



“Mother! Where are you?”: Attachment, Hazard-precaution and Loss Simulation in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo*

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ABSTRACT

This BA project analyses Disney’s animated feature films *Bambi* (Alger, et al. 1942) and *Finding Nemo* (Stanton and Unkrich 2003) from an evolutionary perspective, exploring the adaptive mechanisms that underpin them. The heroes of Disney’s childhood favorites often must survive horrifying threats and traumatic losses. Through the lenses of attachment theory, children’s danger management, and evolutionary film theory, this paper argues that *Bambi* and *Nemo*’s cute and fragile appearances and loving relationships with their parents activate children’s biological urge for parental protection. The characters encounter threats that human children are adapted to avoid, but small children endure these scenes because they offer indirect experience with real-life fitness-threatening scenarios. Finally, while evolutionary theory and feminist theory are frequently considered at odds, I discuss how these two approaches in combination can explore the untraditional family patterns in *Finding Nemo*.

Keywords: Disney, attachment, foreign threats, evolutionary theory, theory of mind, children’s films, feminism.

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Introduction

Today the influence of media starts at an early age, and most people can barely imagine a world without their favorite childhood cartoon characters or the films they used to watch on repeat. Even though many childhood favorites are looked back on with fond memories, many of these films deal with sad and traumatic content. This is also a typical tendency in films by the Walt Disney Company. While Disney films usually have happy endings, the main characters must go through many highly traumatic and uncomfortable scenarios, frequently involving getting lost or losing a parent suddenly and dramatically. In Disney's *Tarzan* (Buck and Lima 1999), Tarzan's human parents are violently killed by a leopard in the beginning of the film, leaving Tarzan to be raised by gorillas, and in *Brother Bear* (Blaise and Walker 2003), the young bear Koda's mother is killed by the human boy Kenai. These are only a select few examples of the truly noteworthy amount of animated Disney films where the main character's parent(s) are killed, and the tendency repeats itself through the Walt Disney Company's many works. *Bambi* (Alger, et al. 1942) and *Finding Nemo* (Stanton and Unkrich 2003) are among the more harrowing examples of Disney films with the loss of a parent at the center of the narrative – and both films were the highest-grossing films of their respective release years (Brydon 2009, 132). One might expect that young children would avoid films with unnerving material, but that is not the case. Given the importance film and media have in even young children's lives, it is key to explore the appeal of films with sad material, the influence these films have, and the evolutionary purpose they serve.

Bambi and *Finding Nemo* depict helpless, childlike creatures in threatening, scary scenarios, and dangerous environments. Through attachment theory, children's hazard-precaution and evolutionary film theory, I argue that *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* activate young children's biological urge for parental protection and act as surrogate experiences for the loss of a parent, which prepares children for real world fitness-threatening situations.

Why an Evolutionary Approach to Fiction?

While studies in human evolution have uncovered many of the human brain's functional structures as well as explained common patterns in human behavior, evolutionary theory is still not frequently used as an analytical approach in the humanities. It conflicts with approaches such as feminism and literary Marxism because it claims that human behavior is made up of "underlying, psychological mechanisms" in combination with external inputs – and so, the groups and roles in society are not socially constructed (Buss and Schmitt 2011, 769). Evolutionary theory is interested in uncovering how the human mind is shaped by adaptations developed through natural selection, but human evolution is not only made up of adaptations developed by our ancestors in the Pleistocene. Grodal suggests bio-culturalism as a combination of old and new influences, noting that "some layers of

culture are determined by biological processes with a time horizon of millions of years whereas other layers may change fast” (2007a, 16). So why is evolutionary psychology useful in the humanities – especially in relation to fiction, which consists of made-up stories instead of real-life human experiences?

Films are pleasurable to humans because they “are often made to elicit strong emotional responses and may be based on stories and situations that activate innate emotional dispositions,” even though these dispositions may not be appropriate in a modern environment (Grodal 2009, 6). An evolutionary approach can therefore explain why certain films have immense emotional impact on the human mind. Joseph Carroll argues that literary Darwinism is especially useful in the humanities because it integrates several different fields of study, from paleoanthropology to personality psychology, and thus has an immense amount of knowledge to support it (2012, 129). Furthermore, dealing with fiction does not make evolutionary psychology an unsuitable approach, since made-up stories always stem from human imagination and experience. Stories typically revolve around central themes in human life, including survival, growing up and family life (2012, 141). The fact that these themes are reproduced repeatedly reveals that they are important concerns of the human mind, which makes them relevant to explore in depth.

Theoretical Framework

A mother and her offspring have an intense and unique bond. Few people dare deny this claim, yet many theorists have discussed what this bond is derived from and when it starts. According to psychoanalysis, the young child is attached to his or her mother, “because the mother feeds the child” (Bowlby 1970, 77). It was assumed that childhood bonds with a parent were linked with the child’s libido, a sexual relation. John Bowlby challenged this way of thinking by showing that parent-offspring attachment is biological rather than sexual. He proposed that “12-month-olds’ unmistakable attachment behavior is made up of a number of component instinctual responses that have the function of binding the infant to the mother and the mother to the infant” – clinging and following being the most important responses (Bretherton 1992, 762). These ideas make the foundation of Bowlby’s *attachment theory*, which is defined as a spatial theory, where both the child and the parent become uneasy and nervous whenever they are too far away from their loved one (Holmes 1993, 53). Mary Ainsworth, who is co-founder of attachment theory, describes this effect as “the secure base effect” where the young child experiences an invisible limit, when he or she ventures too far away from the parent (1993, 56). Importantly, Bowlby notes that the “original, biological purpose of the attachment system ... was *protection from predators*,” and even though few of the threats which our ancestors faced many years ago are relevant today, attachment still benefits the child’s fitness (1993, 50-51). The child’s innate urge for parental attachment and protection is essentially a matter of life and death,

so it makes sense that detachment from a parent is among the most central fears in young children's minds.

The assumption that detachment from a parent is a major fear in young children is supported by Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard, who attempt to explain children's innate fears as part of a system geared to detect and avoid inferred threats to their fitness (2006, 595). This system is named *the hazard-precaution system*. To avoid threats, children and adults develop ritualistic behavior, believing that specific behaviors will keep bad things from happening. While this paper does not deal with the complex study of ritualistic behavior, it is worth noting Boyer and Liénard's discoveries about the fears this behavior is meant to avoid. Young children's rituals are often connected to anxiety, revolving around the fear of animal attacks, strangers, or separation (2006, 597). Since these fears and anxieties change through the child's development, it is reasonable to assume that they are strongly connected to the evolutionary fitness of very young children, and that they become less relevant as children grow older, likely because small children lack the ability to defend themselves. Not only do young children have an innate system which triggers fear when faced with strangers or other threats, they also have a highly developed understanding of predator-prey encounters. While the modern-day, Western human child rarely has a reason to fear animals, children as young as three years old can predict and describe the outcome when a lion encounters a zebra (Barrett 2005, 210). Their ability to describe the outcome of this scenario also reveals that children understand death as a potential result of an encounter with a predator (Buss 2016, 90) That is, children have both an innate and sophisticated understanding of the vital importance of parental protection as well as the implications of the predator-prey dynamic.

So why do these theories about attachment and hazard-precaution matter regarding Disney's world of made-up stories? Denis Dutton and Joseph Carroll provide useful inputs that help explain the importance of fiction to human fitness. Just like any story told in prehistoric times, Disney films are about "human life – the desires, emotions calculations, struggles, frustrations, and pleasures that are the stuff of human experience" (Dutton 2009, 117). While many stories are not about real people, they are about characters overcoming realistic problems, "which means stories not only take their audiences into fictional setting, but also take them into the inner lives of imaginary people" (2009, 118). Around the age of three, children develop the ability to make inferences "about the beliefs and desires of other individuals," and this mechanism is often referred to as a "theory of mind" (Buss 2016, 399). This helps humans indirectly gain experience through other people's emotions and actions, which offers knowledge on how to tackle problems without having encountered them before. This also means that the make-believe play humans engage in from a young age is not just entertainment, but useful training. Grodal notes that "chase-play enables mammal offspring to train to hunt and to avoid being prey before being confronted with the real thing," which further explains the frequency of the predator-prey theme in many children's films (2007a, 17). The theory of

children’s fictional stories and films as behavioral and emotional training links well with Bowlby’s research on attachment. Alexander and her team conducted an experiment concerning young children’s attachment to stories. They reported that two children “cried with the same urgency every time they saw the hunters kill Bambi’s mother,” even though they knew the story well and kept requesting to watch it (2001, 387). That is, even though the children are aware that the story is not real – further emphasized by the fact that the main characters are animals – “they still may be reluctant to let go of the fantasy” (Anderson and Henderson 2005, 303). Indeed, Bowlby’s attachment theory, children’s hazard-precaution system, and storytelling as an adaptation are useful theories in combination, and can explain the appeal and evolutionary purpose of Disney cinema.

Bambi and Finding Nemo Through the Lens of Evolutionary Theory

How are attachment and hazard-precaution as adaptive functions exhibited in children’s films? As mentioned before, there are many different Disney films dealing with attachment and the loss of it – and this storyline is seen repeated from the earliest animated feature films to the latest Pixar animations. I analyze the Disney film *Bambi* and the Disney Pixar film *Finding Nemo* because of their shared themes of parent-offspring bonding and hunters as foreign threats, despite the large time gap between their individual release. Regardless of the films’ vast differences, which I also explore in this paper, they reflect young children’s universal fears of losing a parent, but also act as “mental-emotional experiments in dealing with attachment and hazard-precaution” which prepares children for real fitness-threatening situations (Grodal 2009, 30).

A Question of Cuteness – Attachment in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo*

While the major themes in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* concern existential matters of life and death, much of the films’ appeal to children stem in their images of fragile cuteness. *Bambi* opens with tranquil images of a dense, green forest inhabited by different animal species, all gathering to welcome the new “Prince of the Forest” into the world. The newborn Bambi is lying close to his mother, stealing curious but careful looks at the cheerful forest animals surrounding them. The studio strived for scenic realism in *Bambi*, where real “deer fawns were brought to the studio for artists to study” (Payne 1995, 138). However, Bambi’s features are extreme compared to those of a real deer fawn, and this certainly has an effect on a young audience. The young deer has exaggerated, childlike features, including cute, oversized eyes and a big head in relation to his body. Furthermore, he struggles to stand without falling over, showing inadequate motor skills. Grodal explains that these neotenus features are often seen in characters aimed at young children, adding that they “strongly enforce the strong innate disposition to care for neonates” – a capacity present in both adults and

children (2009, 29). These reactions to cuteness are not merely young children's imitations of their parents' reactions, but rather a way of developing "mental models of parental care," supporting their experiences of attachment to a parent (2009, 30). Similar observations can be made from *Finding Nemo*. Although the wildlife featured in the film is clearly based on real animals, the young clownfish Nemo has human-like facial features, including round, over-sized eyes, a big, smiling mouth, and eyebrows. These features not only give Nemo and other sea creatures the ability to express human emotions through facial expressions; they also give Nemo the cute-factor necessary "to secure young viewer's identification with [him]" (Whitley 2014, 217).

The films not only express experiences of attachment through their cute and fragile characters, but also from their relationships with main caregivers. In the early scenes of *Bambi*, Bambi is careful to stay close to his mother, and he only explores his surroundings under careful supervision of other animals in the forest. This behavior is in tune with Bowlby's definition of attachment as a spatial theory, where the child will not venture out beyond a certain limit. An interesting note is the role of Bambi's father, referred to as "The Great Prince of the Forest." During the nativity scene, the silhouette of the father is seen looking stoically over the forest, taking no part in the birth of his son. Even though the forest is filled with different animal families, the mothers are usually nurturing and caring. Conversely, "the fathers in the film are revered although they take minimal part in raising the children" (Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca 2015, 1969). For example, the rabbit Thumper is frequently reprimanded by his mother, who often makes him recite wise words from his father, but the father is never shown. According to Buss, "females are far more likely than males to care for their offspring," which is a tendency seen throughout the animal kingdom (2016, 196). While this choice in *Bambi* can be seen as mimicking the real-life dynamics between parents and offspring in nature, these visions also support young children's attachment to – especially – mothers, who in most cases invest more in the fitness of their children in comparison to fathers.

Although mothers are portrayed as the main caregivers in *Bambi*, this is not a typical tendency in *Finding Nemo* and in Disney cinema in general. Like in many other Disney films, such as *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise 1991) and *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker 1989), the main character's central parental figure is the father, but in *Finding Nemo* the relationship between father and offspring is especially central and detailed. The opening scene features the clownfish couple Marlin and Coral, who have just moved into an anemone with hundreds of tiny eggs. While both parents are eager to start a family life, Coral is especially caring towards their future children. When asked what to name their children, Marlin is indifferent, suggesting that they name "this side Marlin Junior and this side Coral Junior," whereas Coral states that she likes the name Nemo. While Brydon proposes that Marlin does not do any less parenting than Coral, she notes that Marlin appears to distance himself from the role as a father, "pointing to a perceived unnaturalness of his parenting" (2009, 138). Moments later, when the couple spots a barracuda silently staring at them, Marlin does

not express worry about the safety of their eggs, but wants to protect Coral. Unlike him, Coral immediately attempts to save the eggs, leading to the death of herself and all but one of the eggs. While in *Bambi* the viewer gets a sense of the emotional bond between the titular character and his mother through the scenes picturing his early life, in *Finding Nemo*, the protagonist never gets to meet his mother, but the sense of pain and attachment remains. The fragility of the small egg, now with a crack in the shell, makes Nemo appear even smaller and more in need of protection – a responsibility now in the hands of a father who moments before appeared to provide less parental care than his female partner.

After Coral's death, Marlin takes on the role of the overprotective parent who dislikes not having his offspring nearby. While some of Marlin's physical interaction with Nemo is through play, "he also is shown cradling Nemo's face in his fins, grooming him, holding his fin on the 'streets' of the reef, and so forth" (Brydon 2009, 139). Like in Bowlby's attachment theory, Marlin is nervous about the prospect of Nemo starting school (where Nemo must be away from him), eagerly suggesting that he should stay at home for another year. While Nemo is initially annoyed by his father's overprotectiveness, he becomes nervous when his new friends dare him to swim into open water. Moreover, when a diver catches him, he still frequently calls for his father in a scared voice. Whenever Nemo senses that his life is in jeopardy, he desperately calls for his father, even when it has been established that Marlin is nowhere nearby. These scenes showing a young, childlike character detached from his parent mirror young children's innate knowledge about parents as a secure base, and the consequence of wandering beyond this base is made clear by the results of Nemo's rebellious behavior.

Films like *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* have parental attachment as a central theme, and the viewer indirectly experiences this attachment through visions of young, fragile creatures and their caring parents. That is, the vital importance of parent-offspring attachment is made apparent, but *Finding Nemo* also challenges the traditional image of attachment (with mothers as the main provider of care) known from films like *Bambi*. But why do these films have such an appeal? To shed light on the appeal of these attachment films, Grodal explains that "sorrow and grief are innate adaptations related to creating social cohesion and emphasizing the importance of attachment" (2007b, 101). That is, humans have evolved adaptations aimed at keeping people interested in stories about attachment, and such an interest is important to the fitness of Disney's primary audience – children.

From Bullets to Deathly Bites – Threats to Fitness in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo*

In the previous section I examined the evolutionary purpose of images of fragile, cute creatures and their relationship with their parents, but hazards and foreign threats play important roles in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* as well. In both films, the main character grows up in an environment with danger lurking around every tree or coral reef, and these threats are emphasized frequently. The main parental

figures are protective of their children, making effort to keep the young ones out of harm's way, but with significantly different outcomes and effects. In the following I analyze the portrayal of dangers in *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* in relation to children's hazard-precaution system, exploring the appeal of children's films with scary and uncomfortable material.

Bambi draws a line between perceived threats and actual, life-threatening dangers in nature. After Bambi's day of exploration, Bambi looks curiously at the raindrops falling outside, followed by the non-diegetic sound of the song "Little April Showers." The rain quickly intensifies and develops into a thunderstorm as the music becomes louder and more dramatic. Bambi, clinging to his mother and hiding his face, is terrified, mirroring how young children are often scared of thunderstorms. Conversely, when Bambi's mother takes him to the meadow in the summer, he excitedly runs towards the meadow, but his mother quickly stops him, explaining: "You must never rush out on the meadow. There might be danger." During these two consecutive scenes, the forest is shown as a place filled with danger, but whereas thunder is not truly hazardous, Bambi is unaware of the true threats found on the meadow. As signs of hunters appear on the meadow, Bambi gets lost from his mother and exposed to danger. Bambi's father runs towards him and helps him away from the meadow, barely escaping shots fired from an off-screen rifle. In this way, the film confirms the true danger of the forest, namely hunters. Interestingly, there appears to be no signs of animal predators, and the nonpredatory deer rule the forest (Payne 1995, 141). Grodal notes that "children's stories deal with vital mammalian concerns: to cope with attachment in jeopardy and to master the roles of hunter and prey" – the role of prey being the focus in *Bambi* (2007b, 103). While this notion supports the view of *Bambi* as a powerful anti-hunting film, it also emphasizes the importance of getting to know your surroundings and learning how to tackle hunters and predators.

At this point I have touched on many aspects of *Bambi* concerning attachment and hazard-precaution without having discussed what is arguably its most iconic and memorable scene – the scene where the mother dies. King notes that for many children, "that killing (off-screen by a hunter's rifle shot) was their first vivid encounter with the reality of death and separation, ranking among the top collective early childhood traumas," and it is not hard to understand why (1996, 62). After barely surviving a long, cold winter in the forest, Bambi and his mother finally discover fresh spring grass on the meadow. When the mother notices the hunters in the forest, Bambi barely manages to escape to the thicket, but the mother does not return. In the following shot, Bambi appears more tiny and vulnerable than ever, shown in a long shot against the enormous, dark forest covered in snow. The viewer does not get to see the hunter or the mother's dead body, instead "the loss is shown through visual symbolism" made even clearer through the melancholy background music and Bambi's woeful calling for his mother (Hastings 1996, 54). According to Boyer and Liénard's observations on children's hazard-precaution, detachment from a parent is among young children's most powerful fears because of its immediate threat to their fitness. This is portrayed vividly in *Bambi*, where the

young deer loses his mother during the bitter, cold winter, when his survival is most at stake. In this scene, all the most pressing threats to children culminate all at once: dangerous strangers, threatening environments, and the loss of a parent. As previously discussed, young children are drawn to *Bambi* though the film scares and upsets them. Given the film's immense popularity, the pleasure of consuming uncomfortable material must serve a beneficial purpose. Evolutionary psychology offers the explanation that "stories with content linked to high order goals central for survival should mobilize mental functions that override reactions of avoidance created by painful events, and integrate such negative experiences into larger narrative patterns" (Grodal 2007b, 102). Since many of the unpleasant themes in *Bambi* in general (and in the death scene in particular) are linked to survival, young viewers can cope with these painful visions because doing so ultimately benefits their own fitness.

While *Finding Nemo* deals with many of the same hazards that *Bambi* deals with, Pixar uses them in a different way. Whereas *Bambi's* mother dies two thirds into the film as a way of validating the survival training which the young deer goes through, Coral's death takes place in the very first scene of *Finding Nemo*. The barracuda which kills Coral and the eggs has many of the characteristics that trigger antipredator responses in both children and adults. The barracuda has its gaze pointed directly at Marlin and Coral, a cue that prompts antipredator responses in other species, and likely also in humans (Barrett 2005, 208). When Marlin first spots the barracuda, it is shown in long shot against the ocean, its dark body almost indistinguishable. Up close it has rows of sharp, white teeth, moments later seen snapping repeatedly at Marlin. Even though teeth are rarely a relevant threat to modern humans, teeth are a common fear in many narratives, which suggests that "the fear of teeth is ... probably supported by an innate adaptation" (Grodal 2007a, 19). Within its first five minutes, the film plays heavily on young viewers' hazard defenses, and even though Coral and the eggs are eaten off-screen, the ocean still appears to be a dangerous, threatening place.

On the basis of the sad and scary opening scene, *Finding Nemo* goes on to discuss foreign threats through the nervous and overprotective Marlin. When Marlin and Nemo exit the anemone, Marlin asks his son what the most important thing to know about the ocean is. Nemo answers: "It's not safe." The two swim through the coral reef, which mimics an urban neighborhood in human society with busy, dangerous traffic. Rather than triggering hazard-precaution mechanisms, Marlin's perceived dangers have a humorous effect, and the clownfish appears paranoid to the viewer. Marlin communicates many of the central fears in young children, including the loss of a parent, getting lost, and foreign threats. However, many of these perceived threats are proven to be less dangerous than first anticipated by him. On his search for Nemo, Marlin and his new friend Dory encounter three sharks – sea creatures often portrayed as bloodthirsty predators. While these sharks have many of the same cues triggering anti-predator responses as the barracuda, the sharks do not intend to eat the fish, but want to partake in a vegetarian lifestyle. Likewise, when a whale swallows Marlin and Dory,

Marlin is certain that they will not survive, but the whale instead helps the fish on land in Sydney. Whereas the hunters introduced in *Bambi* cause Bambi's mother's death along with the deaths of many other animals, *Finding Nemo* plays on the viewer's adaptations to survival. When dramatic music plays in the background as Nemo is caught by a human, the trauma is linked to Nemo's detachment from Marlin, not the human as a predator. Ironically, the most urgent threat to Nemo's survival is the dentist's spoiled niece Darla, an antagonist that challenges the viewer's perception of danger.

Young viewers are invested in a story like *Finding Nemo* because of its visions of threatening predators with sharp teeth, which are cues triggering children's innate adaptations supporting the fear of being eaten. Thus, both *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* appeal to young children because of their themes dealing with vital threats to fitness, but *Finding Nemo* also creates a sharp contrast between innate fears and actual threats to survival.

A Lesson to Learn: The Adaptive Functions of *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo*

Disney films, with their captivating storylines and loveable characters, not just function as entertaining time-killers; they also serve important adaptive functions that can be highly useful in the real world. When literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall asked his students why they like stories, they answered that they give them pleasure, but popular children's stories revolve around scenarios that are far from pleasurable (2013, 48). Both *Bambi* and *Nemo* experience temporary or permanent detachment from a parent, and the pain and trauma associated with these losses are not only experienced by the fictional characters, but also by the viewer to an extent. Through his or her *theory of mind*, the viewer can relate to the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the characters, so stories ultimately offer "low-cost, low-risk surrogate experience" (Dutton 2009, 110).

Children's films not only give children the opportunity to indirectly experience serious trauma; they also offer a range of different choices about behavior, if audiences should find themselves in a similar situation in the real world. Although *Bambi* is taught the importance of staying close to his mother, he ultimately must take care of himself after her death, and this resonates with the viewer. While the scene where *Bambi* is alone in the snow seems long and painful, the film does not dwell on his tragic experience for long. When *Bambi*'s father finds him to tell him of his mother's passing, the music is gloomy and the screen fades to black, but the sorrowful atmosphere is immediately followed by cheerful music and the sound of birds chirping happily in the spring. Moments later, the heartbroken, young *Bambi* has been exchanged with an adolescent, happy, and strong *Bambi*, who does not seem weighed down by his mother's passing. Instead, he goes on to find a partner, save her from a forest fire, and continue his father's legacy. The vision of *Bambi*'s sadness and pain associated with the loss of his mother emphasizes the importance of parental attachment, but the joyful, adult *Bambi* shows that it is possible to cope with this loss and move on from it.

Similar to how Bambi must continue his life without the support of his mother, Nemo must tackle problems of a completely different nature than those Marlin has taught him to avoid. Whereas Marlin faces the dangers of the sea – from scary sharks to hungry seagulls – Nemo learns how to independently handle trouble such as getting stuck in an air ventilator or being gifted to a little girl prone to accidentally killing her pets. These threats to survival are very different from the threats humans have evolved adaptations to avoid, so rather than being an instruction manual on how to handle these specific dangers, *Finding Nemo* is a mental-emotional experiment on how to cope with challenging situations. The fact that the main characters are animals makes the film no less relevant from an evolutionary perspective. The animals and their surroundings are exciting and exotic, making them more salient in the mind of a young viewer, but “animals in stories ... are invariably stand-ins for human beings” (Dutton 2009, 115-117). Carroll notes that the most important psychological function of stories “is to serve as instruments of subjective orientation – orientation in attitudes, emotional responses, values and beliefs” (2006, 43). That is, *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* offer means of practicing how to cope with painful or challenging situations in a risk-free way, and children’s ability to put surrogate experiences like these to use can ultimately benefit their fitness.

Room for Feminism? A Discussion of the Possibilities and Limitations of Evolutionary Film Theory

This paper has explored how *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* activate young children’s innate adaptations and dispositions through evolutionary film theory, but what are the potentials of evolutionary theory in combination with very different approaches? Evolutionary theory and feminist theory are frequently considered mutually exclusive in their approaches to popular culture. Even though evolutionary theory and feminism may never agree on whether gender roles are enforced by the patriarchy, these two approaches may not be so incompatible. By comparing different stances on the debate, I argue that these two differing approaches can help shed light on the human condition in combination. Although I have chosen to represent each field with just one scholar, I acknowledge that a single person cannot fully represent the views and attitudes of an entire field of study.

Evolutionary behavioral scientist Gad Saad makes claims against the scientific use of feminist theory in his article “Nothing in Popular Culture Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution.” By referring to examples of popular proverbs and song lyrics, he states that these examples portray a “universal truth” about male and female mating strategies from an evolutionary perspective (2012, 112). While evolutionary theory can explain many common phenomena about human behavior, uncritically referring to scattered observations as universal truths is problematic, as it fails to consider the numerous exceptions to these observations. Saad argues that the advantage of evolutionary theory is its ability to explain human behavior through thousands of years. He calls an approach such as

feminism an “anti-science approach” because it is bound to a certain time or culture (2012, 115). From a feminist perspective, evolutionary theory is at risk of essentializing the most common patterns in human behavior, leaving little room for individual differences and socialization regarding gender roles. Susan Franzblau argues that Bowlby’s attachment theory is especially problematic because it naturalizes, romanticizes, and conceals oppression of women, who might not feel the urge to become mothers (2002, 93-110). She argues that evolutionary theory’s tendency to make broad generalizations can ultimately limit the potential for change in society. That is, evolutionary approaches are viewed as “antithetical to political goals” (Buss and Schmitt 2011, 770). So, in what way can these ostensibly opposite stances meet?

Although I have demonstrated how common tendencies in *Finding Nemo* and *Bambi* can be explained through evolutionary film theory, there are also aspects that could be illuminated from a feminist approach – especially when it comes to the roles parents fill in the films. The parents in *Bambi* match evolutionary psychology’s predictions on parents’ willingness to invest in children, but that is not the case in *Finding Nemo*, a much more recent film. Grodal attempts to explain Marlin’s role as a single father through an increase in the divorce rate, making fatherly care more probable (2007a, 20). However, after Coral’s death, Marlin encounters several caring fathers, but no mothers, which illustrates a society where nurturing paternal figures are the norm. Whereas Grodal proposes that Nemo’s struggle for reattachment with his father indirectly becomes a search for a new mother in Dory, it is worth noting that Dory is much less nurturing and maternal than Marlin (2007a, 20). Brydon notes that Marlin’s “mothering” appears natural, and his nurturing behavior is not questioned in any way, which can potentially help normalize fathers’ engagement with children (2009, 142). Even though it may be true that the diverse and politically correct family patterns in *Finding Nemo* can be a result of the changing family patterns in modern society, the film does not demonstrate these “universal truths” that Saad claims can be found everywhere in popular culture. Instead, the film illustrates a break with those traditional family structures that are at risk of being naturalized by evolutionary theory. Where Saad denies the potential of a feminist approach because it is bound to a certain culture or time, I propose that evolutionary theory is useful in combination with such approaches because popular culture is always a product of its own time. Where evolutionary film theory can identify and explain how shared behavioral tendencies are visible in a film such as *Finding Nemo*, feminist theory can explore and discuss those individual differences that characterize the film’s specific time and place. Studies in human evolution have offered invaluable additions to psychology, but it is important to keep a critical eye. Despite their differences, evolutionary film theory and feminist theory are not mutually exclusive, but offer complementary ways of understanding the popular culture produced by the human mind.

Conclusion

“Mother! Where are you?” When the image of the cold and fragile Bambi mournfully calling for his mother resonates with a viewer, theories of evolutionary psychology can help explain why this type of tragic material has such an immense appeal – especially to young children. Children respond strongly to images of cute and clumsy animals and their relationship with their parents because these visions target evolved adaptations for attachment to parents (and in *Bambi*’s case, especially mothers). While the cute and fragile characters encounter many different types of fitness-threatening situations – from cynical hunters to scary barracudas – the viewer endures these unpleasant scenes because doing so helps them practice the dynamics of hunter and prey, a vital skill throughout human evolution. From an evolutionary perspective, children can gain surrogate experience on how to tackle a crisis by following Bambi and Nemo through their ups and downs. Humans have evolved adaptations to avoid sharp teeth and staring eyes in the dark, and *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* act as mental-emotional experiments, enabling children to test their evolved adaptations, vicariously try out unexpected challenges, and, importantly, experience their most feared scenario: losing their mother or father.

As shown, evolutionary film theory offers explanations for many common tendencies in popular culture such as Disney films, but aspects like gender roles in Disney can benefit from also being explored from a feminist perspective. While evolutionary theory and feminist theory may always be considered polar opposites by some, I suggest that evolutionary film theory has room for an approach that discusses and questions gender roles through the lens of the specific place and time, which films like *Bambi* and *Finding Nemo* are products of. However, with or without the inputs of feminism, evolutionary film theory remains a useful approach for understanding how the most beloved Disney favorites can emotionally influence children in the present and possibly affect their behavior in the future.

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