consumer culture (beginning in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, such that in “people well down in the socioeconomic hierarchy began to spend more money for objects for reasons that went beyond necessity”), and the subsequent Industrial Revolution that enabled consumerism on a gigantic scale, have been largely responsible for this novel “variety and magnitude” of anthropogenic

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<sup>120</sup> St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, Economic Research, “Graph: Personal Consumption Expenditures/Gross Domestic Product” Accessed April 15, 2014. <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/graph/?g=hh3>.

environmental impact.<sup>121</sup> Consumerism causes environmental damage due to excessive resource depletion, energy requirements for products' manufacture, distribution, advertising, and usage, and the pollution entailed in these processes. Furthermore, consumerism is particularly upsetting in regard to its environmental impacts because of its triviality. Many consumer products do not serve necessary or functional biological purposes to humans, but instead serve socially symbolic or personally gratifying functions. Also, many consumer products are rarely used, or are discarded even before they break or wear out, contributing to further pollution, and further consumerism as they are replaced.

Consumerism is considered to be a potent force for environmental degradation not only due to these reasons, but also due to its deceptive quality. McCarthy discusses the environmental ramifications of Karl Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism," initially introduced in *Capital*. Capitalism's division of labor has "made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for us to fully understand the social and environmental implications of our behavior as either producers or consumers." This "mystification" further results in a "diminishment of responsibility," by allowing people to continue to engage in consumer behavior without realizing the potential effects of their actions on nonhuman life forms and the natural environments they depend on.<sup>122</sup> This aspect of consumerism is particularly troubling considering the increased appreciation of nonhuman nature and awareness of anthropogenic effects on the environment that has been present and ever-growing in the American consciousness in the twentieth and twenty first

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<sup>121</sup> Tom McCarthy, *The Black Box in the Garden*, 306-7

<sup>122</sup> Tom McCarthy, *The Black Box in the Garden*, 312

centuries. Despite increased sensitivities among the public to negative human effects on natural environments, the mystifying quality of consumerism veils and obscures people's responsibility for environmental degradation, enabling environmental degradation to continue without people fully realizing or understanding it. The consumer instead only sees the " 'dazzle' ...[of products'] complexity, functionality, styling, quality, affordability, and symbolic import."<sup>123</sup>

### *The Little Mermaid: Fetishized Negligence*

When *The Little Mermaid* was released in 1989, it broke box office records and marked the first of Disney's new string of " 'instant classics'" that were not only commercially lucrative, but aesthetically praised.<sup>124</sup> The film itself won two Oscars,<sup>125</sup> and generated a huge commercial merchandising campaign and subsequent television show. Considering the film's widespread popularity and hegemonic power, it is especially important to consider how it informs children of acceptable worldviews and attitudes about nature.

Loosely based on the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen, the story describes a mermaid princess, Ariel, who in order to be with the human prince that she loves, will make a deal with the evil sea witch-octopus, Ursula to grant her human legs (at the cost of her voice) if she is able to get a kiss from the prince in

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 312

<sup>124</sup> Pallant, 89

<sup>125</sup> Disney Movies. "The Little Mermaid About." Accessed March, 2014.  
<http://movies.disney.com/the-little-mermaid/about>.

three days time, or become part of Ursula's collection of enslaved, grossly deformed souls. Ursula ends up tricking the princess, and in the end after prince Eric slays Ursula, King Neptune transforms Ariel into a human permanently, so Eric and Ariel can get happily married.

*The Little Mermaid's* depictions of consumerism, as it relates to human and natural realms, are particularly troublesome. On one hand, largely through its depiction of both the attractiveness and innocence of commodities, it clearly encourages an indiscriminating consumerist ethos in children. Even before she sees Eric, Ariel's fascination with the human world derives from her fascination with the consumer goods that humans produce, particularly from the early modern time period of the film's setting. Her underwater cave is full of an enormous number of human-made objects that she has collected over time, presumably from shipwrecks. The consumer goods include paintings, figurines, candelabras, a box of ornamental corkscrews ("thingamabobs"), toys, jewelry, clocks, books, pipes, silverware, a globe, musical instruments, and a variety of china, vases, jugs, and chests.

Rather than depict Ariel's massive collection as messy or trashy, however, the film utilizes certain aesthetic techniques to portray a beauty and wonder in her assortment of items, that ultimately encourages a fetishistic gaze. Objects are neatly organized along the 'shelves' that are the smooth contours of the vertical cave; nets and sheets are draped like curtains, jewelry hangs gracefully from ledges. The shots depict dramatic angles of the many overlaying curves of the cave filled with these commodities, while panning slowly, or circling as Ariel spins. The twinkling of light visible on these items due to the underwater sun is apt material manifestation of the

commodity “dazzle” that McCarthy described earlier. That “dazzle” precisely describes Karl Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, the almost fetishistic lens that consumers view products in a consumer culture. Rather than understand a product for its use value, or recognize the social and environmental actions that enable that product to be made, the consumer is fascinated by the product in an acutely aesthetic and superficial sense. The focus on aesthetic and superficial values in this allure, combined with its powerful, ultimately sinister hold on people, account for why consumerism can be understood as such a “fetish.”

Indeed it is precisely this aesthetic that enthalls Ariel, rather than any use value for the commodities. Although Ariel wants to know more about the human lifestyle, as evidenced in her song “Part of Your World,”<sup>126</sup> much of her interest in the human commodities is purely aesthetic, especially considering that she does not even know what most of the items are used for. Ariel’s naïveté is comical, such that she believes the seagull Scuttle’s teachings that a fork is a “dinglehopper,” used for straightening hair, and a tobacco pipe is a human instrument, the “snarfblat.” But Ariel’s infatuation with these items despite her foreignness to their actual purposes reflects the ultimate degree of superficiality in her gaze, consumer fetishism in its most unadulterated form. Potentially, Ariel’s naïveté to man-made objects could be played out to encourage critical thinking about the origins of commodities, such that only by looking at them as strange, can we really question our inculcated assumptions about the norms of consumerism. However, the film fails to take this

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<sup>126</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, 1989.

route, and her appreciation for the commodities only becomes more fetishized and superficial due to her lack of knowledge of the commodities' use-values.

The film's emphasis on superficial visual appreciation in other of its aspects further encourages a consumerist ethos. The shallow, aesthetic basis for both Prince Eric's and Ariel's notions of interpersonal "love" are a testament to this. Ariel's love for prince Eric is solely based on her initial aesthetic attraction to him. Certainly Prince Eric is portrayed as a noble man looking for love, but Ariel falls in love with him solely for his aesthetic looks—"He's very handsome, isn't he"<sup>127</sup>, "He's so beautiful"<sup>128</sup>—even though she doesn't talk with him until the end of the film. Likewise, the Prince's love is based solely on his shallow appreciation of her voice. While the film may hint that the Prince is beginning to overcome this superficiality when he and the voiceless, human Ariel almost kiss, it entirely subverts from this message immediately afterward, when Eric decides to get married to the disguised Ursula upon hearing her voice (that had been captured from Ariel). Eric's 'love' is entirely based on his superficial adoration of Ariel's voice, rather than on more meaningful and deeper qualities of personality.<sup>129</sup> Through these depictions of interpersonal love the film encourages a mode of appreciation, also particularly central to materialism, that is entirely superficial.<sup>130</sup> Children are taught not only that interpersonal love does not require complex emotional engagement, but also that consumer items need not be evaluated in any complex or deep sense that would

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<sup>127</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, 1989, 0:20:53

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, 0:25:30

<sup>129</sup> Roberta Trites, "Disney's Sub/version of andersen's the little mermaid", *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 18(4), (1991): ,148  
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/199382099?accountid=14824>

<sup>130</sup> murphy, world scrubbed clean, 132-3

ultimately consider the environmental and social implications of their production, use, and disposal.

Particularly relevant to my analysis, the film's treatment of consumerism is embedded within a story context that powerfully engages with the binary of human and nature. The central tension of the story's plot stems from Ariel's simultaneous wish to experience human life and love, and her inability to cross the barrier that separates the merpeople and other wildlife in the sea from humans and their livelihoods— both by her father's will for her not to associate with humans, and by her anatomical inability to move on land. The realm of the ocean indeed is clearly associated with the realm of nature. Despite the implications of dominative rule by humanesque merpeople of the ocean life, the merpeople and the ocean fish are intended to comprise of a world apart from human development and cultural norms, a clearly evoked natural realm, despite (or perhaps partially contributed by) its mythic overtones. On the other hand, the human world of the film, occupied on land, is characterized by its European cultural customs, technology, and relative disengagement from non-human animals (except Prince Eric's domesticated dog).

It has been argued that the film's treatment of the human-nature divide suggests a positive environmentalist reading. On one hand, the film does engage some critical thinking about the effects of humans on the natural world, specifically in our food consumption, "which contemporary culture systematically disguises and mystifies."<sup>131</sup> This portrayal is evident in Sebastian's constant fleeing from the violent and determined chef, along with King Triton's denouncement of humans as

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<sup>131</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 44



“spineless, savage, harpooning, fish-eaters, incapable of any feeling.”<sup>132</sup> However, the film is also escapist, because not only does its focus on human food consumption disguise the much broader and more severe range of negative human effects on the environment – such as all of the trash which Ariel has accumulated in her cave, but its positive depictions of the humans (as well as the failure of the chef to actually catch and cook Sebastian) reassures audiences that human behavior is acceptable. In another way, Whitley argues that Ariel’s eventual transgression of that boundary to gain legs and marry Prince Eric “play[s] out a longing for some form of resolution to the nature-culture divide.” He also considers the mixed anatomy of the mermaids, as part human, part fish, and the lack of physical boundaries presented in many of the spaces of the undersea environment, as also signifying this positive coalescence of human-nature realms.<sup>133</sup> Indeed it has been substantially argued that human attitudes must accept a union of the divide between human and natural realms, as a necessary precursor to developing truly environmentally sustainable practices.<sup>134</sup> However, while Whitley’s is an interesting reading, I think it a bit strained. Rather than Eric turn into a merman and live among the ocean life, Ariel transforms into a human so that they can overcome the boundaries separating their ‘love.’ This suggests that rather than endorse changing human perceptions and livelihood, nature must transformed to fit to human desires, and indeed must do so on its own.

The film’s anthropocentric engagement of the human-nature dualism is especially evident when considering the film’s treatment of consumerism. A

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<sup>132</sup> *The Little Mermaid*. DVD. Directed by John Musker. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video, 1997, or. Released 1989.

<sup>133</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 40

<sup>134</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness”

primary distinction made between the human and natural worlds, apart from being on land versus water, is the presence of consumer items in the human world. While the underwater world does seem to have a small presence of consumerism, as evidenced by the mermaid jewelry, the huge number of consumer items stashed in Ariel's cave are associated specifically with the human world, and this aspect of the human world particularly fascinates Ariel—"I don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad."<sup>135</sup> Indeed this quote, and the whole film in many ways, seems an attempt to justify human consumerism, as a response to King Triton's criticisms of humans' propensity to eat fish. If not a justification, the film at least presents both a reverence for superficial consumerism, and the notion that such consumerism is a central, defining, and possibly redemptive aspect of humanity.

As I have explored, *The Little Mermaid's* encouragement of the superficial gaze and naïve consumerism is troubling. While some Disney films, such as *Tarzan*, have played to the desire to retreat from modern society's triviality and materialism, *The Little Mermaid* instead plays out an appreciation of the human world due to its frivolous consumerism, a sort of retreat *into* human society. Consumerism is not only emphasized as a distinctive and redemptive quality of humankind, but a superficial fetishistic gaze is encouraged through the characters' actions in the film. Without needing to know the uses for commodity goods, or the deeper emotional qualities of Prince Eric, Ariel is nonetheless infatuated with elements of the human world for their superficiality. This superficial gaze is central

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<sup>135</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, 1989.

to a systematic alienation from the adverse environmental effects of everyday human actions, evident particularly in consumerism, but also in many other human endeavors. While *The Little Mermaid* seems to play out a simple, indiscriminating ethos of superficial consumerism, as we will see, *WALL-E* engages much more complexly with the issue.

## CHAPTER 5:

### A Progressive Look at Consumerism in *WALL-E*

#### *WALL-E's Warning to Humanity*

My personal favorite among Disney films, *WALL-E* employs spectacular animation, is emotionally engaging, and is especially progressive in a number of ways. Disney Pixar's *WALL-E* was both hugely commercially successful, as well as critically praised, winning numerous awards.<sup>136</sup> *WALL-E* is the first film that I am considering in my thesis that was not produced via the traditional hand-drawn animation technologies of other Disney features, but instead using computer-generated graphics, by the Pixar animation company. Although Pixar, a pioneering computer animation studio, had previously been independent, and maintained a "very distinctive aesthetic", in 2006, Disney purchased the company, and John Lasseter oversaw production of animation at both Disney and Pixar Studios.<sup>137</sup>

*WALL-E* is in many ways unique among Disney films, especially among those where the nature is a strong theme, in that the setting of *WALL-E* is dystopian, and "nature" is almost entirely remiss from the movie's images. Rather than depict an idealized, natural past, *WALL-E* subverts Disney's typical setting by portraying a troublesome, almost lifeless future. *WALL-E* takes place in the far future, when largely due to the influence of megacorporation Buy-N-Large, excessive human

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<sup>136</sup> IMDb, "WALL-E (2008)." Accessed January, 2014.  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910970/?ref=ttawd\\_awd\\_tt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910970/?ref=ttawd_awd_tt).

<sup>137</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 13

consumerism has left the planet Earth a lifeless trash-filled desert, and humans have since relocated to space stations far away, leaving *WALL-E* (Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class) robots to clean the trash. The plot revolves around a small, outdated robot named *WALL-E*, the last of his kind still operational, who continues to embark on his daunting daily tasks of compressing garbage into stackable cubes, while simultaneously collecting certain items of trash as keepsakes in his home, the inside of an old “WALL-E transport” storage unit. Then, EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator), a futuristic robot soon to be WALL-E’s love interest, shows up on the planet, programmed to look for the presence of life forms, to report to the humans, as a sign that they can potentially return. When WALL-E presents EVE a small plant he has found, EVE (with WALL-E tailing along) is sent back to the *Axiom*, a Buy-N-Large space ship where humans now dwell, immensely obese and antisocial due to the automation technology that fulfills their every function. As EVE tries to fill her directive, with WALL-E’s help, we find out that the ship’s central autopilot robot, “Auto” is trying to sabotage their mission, as part of a since-programmed directive of BnL that Earth is permanently uninhabitable. Eventually with the help of a gang of malfunctioning robots and an increasingly aware Captain McCrea, WALL-E and EVE try to find the seedling and place it in the “holo-chamber” so that the ship will return to Earth, while Autopilot and the ships main robots try to stop them. Finally, largely due to WALL-E’s efforts throughout the film, the ship returns to Earth and humans and robots recolonize life, sustainably.

Evidently, WALL-E’s plot clearly warns of the dangers of rampant consumerism on the environment. It encourages children to look at human

consumerism beyond its superficial allure, and consider its real environmental consequences. It mainly focuses on the dangers that consumer behavior poses for the environment through its creation of trash, but also depicts haunting images of other troublesome aspects of consumer industry, such as the empty power plants and construction machinery in the opening minutes (see Appendix, Fig. 8). In these opening minutes, it provokes an unsettling look at consumer culture by depicting images of an excessive amount of gaudy Buy-N-Large holographic billboard advertisements and stores, throughout the rubble of an empty planet Earth. All the while these images are set to an eerie soundtrack. One series of billboard advertisements darkly pokes fun at the triviality of consumer culture by advertising “Too much garbage in your face? There’s plenty of space out in space! BnL Starliners leaving each day. We’ll clean up the mess while you’re away.” Even the excess of trash due to rampant consumerism has become something to be used in corny BnL commercial campaigns! The film largely portrays an extreme, and disturbing warning that human negligence of the other side of consumerism, beyond the superficial allure, could potentially reduce the planet to a distressed state where life (except for WALL-E’s pal cockroach) can no longer inhabit it. Similar to *Bambi*, *WALL-E* portrays humans for most of the film in a deeply unsettling manner, particularly in their negligence of the environmental consequences of their actions. Finally, in the end, the film endorses humans’ responsibility to be stewards of the planet that they have altered so substantially, through a retreat from technologic consumerism to active human engagement with the environment.

### *The Hidden Gaze in WALL-E*

While *WALL-E* seems to universally condemn consumerism on the surface, on another level, the film actually seems to advocate certain kinds of consumerism. Although the depictions of such excess of trash on Earth carry a powerfully ominous tone, depictions of garbage are also made aesthetically pleasing in many instances.

For one, the trash-filled landscape of Earth is not entirely revolting to view, and the flowing contours of trash, situated with dramatic skyscraper-like piles of cubed garbage, are in some senses aesthetically interesting (see Appendix, Fig. 8).

WALL-E art director Anthony Christov admits that they “ ‘were looking for designs that were extremely dirty, yet organized in an almost subconscious way and not offensive or repulsive...It looks dirty, but just enough that a kid would still want to go there and play.’ ”<sup>138</sup>

More centrally, WALL-E's collection invokes a consumerist gaze, not unlike that of *The Little Mermaid* in some ways. In WALL-E's storage unit home, WALL-E possesses a huge collection of accumulated items that he has selected over time from the trash that he works with. Similarly to Ariel's collection in *The Little Mermaid*, cinematic and sound techniques portray WALL-E's collection with a sense of wonder. Christmas light strings, and mobiles fashioned from old hinges, CDs, wires, and plastic cutlery artfully drape from the ceiling. The metal shelves are lined with numerous dirty discarded items that are displayed with a rustic aesthetic. Dilapidated and dirty they may be, the items are nonetheless attractive due to their simplicity, cultural nostalgia, and artful organization in visually interesting ways: an

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<sup>138</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 143

old bird cage filled with yellow rubber duckies, pink lawn flamingoes hung from the wall, small collections of old miniature clocks, garden gnomes, flip-top lighters, forks and spoons in plastic cups (with a plastic spork he decides to place in between); a plastic singing fish, a Rubik's Cube, old toys, a saucepan, etc. (see Appendix, Fig. 9) Soft, dramatic lighting and nondiegetic music during this scene where we first see WALL-E's home further emphasize a bittersweet wonder in his collections, that is at the same time curious, charming, and nostalgic. Specifically, WALL-E's collection evokes a nostalgia of mid-twentieth century commodities, "an era of consumer technology prior to the intensive development of the microchip-based culture that has so profoundly shaped contemporary consciousness".<sup>139</sup>

In some sense, WALL-E's collection seems very similar to Ariel's, by encouraging a consumerist gaze. WALL-E's trove, like Ariel's, is based on a largely aesthetic appreciation of the commodities, rather than their inherent use value. Many of the items are given a wondrous quality, not for how WALL-E uses them (for indeed actually WALL-E uses very few), but for their aesthetic appeal. At first glance, the superficial fetishistic gaze seems to be embodied here in WALL-E's collection, which is indeed troubling for environmental causes.

In another sense, *WALL-E*'s appreciation of consumerism is not only limited to a mid-twentieth century "nostalgic" variety, but also appreciates that of a high-tech, "futuristic" appeal. Whitley shrewdly considers how the film endorses "both [of these] polarities of contemporary consumer culture".<sup>140</sup> The film underlines an attraction to EVE, WALL-E's love interest, due to her sleekness that utterly

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<sup>139</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 153

<sup>140</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 154



juxtaposes WALL-E's clumsy, outdated state. Unlike WALL-E, EVE is "all smooth surfaces and no moving parts, a machine that epitomizes state-of-the-art micro-electronic design functions of our own age."<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, the allure of EVE's sleek design, remarkably characteristic to that of Apple devices, could be a consumer venture in its own right, "the ultimate sophistication in product placement," considering that Steve Jobs had been a co-founder and CEO of both Apple and Pixar (and became a board member and the largest shareholder of Disney when the corporation bought Pixar).<sup>142</sup> This futuristic aesthetic is also portrayed in other items, such as the ship that brings EVE to earth, and the cleaning robotics aboard the Axiom.

### *A Second Look: Complex Consumerism in WALL-E*

Now, let's not get carried away. A superficial examination of *WALL-E* might conclude that these aspects of *WALL-E* that encourage consumerism and aesthetic aspects of garbage are enough to diminish the film's environmentally progressive message. However, I'd argue that is far from the case. Even though *WALL-E* seems to endorse a superficial consumerist gaze in some regards, the film's engagement with consumerism is far more complex. On one hand, as I mentioned earlier, the entire dystopian premise behind the film's plot alone sends a clear message

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<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, 154

<sup>142</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 154-5; Laura M. Holsen, "Disney Agrees to Acquire Pixar in a \$7.4 Billion Deal," *New York Times*, January 25, 2006, accessed April 20, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/25disney.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/25disney.html?_r=0).

condemning trivial human consumerism. Furthermore, in other ways, the film endorses forms of consumerism and engagement that challenge traditional modes, and are environmentally sustainable.

Upon further inspection, even WALL-E's collection does not endorse a simple consumerist ethos. On one hand, WALL-E's collection is obtained through the recycling of waste from refuse piles. *WALL-E* thus directly encourages a sustainable form of consumption, that of already discarded materials, rather than consumption of dazzling, new commodities, which is much more potentially damaging to the environment. Thus *WALL-E* demonstrates the aesthetic appeal for recycling, a process which is in itself a compromise between the cultural preoccupation with consumerism, and its negative environmental effects (because it eliminates or reduces the processing and waste inherent in new consumer goods, by utilizing the waste of old goods).

As I presented earlier, it could be argued that *WALL-E*'s portrayal of the sleek, high-tech EVE, is a subliminal form of appreciation for the aesthetic appeal of futuristic technology. However, the forms of futuristic technology that the film actually glorifies, such as EVE, are generally not related to personal consumer interests, but have more utilitarian purposes. On the other hand, new consumer goods technologies are overwhelmingly indicted in the film. BnL advertisements for new technological commercial products (on Earth, and on the Axiom) are portrayed in a negative light, as gaudy, trite, and negligently superficial. And as I earlier discussed, the film clearly expresses that consumption of such goods diminishes humans' meaningful engagement with each other, and with the planet Earth.

Furthermore, while most of the recycled items in WALL-E's home seem to hold primarily aesthetic value, the consumer item that is given primary significance to WALL-E in the film is engaged on a much deeper level. WALL-E is fascinated by the film *Hello Dolly* that he watches on a makeshift television (consisting of a cassette player hooked up to an ipod, situated behind a giant magnifying glass), because of its depiction of human love. As WALL-E sees the loving couple in the film holding hands, the film emphasizes the empathetic, compassionate look in his eyes as he tries to mimic the action with his own metal fingers (see Appendix, Fig. 10), and later he continually tries to garner the courage to show EVE his love by initiating the same gesture. WALL-E's appreciation of this consumer item thus is not simply superficial; he is drawn to *Hello Dolly* by its deeper meaning, what it evokes about expressions of love. Thus we see another side of consumerism advocated in *WALL-E*, one that is not a simply fleeting and superficial obsession with the next fad (which *The Little Mermaid* would more likely encourage), but a deeper connection to what the commodity represents in the real world. Drawing upon the theories of Jane Bennett, Whitley suggests that *WALL-E* expresses positive forms of "enchantment," without which modes, " '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.'"<sup>143</sup> Rather than " simply...to generate amusement, which 'disables systematic thinking,'" *WALL-E* expresses "richer, stronger affective

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<sup>143</sup> Quotation of Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 174; quoted in Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 155.

modes, which contain ‘rebel energies’ that delight but also unsettle.”<sup>144</sup> *WALL-E*’s focus on the consumer good of *Hello Dolly*, which can be engaged with on a deep, emotional level, thus also supports this idea that “richer” forms of “enchantment” invoked by some consumer goods are not necessarily detrimental, but indeed can foster the type of ethical sentiments that underscore ecological sensibilities and movements.

Moreover, even in ways not directly linked to consumerism, *WALL-E* encourages deep forms of engagement that challenge the mindsets behind negligent consumerism. Compared with many other Disney protagonists, such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Ariel, *WALL-E* is atypical. While many other Disney films underscore the physical beauty of the protagonists (even if such characters do not realize it initially), *WALL-E* is dilapidated, dirty, clumsy, and constantly breaking down. However, the film encourages a loving appreciation of *WALL-E* not for his superficial qualities (indeed compared to newer robots, he is quite unattractive), but for his deeper qualities—his affection, selflessness, and determination. Viewers are thus encouraged on one hand to understand characters as necessarily complex beneath their surface, but also to understand any entities, including consumer goods as necessarily complex beneath their surface. Unlike *The Little Mermaid* which encourages negligent consumerism through its motif of the superficial appreciation of consumer goods and people; *WALL-E* calls for a more discerning gaze, one in which not only recognizes that a character’s value lies beneath his or her physical exterior, but one in which also understands a consumer good beyond its superficial

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<sup>144</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 127; quoted and applied in Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, 158

appeal, as inherently linked with environmentally damaging processes that are a result of its production and disposal.

In both *The Little Mermaid* and *WALL-E*, the Walt Disney Company expresses a significant statement about humanity's relationship to nature, through depictions of consumerism. Unlike *The Little Mermaid*, which encourages a superficial gaze that neglects the environmental externalities of consumerism, *WALL-E* addresses the concept of consumerism in a much more progressive, complex manner. On the surface, through depictions of a dystopian, virtually lifeless planet Earth, the film clearly encourages children to consider the environmental consequences of rampant consumer activity. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of *WALL-E* also suggests that while the film does seem to express a consumer gaze of certain items, the appeal is expressed only for more environmentally progressive modes of consumerism. *WALL-E*'s appreciation of consumerism is only for recycled items, and items that encourage deep emotional engagement, which are conducive to environmental protection. Finally, in contrast to *The Little Mermaid*, *WALL-E* encourages a discerning gaze at consumerism through its depictions of characters that must be understood on a deeper level than their appearances.

# CONCLUSION

“Nature” is a concept that indeed is much more complex than it initially appears. Rather than being scientific or genetic, our understanding of “nature” is very cultural. If our understanding of life on planet Earth were more derivative of the environmental scientific canon, perhaps humans would treat the environment more in ways that ensured the welfare of humans and non-human life forms. Perhaps, with our biological understanding of life processes and life forms, we would not conceptualize of humans as so entirely distinct from other organisms on the planet. Perhaps, we would understand ourselves as animals, closely related to many others, and realize that our livelihood, as well as that of other life forms, depends on changing our actions and lifestyles.

However, as I have explored, our perceptions of the environment are not scientific, but are constructed and shaped via the processes of culture. Indeed to approach our conceptions of “nature,” we must recognize our current assumptions, as well as ground our worldviews in their historical and cultural roots. Furthermore, it is important to explore specific agents in culture, including the initial producers of the Bible, Calvin, Francis Bacon, Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and even the Walt Disney Company, which have been able to act as agents in transmitting and shaping our cultural worldviews of nature.

I have analyzed the Walt Disney Company as one such powerful force in influencing American children’s perceptions about nature, through the company’s portrayal of both harmful and progressive cultural worldviews of nature. I first addressed two of Disney’s earliest films, which expressed worldviews on how

humans should directly conceptualize of, and interact with nature. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Disney's earliest full-length animation film, released in 1937, largely reflected Disney's attempts to appeal to the conservative values of a strongly Christian audience. Echoing the worldview of dominion that had strong Christian roots, *Snow White* portrayed nature as both separate and subordinate to humans, as well as requiring human domestication to be valuable.

On the other hand, in Disney's 1942 film *Bambi*, the company expresses an entirely different sentimentality towards nature. Perhaps after Disney was able to gain even more widespread popularity, and after Walt had become comfortable with the feature animation medium, he was willing to express a more progressive ideology in *Bambi*. Even though it released shortly after *Snow White*, the film draws upon an entirely different ideology, that of conservation, which expresses a desire for humans to preserve or conserve natural resources and landscapes. Garnering its heritage from Romantic mentalities during nineteenth century industrialization, conservation had become significantly popular among the masses in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, *Bambi* was especially progressive for the form of conservation it seemed to convey, that of the land ethic, a more ecologically influenced conservation worldview, which discouraged the anthropocentrism that was still overwhelmingly common in American conservationism at the time. *Bambi* was able to encourage audiences to sympathize with the plights of animals threatened by human actions, as a new mentality of conservation.

The next two Disney films I discussed were made in the last twenty-five years and expressed sentiments in regard to the process and worldview of

consumerism. While the environment issues of the 1930s and 40s seemed to revolve around issues of direct human degradation of the environment, such as hunting, starting forest fires, and pollution; modern environmental issues have instead largely been fueled by the effects of consumerism, which makes it possible for people to be unaware of their environmental effects, even if they have somewhat environmentally supportive worldviews. In 1989's *The Little Mermaid*, Disney largely condoned a negligent consumerist worldview, through encouraging a fetishistic gaze for human consumer goods, and through underlining other forms of superficial engagement. The release of Disney Pixar's *WALL-E* in 2009 reflects not only an increase in cultural concern for the effects of consumerism on the environment (and on social relations), but also an increased sensitivity of the subject by the Walt Disney Company. *WALL-E* asks young audiences to look deeper than the superficial appeal of goods and realize the environmental damage that is inherent in the normative processes of mass consumerism.

In my analyses I have found that the Walt Disney Company has vacillated greatly in its portrayals of nature, sometimes expressing worldviews that encourage human degradation of the environment, and other times communicating radically progressive ways of understanding the environment. Although many scholars I encountered seemed to analyze Disney's portrayals of nature (as well as its portrayals of gender, race, and culture) as either entirely demonstrative or wholly positive, I have noticed that Disney's portrayals are more of a mixed bag. Disney's vacillations on how it expresses nature reflects not only that multiple competing worldviews on nature exist in American culture at a given time, but also that a



company can have important influence on the development of these shifting and contending worldviews. For instance, as I noted in the paper, the depictions of nature in Disney's *Bambi* were possibly influential in encouraging a land ethic worldview among children that would eventually champion these ideals in the late 1960s environmental movement.

Disney has thus been put in an interesting position between reflecting and influencing cultural ideologies for how Americans understand nature. In all of its films, Disney has relied on worldviews of nature present in American culture, but only in some films has Disney promoted views of nature that are not widely accepted (and thus that have had potential to influence cultural sensibilities). For instance, while the depictions of nature in *Snow White* seemed to appease deeply set Christian values of Disney's growing audience, *Bambi* seemed to express a land ethic worldview that did not become more widely believed until the 1960s. Both films nonetheless drew upon circulating American worldviews of nature at the time, but *Bambi* expressed a stance that was significantly less popular than dominion or anthropocentric versions of conservation.

While most media companies (and at times, Disney as well) would be likely constrained to depict only the most widely popular worldviews in their films in order to secure commercial success, Disney has shown that they can achieve success by expressing worldviews of nature that aren't entirely mainstream. Through its huge influence, and skill at engaging children audiences with its beautiful artwork and sentimental, captivating stories, Disney has been able to be progressive, and play a part in shaping cultural worldviews of nature. While *Bambi* may have

inspired an ecological conscience in the young population of baby boomers who would later become environmental activists, the progressive views expressed in *WALL-E* may indeed influence the growth of new environmentally conscious views towards consumerism, in years to come. Nonetheless, while Disney's expressions of progressive environmental worldviews can stimulate positive cultural sentiments in children, its depictions of harmful environmental worldviews nonetheless can have an equally detrimental effect. So, while films such as *Bambi* and *WALL-E* can encourage progressive attitudes towards nature among children, films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *The Little Mermaid* can equally serve to maintain the status quo, by educating worldviews in children that condone damaging human treatment of non-human nature.

Disney is in a vastly influential position, able to impact American (and worldwide) culture, as well as the non-human life forms and physical landscapes of the "environment." How Disney conveys humanity's relationship with nature can have a lasting impression on children's minds, as they grow and learn about the world around them; and how these children come to conceptualize of nature (and humanity's relationship to it) will indeed determine how they treat it. Considering the trend of anthropogenic degradation to the environment that has intensified until our present-day circumstances, how the next generation of children understands humanity's relationship with non-human life forms and the planet is very pertinent. Thus, considering its huge influence on the formation of cultural worldviews in young minds, Disney has significant responsibility. Although Disney's progressive portrayals of nature are indeed worthy of praise, its vacillations between expressing

these progressive environmental worldviews and more harmful ones nonetheless conveys mixed messages to children. To make a more significant impact upon the outlooks of the next generation of American youth, Disney should instead aim to portray worldviews of nature in its films that are more consistently progressive. Even films that may not seem to directly address humanity's relationship with the environment, such as *Snow White* and *The Little Mermaid* (indeed the plots of these stories mostly *seem* to revolve around other issues), can evidently convey significant statements about this issue. Children nonetheless are still educated about how humans should interact with nature, even if they do not realize it, through their learning of normative and acceptable practices depicted in these films. Thus, Disney should maintain a conscience about how nature is depicted in *all* of their films, even ones that seem more focused upon other issues, because these can still make an substantial impression on young minds.

My work opens up further questions for STS, media studies, and environmental studies scholars. While I have chosen to analyze only a handful of Disney films, it would be interesting to see how nature is depicted in the other films of the Walt Disney Company, and in the products of other media companies. Furthermore, it would be intriguing to explore how our understanding of ideas other than “nature,” such as aspects of human societies, and psychological perceptions, are influenced by cultural forces and scientific knowledge; furthermore, one could investigate how conceptions of these ideas are expressed in cultural media products. The conception of “nature” could also be further explored— one could investigate assumptions in the concept that I did not touch

upon, further worldviews of understanding it, and its relationship to science and culture in other ways.

Moving forward, it is important to consider how my discussions can be related to the environmental “crisis” that humans now face. The disjuncture between scientific understanding of the environment, and society’s treatment of it, can begin to be understood by considering our perceptions about nature as culturally constructed, and able to be influenced by media. On one hand, this cultural constructivist perspective invites us all to adopt a more discerning eye for how media and other cultural agents can influence our assumptions and actions, which indeed can have devastating consequences on the welfare of other life forms. Furthermore, we must consider ways in which ecological knowledge and ethics can be promoted in cultural worldviews in the years to come, so that people will live more sustainably and ethically in regard to the environment, and to the life forms that inhabit it. Indeed children’s media has proven one such powerful tool for influencing our worldviews, and prominent media producers such as the Walt Disney Company, must realize the impact that they can potentially have on human perceptions.

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## APPENDIX

Useful film stills that I refer to throughout the text are henceforth displayed.



Fig. 1. The forest animals will not transgress the human-nature boundary, but instead look on helplessly from outside the cottage as the disguised evil queen prepares to give Snow White a poisoned apple.



Fig. 2. Snow White domesticates nature by teaching them how to properly clean the home.



Fig. 3. Disney's attention to detail in depicting wildlife (which helps to reflect an ecological perspective) is apparent in *Bambi*.



Fig. 4. *Bambi* encourages viewers to identify with the perspective of the ecological animal, as it is threatened by human actions, such as this forest fire.



Fig. 5. We see Ariel's cave, where her collection of human items is artfully organized on the shelf-like walls of the cave. This aesthetic organization, slow camera panning, a tinkling musical motif, and sparkles reflecting off of the items invoke a sense of wonderment (commodity fetishism) in the viewer.



Fig. 6. In "Out of This World," Ariel sings about her desire to be a human, provoked by her fascination with human commodities.





Fig. 7. Ariel gazes for the first time upon Prince Eric, remarking at how “handsome” he is. Motifs such as these in the film support a superficial, fetishistic gaze.



Fig. 8. Here we see the dystopian landscape of Earth in *WALL-E*, covered in trash; the skyscraper-like piles of trash indeed do have somewhat of an aesthetic appeal.



Fig. 9. In WALL-E's storage-unit home, the film emphasizes the aesthetic appeal of his collection of recycled goods. While the film's appreciation of this aesthetic may seem to emphasize a fetishistic gaze, it is only for goods that are already recycled. Thus the film depicts the aesthetic appeal of a more sustainable form of consumerism.



Fig. 10. Here we see WALL-E's enchantment with the characters in *Hello Dolly* holding hands to express love; WALL-E later tries on several occasions to garner the courage to express his love to EVE via the same physical gesture. The film's focus on *Hello Dolly* among WALL-E's items encourages forms of consumerism that inspire deep, meaningful emotion sentiment, rather than more superficial forms.