



Bambi the Counter-revolutionary

The rumour went round the kids in the neighbourhood like a forest fire: *Bambi* would be coming to the Gaumont cinema in Oakfield Road. It was a brilliant piece of marketing. Every ten years or so the Disney organisation would relaunch their major cartoon movies so that a whole new generation of children became hysterical with anticipation. Whenever a group of us six-year-olds came together, in the playground at break-time or running around the streets after school, we imagined what the film would be like, conjecturing deliriously and inaccurately on the possible storyline. More than anything else there was some collective sense, some morphic resonance that told us all that seeing *Bambi* was going to be a defining moment in our young lives.

Usually I was at the centre of any wild speculation that was going on, dreaming up mad theories about the half-understood world – the year before, I had successfully convinced all the other kids that peas were a form of small insect. But on this occasion there was something lacking in the quality of my guesswork, a hesitation, an uncertainty which the others sensed, because for me, getting in to see *Bambi* was going to be a huge challenge.

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The lives of other children, when they were away from their families seemed to be entirely free from adult interference – there was a range of activities such as purchasing comics, seeing films, games of hide-and-seek and tag, buying and playing with toys, that were regarded by both sides as ‘kids’ things’. For my friends, going to see *Bambi* would simply mean their mum or dad buying them a ticket and then crossing over Oakfield Road to the cinema in a big, noisy gang. My life wasn’t like that. It was subject to all kinds of restrictions, caveats and provisos, both physical and ideological. I was never entirely sure what was going to be forbidden and what was going to be encouraged in our house, but I suspected that something as incredible as *Bambi* was certain to be on the prohibited list and I knew that if I was going to see this film it would be a complex affair requiring a great deal of subtle negotiation, possibly with a side order of screaming and crying.

It wasn’t just seeing the film, fantastic as that was likely to be, that obsessed me – it was that the whole event represented a dream not exactly of freedom but of equality. I had begun to suspect that we weren’t like other families. There were things we believed, things we did, that nobody else in the street did, things that inevitably marked me out as different. What I really longed for and what I thought going to the pictures to see *Bambi* would give me was a chance, for once, to be just one of the crowd. I was convinced that, by taking part in such a powerful cultural event as the first showing for a decade of this animation masterpiece, everything that was confusing about other people’s behaviour would become clear and all that was strange about my own would

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somehow magically vanish. I would be exactly like everyone else.

My parents needed to understand that they had to allow me to see *Bambi*! But they didn't. Whatever pleas I made, whatever tantrums I threw, they steadfastly refused to let me go. They had two reasons. My parents disapproved of most of the products of Hollywood but they had a particular dislike for anything made by the Walt Disney company. 'Uncle Walt' had been an enthusiastic supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his anti-Communist witch-hunts of the early 1950s, so they hated him for that. But even if he hadn't been a semi-fascist they would still have had an aversion to his gaudy cartoons and sentimental wildlife films. More significantly in this case, my mother had the idea that I was a sensitive, delicate, artistic boy and she was worried that I would be distressed by the famously child-traumatising scene in which Bambi's mother is killed by hunters in the forest.

Yet they didn't wish to be cruel. They understood that I was missing out on seeing an important and culturally significant film, so as a consolation the three of us took the 26 bus into town to attend a screening of Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky* at Liverpool's Unity Theatre. In *Alexander Nevsky* there are several scenes of ritualistic child sacrifice and a famous thirty-minute-long sequence set on a frozen lake beside the city of Novgorod in which Teutonic knights in rippling white robes, mounted on huge snorting metal-clad stallions, only their cruel eyes visible through the cross-shaped slits in their sinister helmets, charge the defending Russian soldiers across the ice-bound water. When they are halfway over, the weight of their

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armour causes the ice to crack and the knights tumble one by one into the freezing blackness. Desperately the men and their terrified, eye-rolling horses are dragged beneath the deadly water, leaving not a trace behind them.

As I sat in that smoky, beer-smelling room, stunned and disturbed by the flickering black and white images on the screen, it began to dawn on me that all my efforts to be one of the crowd, to be just like the other kids in the street, were doomed to failure. That no matter how hard I tried, I was always going to be the boy who saw Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* instead of Walt Disney's *Bambi*.



Uncle Willy

My maternal grandfather, Alexander Mendelson, the *shamas* – a combination of caretaker and secretary – of the Crown Street Synagogue, died not knowing that his daughter was married to a non-Jew, was expecting a child, had joined the Communist Party and was living in a terraced house in Anfield at the opposite end of Liverpool. My mother experienced a great deal of conflict over not telling her father about her new life and her baby, but if a girl married out of the Jewish faith the common practice amongst devout families was to ‘sit shiva’ for them, to mount the week-long period of grief and mourning held for a dead relative and then to treat the errant daughter as if she was in fact dead. She may have wished to