

A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Bambi* as a Symbol of Ecological Narrative



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Abstract: *Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach for analyzing, understanding, and explaining the social phenomenon. It studies relationships among human beings, their established social systems and investigates their complex social behavior. CDA provides solutions to the problems of inequalities and disparities that affect social and cultural life of the individuals or groups in a social setup. This research paper aims to explore how human beings make their linguistic choices in the context of social and communal ties as well as personal relationships with their physical environment. This is done by studying an animated film “Bambi”, a famous Walt Disney production. The paper also investigates the social forces that communicate behavioral outcomes associated with the interface of power and ideology. The researchers also aim to explore context of fundamental social human interaction through language and images that unfold reality behind the narrative of animated film.*

Keywords: Animated Story, Dark Reality, Ideological Power, Communication, Socio-Political Disorder

Introduction

It has been observed that children and adults are fascinated by the stories presented in animated feature films and texts, for example, Disney stories.

Cartoon stories make their audience wonder about beautiful landscapes filled with amazing and amusing characters, mythical objects, muses, witches and their magical works and still make people of all ages watch animated films and read their storybooks as well. And ‘Bambi’ is not only a symbol of environmental discourse but also a resource of data for Ecolinguistics.



Stibbe (2014) argues that Ecolinguistics broadens the scope of CDA by merging with how discourse affects non-human beings, ecological systems, and human generations. The Researchers view Bambi as a subject of Ecolinguistics as well. The language used by the different animated characters is always found to be simple, polite, and imaginatively vivid. The plain language and colorful images always attract the attention of every beholder possessing a sense of sight. In stories like “Bambi”, there are morphological components, terminologies and ideologies; for example, Bambi learning to walk is a metaphor that refers to the struggle, hardship and future challenges of life for a young fawn (Literary Devices, 2024). These characteristic parts can be taken as empirical sources for critical analysis of unfolding historical, emotional and sociocultural traditions of the time, established social practices and cultural beliefs.

Walt Disney animated films paved a path for audiences to think out of the box, indirectly emphasizing changing arrogant and abnormal socio-political behaviors that caused humanity, nature, environment and wildlife irreparable destruction by two horrific World Wars; their obsession with hunting and show of power has caused environmental damage as well (Anderson, 2011). Instead, it is stimulated to opt for rituals like spreading love, forgiveness, and kindness to all that breathe on the face of the earth. This holds a unique but fundamental trait for all human beings to establish as one of the important human traits.

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Rationale of the Study

People all over the world and children in particular are usually fascinated by animated movies. However, it is generally taken as the stories of a virtual world. There is a need to connect them to real-world affairs for wellbeing and awareness of people on the face of the Earth. The logical basis of this study is how language is used through animated features to make people think about the benefits and beauties of nature and wildlife, and how some human groups exploit Earth's resources, causing irreparable destruction such as deforestation that not only destroys animal habitat but also causes floods and erosion, which is observed to be natural by common people. And the beneficiaries are usually wood and gun manufacturing industries, consequently leading humankind to establish greater weaponry industries in the world. These issues produce a strong rationale for researchers to target the content of the movie through CDA.

Research Questions

1. How does *Bambi* work as a symbol of ecological narrative?
2. What are the meanings of *Bambi* beyond its symbol in the ecological perspective?

Literature Review

CDA is an interdisciplinary approach for discourse analysis. There are certain eminent scholars whose theories, models or frameworks pave the path for analytical studies. For example, van Dijk's theory of the Socio-Cognitive Model, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (2013), and Foucault's model of discourse analysis. Van Dijk's theory proposes that "critical discourse analysis studies social power abuse and dominance", and inequalities produced in social and political contexts. Fairclough's theory of Discourse Analysis (DA) presents economic and political parameters for investigating CDA and suggests three dimensions for analyzing a text and talk.

Among the existing recognized CDA theories, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional (3D) Model focuses on three important aspects of discourse analysis: textual analysis, discursive practices and social practices. Linguistic parameters and scales fall in the domain of text analysis. Fairclough says that we study discourse to look at three things mentioned earlier. (van Dijk, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2014).

However, Van Dijk (2004) proposed seven dimensions as theoretical approaches that are methods for critical discourse analysis:

1. For Critical Discourse Analysis, language data is drawn from "naturally occurring language used by real language users" in real-life situations, talks or discussions, written or spoken text.
2. It focuses on "larger units than isolated words and sentences".
3. It investigates "beyond sentence and grammar".
4. It pays central attention to non-verbal text, e.g., gestures, images, film and so on.
5. CDA is applied for investigating social cognition, behavior, and sentences.
6. It is applied for examining and determining "the functions of contexts of language use" on the parameters of "social, cultural, situative and cognitive grounds".
7. CDA is also applied for finding out the vast number of social abnormal ties with text grammar and language use such as "coherence, anaphora, topics, rhetoric, mental models, speech acts" and so on and so forth (van Dijk, 2004; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2014).

Foucault's model of discourse analysis is based on "power and knowledge". His idea that power is everywhere radically departs from known modes of conceiving power; rather, he challenges known power-conceiving ideas and says that power is managed and controlled by "people or groups or sovereign acts of domination" in coercive and pervasive ways. For example, corruption is so pervasive in Pakistan that it has seeped into every governmental organization and institution, and has become a complex phenomenon for law to counter at every level (Khan, 2016). Therefore, in this sense, his idea that "power is everywhere and comes from everywhere" is neither an agency nor a structure, but rather a social practice (Foucauldian

discourse analysis Wikipedia) and truth, which constantly seeps into a society and manages society's behavior. Hence, power is legalized through accepted norms, scientific understanding and truth, and Foucault terms these relationships of power with knowledge. Power and knowledge, according to him, are woven together; both elements are connected to each other organically and cannot be separated. His discourse theory focuses on four major questions.

1. What is valid knowledge keeping place and time in a concise way?
2. How did knowledge arise and how is it transmitted?
3. What functions constitute the subject of Discourse Analysis?
4. What consequences of discourse shape and develop a society?

Foucault's theory of knowledge refers to all kinds of subjects that construct human consciousness, all kinds of meanings that people understand for communication and to shape social behavior, cultural norms, and the environment. Foucault's theory of knowledge also refers to being flexible and imaginative, for which he has posed the above four questions and a methodology for which discursive practices and non-discursive practices can be laboratory test samples as knowledge (dispositive); for example, we can get a great picture and knowledge when we read these three printed words: 'it affected settlement'. He suggests a methodology for extracting dispositive (knowledge) from discursive and non-discursive practices by saying that "if you want an image, think of a network of scaffolding that functions as a point of relay between a project being concluded and a new one. Thus, I don't construct a general method of definitive value for myself or for others. What I write does not prescribe anything, neither to myself nor for others. At most, its character is instrumental and visionary or dreamlike" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 58). The authors aim to identify the knowledge contained in discourse and 'dispositive', and how this knowledge is rigidly connected to power relations in power/knowledge complexes. Discourse and dispositive analyses study and interpret the workings of power/knowledge to critique.

Methodology

The research in hand is qualitative in nature. It's, in fact, the CDA of an animated movie, *Bambi*. The content of the movie has been analyzed quite carefully in view of the theoretical framework furnished by Fairclough (1995). It may also be tagged as communicative discourse analysis, parallel to the theoretical framework proposed by Fairclough's 3D model, which is as follows: -

- Text analysis through an image, speech, writing or combination of all. (stage of description)
- Expansion stage of text analysis through discursive practices present in the text (interpretation)
- Production of social analysis and problem-solving stage from the perspective of social practices.

The model suggests three ways of analyzing discourse, for example, talks, discussions, or any written or spoken texts. They are: *The Speech Act Model*, *The Expansion Model*, and *The Problem-Solving Model*.

Speech Act Model

It **examines** the context of what we say or write. It explains the factors behind the speech made through its structure, utterances, actions, and consequences. The Speech Act is the utterance that serves the purpose of communication, for example, greetings, complaints, refusals, invitations, commands, emotions and so on, which are meaningful linguistic expressions.

The Expansion Model

It is an essential part of text analysis. Here, text means verbal and non-verbal expressions. It proposes using background knowledge of texts and authors. Complete sentences and their sequences are expanded, and concrete content analysis is produced. Despite being a complete investigation approach, the model has made an important contribution to linguistic research studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, 2016).

The Problem-Solving Model

It refers to the highly appreciated aspect of research. It is the central aim of scientific studies. It helps in disclosing the dominant social trends, challenges, social orders, and disorders, and subsequently provides solutions (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, 2016).

Data Collections

As there are many versions of Bambi, the data for this paper has been taken from Internet Archive. The story has its own historical realities because of which it was picked up for CDA. Data for discourse analysis is collected from Walt Disney's animated film production on YouTube (1942), books online and Wikipedia. This story has been chosen because, firstly, it is very famous and widely watched; secondly, it helps convey to readers that such classic animated films communicate sensitivity of the subject matter and leave a lasting impact on the minds of viewers and readers.

Discussion and Analysis

"Bambi" is one of the classics of Disney, released in 1942. Bambi is a fawn whose mother is killed by hunters for leisure and is the main subject of the narrative. The animated film draws the attention of its audience towards human brutality, injustice, and the habit of intruding on others' land and destroying the peace of other living beings on earth. The context of the film is that if human beings go on hunting wild animals for leisure, sports and food, then a time will come when they will be left with cats, dogs, rats, and pigs, etc., to have as their food. Hunting and killing of wild animals is presented as a crime and a threat to the environment. Threat to the environment means that wild animals are the guardians of forests, and if they are made extinct, then forests will go extinct as well.



The release date of Bambi also draws our attention towards the effects of world wars on life, earth and environment, and communicates a great message to human beings about who are the most affected ones in their wars: children, mothers and animals, who have nothing to do with their madly fighting with each other using swords, daggers, guns and bombs (Britannica). Killing of wild animals is portrayed to be a crime, and loving or honoring wildlife is encouraged for peace and comfort.

Symbolism in Bambi

Bambi is a symbol of innocent animals in wild woods, children, and women, who become the victims of ruthless hunters and wild wars. The researchers hypothesize that Bambi's mother's death is also related to the "symbolic elements". Symbolic references refer to things that represent something else. They are usually signs, colors, objects, or actions conveying deeper and hidden meanings. For example, a white dove with a little olive branch in its beak can mean peace, and a skeleton of a human face can mean danger. These images do help us in understanding the idea and feeling behind these images without using words. Similarly, the image of Bambi takes researchers to the larger "cultural ideologies and assumptions" about death and trauma that usually resonate with many human communities around the world. In doing so, it also "demonstrates how audiences communicate through visual medium the trauma of viewing animated death" (Cox, Garrett, & Graham, 2005).

It is always a traumatic experience for a young one whose parents are killed. This can cause more psychological illness in adulthood (Freud, 1953). Felix Salten (1922), the author of original novel 'Bambi' insisted that he wrote Bambi "to educate naive readers about nature as it really is: a place where life is always contingent on death, where starvation, competition, and predation are the norms. And Schulz puts "that motive did not make Salten go easy on human beings". For him novel is darker than we think and adds on

by saying, “*The original book is far grislier than the beloved Disney classic—and has an unsettling message about humanity*” (Schulz, 2022).

Bambi is an animated but beautiful production of Disney World. It is a story of a white-tailed deer, a noble prince of the wood, who is committed to protecting and defending the creatures of his forest. His princess doe gives birth to a male fawn prince whom he names ‘Bambi.’ *Bambi* makes friends while exploring the forest: “a rabbit Thumper, a skunk named Flower and a beautiful young doe Faline”. The parents of *Bambi* warn him about great danger in the open meadows because hunters can easily spot animals and kill them (Wikipedia, 2020). The plot of ‘Bambi’ communicated that animals’ lives are as precious as human lives. They are not born to be hunted and killed brutally. Losing a mother for a baby animal is as traumatic as it is for a human child. Destroying animals’ homes (forests) is a horrendous act of human beings and is equal to animals’ genocide as well. With this understanding, the author opted to voice for animals’ rights protection and forest protection.

Owl, Symbol of Change

One of the most adorable characters in *Bambi*, apart from the rabbit, Flower, Mrs. Rabbit, and Mr. Owl, who is old, wise, grumpy and a close friend of the royals (Bambi and his parents). It lives in the woods and has been portrayed as a mentor of all animals. It counsels Bambi, Thumper and Flower about the fragility of life. It also guides them about the appropriate opportunities to be romantic once they become adults (Bambi Wiki Fandom). Owl is depicted as the symbol of inner wisdom, which is regarded as a bird of wisdom in Western culture. An owl was associated with dark spirits throughout the cultural history of the world. People linked it with death and despair. Edward Howe in 1993 said that *since the dawn of history, owls have been the pitiable victims of ignorance and superstition, hated, despised, and feared by many peoples. Only their nocturnal habits have enabled them to survive in the company of civilized man. In the minds of mankind, they have been linked with witches and malignant evil spirits, or even have been believed to personify the Evil One* (Long, 1998). However, Walt Disney attempted to change the old wholesome stature and concept of the owl. He portrayed the owl as a symbol of wisdom and knowledge.



Thumper, The Rabbit

Symbol of mannerism, an obedient child of parents who consciously tries to follow principles of discipline taught by its parents. Through Thumper, the author of the story draws the audience’s attention, who are mostly children, to the importance of eating fresh vegetables necessary for growing healthy and strong. Children do not like eating vegetables. And it is difficult for mothers to make their kids love eating vegetables. Thumper’s dialogue, “eating green is a special treat. It makes long ears and great feet”, makes children and the audience love eating green vegetables and contemplate accordingly. The author of narration also draws the audience's attention to the importance of greenery, for which the presentation of lush green forests and beautiful meadows has been given special attention. Undoubtedly, contemplation can play its role until they reach adulthood.

Thumper’s mother, Mrs. Rabbit, is found disciplining him and minds him every time she feels that he needs to be corrected. For example, she reminds him when she finds him talking unnecessarily and asks him to repeat what his father advised him. Thumper replies, “If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all.” Though “nothing” is an intensifier and is applied when one wants to express something with higher force or intensity. And the use of the intensifier “nothing” leaves an impact on those people who are very talkative but use unkind language for others as well.

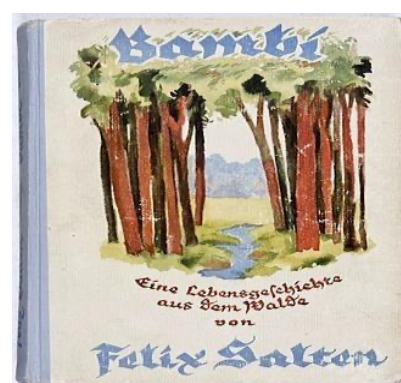
Vocabulary Building through Fictional Characters

Stephen Krashen (2017) shares with his readers the blunt advice of Kaufman, who says, *“Do not spend time in a vain attempt to master the language from grammar rules and word lists. You will not enjoy this tedious form of study, and it will not work.”* ‘Reading is fresh comprehensible input’. We see that there is no deliberate grammar correction attempted but we learn the meaning of word “thumping” through rabbits action that makes us realize beating one’s foot swiftly on ground many times is an act of “thumping”, known as verb in English language and adding a suffix “er” by removing “ing” at the end of word “thump” becomes a noun. A male rabbit “Thumper” is known and named for thumping his left foot. Skunk, the tritagonist, was in a flower bed when the fawn “Bambi” mistakes Skunk for one and names him “Flower” accidentally. Until the end of the movie, Skunk is known as Flower, who also meets a friend, “Thumper.” Friend Owl appears to be humble, polite, caring, and grumpy, and close to the royal family of the forest (Bambi, his mother, and the Great Prince of the Forest). He is incredibly cheerful most of the time and stays friendly with all other animals in the forest. The killing of Bambi’s mother gave birth to the ideology of animal rights, which has emerged in the current Modern time as “Animal Rights Matter”. It highlights the need for legal measures to save them from being killed and spreading awareness among the masses of the world that their right to exist cannot be usurped and their right to life is not in the hands of mankind. They have equal rights to live on earth in the same way human beings think about themselves and their rights of existence. The concept of cutting down trees and reducing forests to plain land became a crime on the legal borders. The context of the theme was a display of displeasure with human behavior that intrudes on the forests’ space and disrespects wildlife. It reflected the beliefs, interests, and values of a society towards free natural bounties in the 19th century. There were no laws for curbing or banning animal killing in the political, social, and governmental systems. Today we see so many beautiful wild animals gone by instinct. There is another context under the surface of “Bambi”, and that is when humans will love, respect animals’ habitats and will ban hunting of animals and birds, then Earth will once again be a beautiful, healthy, and peaceful planet.



Historical Background “Bambi”

It is reported that the original novel “Bambi”, written by Felix Salten, *A Life in the Woods*, is completely different. It is a narrative that postulates about “survival in your own home” and has much darker, invisible, and visible sights and sides of that time, 1923 (Bambi Wikipedia). The other aspect behind the story is that animals are born to be killed and there is no other choice for them (Ferguson, 2021). However, if we explore the pages of history, we observe the horrendous consequences of World Wars I and II before and after ‘Bambi.’ This was rewritten and produced as a Disney film by Walt Disney and redefined the status of every newborn as a prince or princess/boy or girl, born in any family, either a human family or an animal family.



Also, there are reports on the internet that the first bomb dropped into Germany in World War I landed on Berlin Zoo, killing an elephant. The loss of the natural living environment was huge, where forests became battlefields. Rabbits and squirrels were hunted relentlessly for food, and until the end of the wars, the wildlife had no chance to migrate to other safe lands that were hunted out completely. We know that most animals live under the earth's crust and soil. During the world wars, most of the landscape turned into battlefields, and areas where civilians were residing were totally demolished. It is not difficult to draw an image of wars in which troops dig trenches while crushing the plants, grass, and animals’ habitats. Trenches are made by trampling the huge grasslands, and environmental degradation begins with the “churning of soil” and

“erosion resulting from forest cutting to expand the network of trenches in World Wars I and II” (Enzler, 2006).

The animated movie and novel are both remarkable stories and possess many unanswered questions so far to be answered by scientists and discourse analysts. However, the story of the animated film reveals undeniable facts about the weak, powerless, and minorities, and that is throughout the world they are unjustly treated, and their rights to life and freedom have no meaning in the eyes of power-holding brute (Sullivan, 2022).

Bambi film appeared at a time when it became particularly important for all human beings to have a strong sense of realization about the horror and destruction caused by wars and hunting. The hunter represents all hunters in the world, symbolizing a merciless enemy of wildlife on earth. However, there are many other questions left unanswered by the discourse analysts, such as why *Bambi* was a young prince in the film? Why did Disney adapt the original novel to produce animated films? Why is the story of the *Bambi* film different from the original novel? How much truth is there in the film, and how much is hidden, and why? Researchers say that the original story had a dark reality associated with mankind; that dark side of mankind is not portrayed in the film (Cartmill 1993-96).

Psychological Perspective of *Bambi*

“Bambi Effect” led to environmental protection talk in the world and raised the “anthropomorphic quality of modern cinema” and the need to make innumerable documentaries about the importance and protection of wildlife among the people of modern Western civilization “through TV or cinema, which has led to influencing our readers and audiences of eastern civilization as well. *Bambi* played a crucial role in changing the political behavior of the power-holding elites of Western societies. It made scholars emanate the philosophies of life incited by their forefathers (Wikipedia, 2023). Discourse Analysts need to research what Mr. Hightower, a World War II fighter and former hunter, once said: “*My personal opinion is that anybody who goes out and shoots helpless animals has a psychiatric problem*” (Swan, 2006).

Theoretical Approaches

Narratives, like *Bambi*, are children’s literature and literary texts under theoretical approaches like literary text (Fairclough, 1991, 1995). Wodak and Meyer (2009), Wodak (1989), and Van Dijk (1993) refer to various frameworks, perspectives and methodologies for linguists and discourse analysts used to analyze literature and interpret literary texts. Take the example of “*Bambi*”, which reveals the period and conditions of society. Works reveal the worth of common human beings and power holders. The story reveals information about sociological, psychological, philosophical, and political behavior of the society of that time. The language structure of the film is in plain language, and the inspiring vocabulary is easy to understand.



The viewer gets the author’s message in the shortest possible time. The advantage of using plain language in animation is to communicate the real message across the board effectively. Besides, communication in plain language helps the reader or receiver to understand the message in the given time. *Bambi* is remembered to this day because of its plain language use that helps the audience to understand its message and leaves less chance for readers to misunderstand the message and spend less time explaining it. Plain language is always in short sentences, and complex words are avoided. Also, for communicating one’s message across effectively, the language must be well structured but in plain words, style, and tone, so that clarity enables the reader or receiver to comprehend, promoting participation, which is a necessary step towards greater and barrier-free communication.

Bambi, Representation of Socio-political Disorder

Wars are the result of socio-political disorder and abuse of power. Being a member of such complex societies, Bambi also represents the idea of relying on having a small family unit, especially in a society where injustice is rampant, and it is likely for the members of a big family to face irreparable damage that is caused by innumerable economic, social, and political issues. The animated film also makes us understand and feel about how we humans suppress the fundamental rights of the oppressed ones around us and how we treat them inhumanely. *Bambi* also reflects that it is complex and difficult for a member of a big family to cope with social menaces like poverty, injustice, human rights violations, hunger, hygiene, and so on. A horrible picture comes to our minds for children whose parents are hit by war or die for some other reason; they face malnutrition and are deprived of health and educational facilities. Instead, they have to spend their whole life in fear, loneliness, and lowliness. And in most cases, they sit all their life in the corridors of orphanages, waiting to be adopted. Hence, they grow old in orphanages and expire. Ideologically, stories like *Bambi* are capable of revealing truths about the culture, psyche, and ideology of the specific community too.



Conclusion

CDA is a systematic approach and possesses an explicit place in applied linguistics. It mirrors social power, abuse, and dominance. It exposes social, political, and economic inequalities and provides solutions. Its neighboring disciplines are sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and anthropology, including all the subjects of social sciences. The paper focuses on analyzing the animated film by applying the model of critical discourse analysis by Norman Fairclough (1995), a British sociologist who deals with CDA. The main objective of CDA is to theorize solutions with a critical perspective in diverse areas of linguistics such as pragmatics, analysis of conversation, analysis of narratives, analysis of rhetoric, analysis through stylistics study, sociolinguistic parameters, ethnographic history, and media discourse analysis. The formation, description and explanation of discourse theory are reflected in the discourse analysis of scholars in society in solidarity and cooperation with dominated groups. This brought the researchers to support the long-standing concerns of the environmental scientists and socio-political scholars in the world who say that wars are the clashes between man-made ideologies, philosophies and political power-gaining forces, and in those clashes, every life on earth got affected insanely. Our added concern is how to stop this abnormal human behavior which is damaging the Earth's environment, wildlife, and entire humanity.

Analysis of *Bambi* brought us to ponder on the effects of man-made disasters due to which many children, women and families have bad experiences that result in mental illnesses. Bambi's traumatic experience of losing his mother and coping with the fear of death and many unpleasant emotions leaves us to find out in real life what happens in the mind of an orphan during the phase when he/she is growing and lands on the strips of social and economic life. How do they cope with the fear of loneliness caused by a traumatic experience and living a life in the absence of parents? This further causes confusion in understanding the real world around them. How do they face despair, helplessness, insomnia, physical pain, anxiety and anger, grief, shock, violence and mistrust, guilt and shame, and loss of trust and self-confidence in healthy ways? Therefore, researchers admire Walt Disney, who changed the negative perspective associated with wildlife and made people love all kinds of animals instead of hunting them brutally. He also gave children and adults a channel for catharsis through which they can have their own beautiful, positive world of imagination that can change any negative aspirations and make them empathetic thinkers. He turned all angry fighters of the world towards thinking of dropping weapons and spreading peace, love and protecting species and children on Earth. His animated work made people protect wildlife and love humanity across the globe.

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