

Zootopia: A Cultural Metaphor in a Utopian Setting

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Abstract: Zootopia, produced by Disney Pictures, is a masterpiece that combines image and depth, featuring a strong comedic effect and a theme of pursuing dreams. Based on the real world, the film constructs an animal metropolis with a utopian touch, ingeniously replicating the human social system into the animal world. At the same time, it artistically recreates the cruelty and reality of modern society through metaphorical means, exposing many phenomena and problems hidden beneath the surface of peace, and presenting a contemporary contemplation on the utopian picture. The cultural metaphors in the film can be classified into three major categories: political metaphors, value metaphors, and consumer culture metaphors. Through the construction of identities, it reflects the ills of the current political ecosystem in the United States and the widespread group biases in society, reflecting the American value of advocating individual dreams and recreating the consumption symbols of the contemporary landscape society. Through the application of cultural metaphors, the film conducts a profound reflection on the real society and also enables the audience to feel the yearning and anticipation for the utopian ideal.

Keywords: Zootopia, Utopia, Cultural Metaphor.

1. Introduction

Since its release in 2016, the animated film "Zootopia" produced by Disney Pictures has quickly become a global phenomenon, winning countless praises from audiences with its vivid character designs and profound social metaphors. The film tells the story of a modern animal metropolis where all animals live in peace. Judy the rabbit, through her own efforts, breaks the traditional prejudice and becomes the first rabbit police officer of the Animal City Police Department. In the process of solving a mysterious case, Judy and Nick, a fox who used to make a living by cheating and swarming, became good partners. Eventually, the two worked together to uncover the conspiracy planned by the vice mayor of the sheep to subvert the system of the animal kingdom, and both became competent animal police officers. The English title of the film, "Zootopia", is composed of the English word for "Zoo" and the suffix "-topia", where "-topia" is derived from the word "Utopia". The name "Utopia" originated from the novel "Utopia" by the renowned British author Thomas More. Moore combined the Greek words "none" (ou) and "place" (topos) to create a new Latin word, Utopia, which means "the land of nothingness". Zootopia constructs an animal metropolis with a strong utopian flavor: whether herbivores or carnivores, they all live in harmony in a civilized society, cooperate with each other, have an accurate understanding of their own regions, and jointly promote social governance. However, as Will Durant said, "Any city is in fact a combination of two cities, the city of the poor and the city of the rich, who hate and confront each other." Meanwhile, each city within a city contains several smaller cities - if you regard them as a unified city-state, you are very much mistaken. In the seemingly utopian animal world, inequalities such as group prejudice and class rigidity are still ubiquitous. Cultural metaphors abound in the film, exposing the cruelty and reality of modern society. At present, there are many opinions on this film in the academic circle. However, in terms of the manifestation of the film's utopian characteristics and its cultural metaphors, there is still room for further research.

Therefore, this article will take the film text as the basic foothold, analyze various cultural metaphors under the utopian scenes in the film, explore the deep real fables in the text, and then reflect on the current society.

2. Political Metaphor: Identity Construction and Group Bias

Zootopia breaks away from the traditional narrative of the strong being supreme that Disney Pictures has followed in animal-themed films such as *The Lion King* and *Ice Age*. Instead, it ingeniously replicates the human social system into the animal world, thus building a peaceful and beautiful Zootopia. The birth of the "Animal City" was based on the overcoming of the wild nature of animals. Through the "city-state", a non-naturally existing "woven fabric", animals were liberated from the animal kingdom and from their own wild instincts, and in a certain sense, they became "adults". The film is based on the real human society and designs buildings, transportation vehicles, commercial places and various occupations for the Animal City. All kinds of animals live, live and work in the city just like humans, presenting a new order of peaceful coexistence. However, although on the surface the narrative main line of the film is the personal struggle and growth process of the rabbit Judy, it does not deliberately emphasize political issues; However, through further analysis, it is not difficult to see that in the prosperous and beautiful Uto Animal City, the social mechanism has not fully operated in accordance with the ideal law of equal opportunity. Beneath the surface of peace in the animal world, there are many not optimistic phenomena and problems. The film personifies animal images and, through identity construction, presents the real problems existing in the American political ecosystem to the audience in a metaphorical way. At the same time, it also reflects the class confrontation caused by racial discrimination and inherent prejudice in the current society through the distrust caused by the inherent nature between herbivores and carnivores, and shows a kind of contemplation on the utopian picture from a

contemporary perspective.

2.1. Identity Construction Metaphor

2.1.1. Mayor Lion: Political Manipulation

Mayor Lion is the supreme leader of Zootopia in the film, symbolizing the typical image of an American politician and metaphorically suggesting the manipulation of the regime. As the king of all beasts, the lion is supposed to be a symbol of majesty and toughness. However, the film repeatedly shows that the lion mayor's majesty is only in front of his subordinates, while he appears extremely docility to the outside world. As the mayor, he showed extremely impatient and rude attitudes towards his subordinates - even the slightly lower-ranking vice mayor, the "sheep". Meanwhile, in daily management, he shows bureaucratic style, is indifferent to the actual situation of his subordinates, but is keen on giving orders and pushing all the cumbersome tasks that are not beneficial to career development to them. Just as the vice mayor of Sheep said, as the vice mayor, she is merely a symbol, a sign of herbivores in the management of Zootopia. The choice of herbivores as vice mayors is not based on personal preference, but rather to win the support and votes of herbivores, which make up the majority of the population in Zootopia. This setting metaphorically represents the significance of political marketing and image building in elections in the real human society, prompting the audience to reflect on the essence of political campaigns and possible strategies. As the plot progresses, Judy and Nick discover that the missing animals in Zootopia were actually imprisoned by Mayor Lion's order because Mayor Lion believed it would cause panic among the public. This plot implicitly satirizes the behavior of the US government in deceiving the public for political votes. When the Lion Mayor sensed the signs of the conspiracy, he did not immediately disclose the facts but chose to hide them out of self-interest. Eventually, not only did he end up in prison, but he also nearly let the Sheep Vice Mayor's conspiracy succeed, exposing the typical style of an American politician.

2.1.2. Vice Mayor Sheep: Politicians Seek Power

In the entire film, the most unexpected character should be the mastermind behind the conspiracy - Vice Mayor Sheep. The deputy mayor of the sheep is named Bell-Wether. Originally, it meant a leading sheep with a Bell around its neck. Later, it was extended to mean a leader of the masses. This naming implies the deputy mayor of the sheep's coveting of power. Sheep have always been known for their diligence and forbearing. In the film, the vice mayor of the sheep, although seemingly diligent, gentle and amiable, and obedient to the mayor of the Lion, is actually extremely ambitious and calculating. To seize power and rise to power, he even uses the "Midnight Howling Flower" to awaken the wild nature of carnivores, deliberately intensifying the conflict between herbivores and carnivores, and forcing the Mayor of the Lion to step down. So as to take control of Zootopia, with the intention of building an "equal society" dominated by herbivores and above carnivores. In "Utopia", Moore once profoundly revealed the prejudice of the weak through the fable of "sheep eating people" : "Your sheep were originally tamed by you and were content with just a little, but now it is said that they have become very greedy, very tyrannical, and even want to eat people..." When Judy and Nick discovered the truth, the vice Mayor of the Sheep finally exposed his true colors and attempted to kill someone to silence him in order to eliminate the hidden danger. The incompatibility between

its external image and true psychology brings a stronger sense of contrast to the audience. The entire film ingeniously reflects the ugly reality in today's society where presidential candidates compete with each other for election success through the power struggle between the sheep vice mayor and the lion mayor. Meanwhile, the sharp opposition between the two in terms of identity construction further enhances the symbolic meaning of the film and profoundly satirizes the many imperfections existing in the political system.

2.1.3. Sloth Lightning: Administrative Inefficiency

The sloth "Lightning" is undoubtedly the most hilarious character in the entire film. He is a civil servant at the Mammal Vehicle Administration (DMV) in Zootopically. During the process of checking the license plates for Judy and Nick, his speech was so slow that it seemed as if he needed to pause for a long time for each word he uttered. Even when he smiled, it was like a slow-motion replay. Faced with Nick's joke, he didn't react immediately. Instead, it was several minutes later that he let out a "ha-ha-ha" laugh, which was quite amusing. It can be said that the sloth "lightning" is a metaphor in the film for administrative inefficiency. First of all, sloths are slow in reaction and sluggish in movement, yet they are named "Lightning". This sharp contrast between their personality and name constitutes the first layer of irony. Secondly, as government officials, the slow actions of "lightning" lead to low efficiency in handling affairs, cumbersome procedures, protracted processes, and endless waiting times... While making people laugh, it also metaphorically represents the administrative organs in real life. "Lightning" only appears twice in the film. The second time is due to drag racing - compared with his efficiency in handling affairs, his driving speed is truly astonishing. It can be said that "lightning" is a classic symbol in "Zootopia", indicating those government officials whose working efficiency in real life is extremely inconsistent with their daily living style, presenting to the audience a "utopian society" as real as real life.

2.2. Metaphor of Group Bias

2.2.1. Racial Prejudice Metaphor

As an outstanding recent graduate of the police academy, Judy was assigned to a traffic police position by Officer Bison after joining the police station because she was a small herbivore, responsible for maintaining traffic order on the roads. Although this arrangement seems to be Officer Bison's professional discrimination against Judy, in essence, it reflects the widespread racial prejudice among animals. In contrast, Nick, who grew up in prejudice and pain since childhood, is even more pitiful. His identity as a fox has long plagued him with social prejudice and repeatedly discriminated against by the outside world, eventually leading him down the path of deception and fraud. When Judy asked why he faked, Nick gave the answer: "I have never been so close to a sheep!" Such brief yet powerful words directly pointed out the sharp contradiction of racial prejudice in Zootopia. Even after becoming a well-coordinated partner with Nick, Judy still got used to carrying fox spray with her, which shows that racial prejudice has long been deeply rooted. It was precisely by taking advantage of this racial prejudice that Vice Mayor Sheep was able to successfully carry out his political conspiracy. On the surface, the film depicts a utopian picture of all animals living in peace. However, a casual remark from Judy instantly exposes the rift beneath this appearance, reflecting the racial disputes that exist in the real

society. Meanwhile, the film ingeniously incorporates new metaphorical connotations in character development to express an anti-racism attitude. In traditional metaphorical expressions, the rabbit symbolizes cowardice, the fox symbolizes cunning and conspiracy, and the sheep symbolizes docility and kindness. In the film, Judy is brave and passionate, Nick is sincere and kind, while the vice Mayor Sheep has the most sinister plots and tricks. The expression of metaphor has played an important role in the dissemination of anti-racism in films.

2.2.2. Gender Bias Metaphor

In the film, Judy, a woman, failed to receive the respect she deserved in the workplace and was assigned to the street to carry out the task of distributing tickets. The other female character, the vice mayor of the sheep, although having a title, is just a name without substance. Obviously, women are in the position of "the other", and their professional identity shows a strong masculine color. The hegemony of gender and race (here, men and carnivores are used as metaphors) is completely isomorphic in the workplace. However, the narrative of the film does not adhere to the traditional binary opposition framework between men and women, herbivores and carnivores. Instead, it ingeniously integrates the opposing sides. In the film, Judy took on the responsibility bravely at the critical moment, successfully exposed and defused the crisis of the conspiracy theory, became the hero who saved Zootopia, and demonstrated extraordinary courage and wisdom. Vice Mayor Sheep, on the other hand, is ruthless and will do whatever it takes to manipulate the situation behind the scenes. The sharp contrast between the two not only enriches the character layers of the film but also further highlights the complex and delicate relationship between gender and power. Meanwhile, the female star Xia Qi Yangchu in the film seems to merely be an embellishment of the city and is unlikely to make a direct contribution to Zootopia. However, when fear enveloped the entire city, she resolutely stepped forward and became a firm advocate of racial equality and anti-discrimination. Not only did she subvert the long-standing stereotypes and stereotyped perceptions of female roles in society, but she also endowed female roles with a brand-new independent image.

3. Value Metaphor: National Dreams and Individual Values

Zootopia overcomes the deficiency of Hollywood animated films in the construction of the world view and ingeniously integrates political fables with fairy tales. Although the two seem to have no logical connection at all, they represent a profound connection between social agreed-upon symbols and meanings. "Zootopia" as a symbol, its "reference" is the harmonious animal survival relationship, and its metaphor ultimately points to the social existence of human beings. In terms of scene setting, the film divides the entire Zootopia into four distinctive areas: the Glacier area, the Sahara Square, the rainforest area, and the Zootopia Center. The differences in the environment enable each animal to have a suitable place to live, thus allowing for a coexistence of "harmony without uniformity" in the animal City. In short, "Zootopia" essentially embodies American social values. The Zootopia in the film is a modern utopia constructed based on the concepts of American society. As the protagonist of the film, Judy represents many ordinary people in the real world, carrying their aspirations and yearnings for

life. To some extent, this construction imperceptibly conveys the cultural symbol of the film to the audience, namely the mainstream values of the United States - advocating the realization of personal dreams and emphasizing the promotion of national development through the enhancement of personal value.

3.1. The Metaphor of "American Dream"

The "American Dream" has always been a major theme in American films. The core idea of "Zootopia" is precisely to unify and unite different ethnic groups in the United States with the "American Dream". After a series of left-wing social liberation movements in the 1960s, the definition of Americans seemed to begin to blur, and the "American Dream" became the last link to maintain the national identity of the United States. At the beginning of the film, it conveys a message to the audience that in Zootopia, every kind of animal has unlimited possibilities. "Everyone can be everything", this idea emphasizing equal opportunities is the most intuitive and genuine interpretation of the "American Dream". The American writer Thomas Wolfe once expounded what he regarded as the "American Dream" in this way: "Anyone, regardless of his background, regardless of his social status, and regardless of the unique opportunities he has..." He has the right to survive, the right to work, and the right to become the person he wants to be by relying on his innate and acquired conditions. Americans firmly believe that the land is free and equal. Regardless of an individual's class status, they can realize their dreams through continuous efforts.

The "peace treaty" on which the Animal City relies for survival has established the basis for the coexistence of herbivores and carnivores living within it, thereby maintaining a city with distinct modern civilization characteristics. This system shares similarities with the United States' Declaration of Independence and the legal system of the United States derived from it. However, written civilization cannot ensure the permanent peace of a city. The contradictions and conflicts presented in "Zootopia" metaphorically represent the various problems in the operation of complex systems under human design. In the film, the audience can observe the existence of arrogance and prejudice, witness the phenomena of racial or belief discrimination, and even feel the friction and collision between freedom and rights. At the end of the film, Zootopia held a concert to celebrate the return of peace. The singer Xia Qiyang sang a song called "Try Everything", in which the lyrics read: "I keep falling down. I keep hitting the ground..." I won't give up. No, I won't yield. I won't start again until I reach the finish line. The film uses a joyous concert as the last resort to bridge the rift among animals, expressing the public's earnest expectations for racial integration and the elimination of prejudice and discrimination. From this perspective, "Zootopia" contains profound political implications. It has transcended the realm of a Disney animation merely about dreams, vividly embodying the "American Dream", depicting inspiring heroism, and making it accessible.

3.2. Individual Value Metaphor

The realization of individual value is one of the core values that Hollywood films constantly output and is also regarded as an important manifestation of the "American Dream". Compared with the group, the individual images in the film are often more likely to trigger the inner projection of the

audience. During the film viewing process, audiences often pour some of their emotions and wills into the protagonist in the film, closely follow the ups and downs of his fate, and share joys and sorrows with him. Only when the character images are distinct and elaborately shaped can the audience possibly identify with the film. In "Zootopia", Judy and Nick hold completely different attitudes towards life, among which Judy shows a more positive outlook on life. However, it was Nick who prompted the transformation of her outlook on life. Judy chose to become a police officer. Her original intention was more about realizing her individual value and exerting her personal talents rather than being constrained by some kind of collectivist spirit. Despite her parents' opposition, she resolutely embarked on the journey of pursuing her dream and eventually succeeded in growing from a fledgling rabbit into a hero of Zootopia. This is precisely a typical embodiment of American values. In Hollywood movies, dramatic conflicts usually stem from the survival crises faced by humanity (including the destruction of the natural environment and the human living environment), and the appearance of heroes can effectively alleviate the fear, doubt and anxiety of the public.

In "Zootopia", Disney did not deviate from the values of individualism and heroism, but transcended the traditional heroic narrative model. In the film, Judy plays the role of a hero twice: The first time, during the process of solving a case, she not only successfully found the missing Mr. Otter and other imprisoned carnivores, but also exposed the "conspiracy" of Mayor Lion, thus shattering the "Midnight Howl" incident. However, the narrative of the film does not end here. The development of the event proved that Judy's judgment was wrong. As a result, she chose to give up her police badge and return to her hometown. However, in her hometown, Judy unexpectedly discovered the truth of the "Midnight Howl" incident. So she resolutely decided to return to Zootopia, expose the conspiracy of the vice mayor of Sheep, and eventually solve the case successfully. In other words, the film ingeniously expresses a brief anti-hero narrative between the two heroic narratives. Setbacks have a great influence on Judy's success. The failure of her first investigation indicated that she was not an exceptionally talented rabbit. However, with an unyielding belief, she eventually defended her victory, which to some extent reflected a cultural symbol that Hollywood attempted to construct - that ordinary people can also succeed. At the same time, Nick, who is accustomed to surviving in the cracks of reality, always appears lazy. However, he can do many things that Judy's enthusiasm alone cannot achieve. It is precisely he who melts away Judy's unintentional hurt and helps her fulfill her mission. This also enables the audience to see different attitudes towards idealism or pessimism in the two protagonists, and to understand the value of striving, dreams and friendship from them.

4. Metaphor of Consumer Culture: The Symbolic Presentation of the Landscape Society

Since the 1920s, the social and cultural ecology of the United States has undergone tremendous changes, among which the most notable is the rise of consumer culture. With the deepening of the modernization process in the United States, the improvement of social income levels and the emergence of leisure lifestyles have laid a material foundation and provided realistic possibilities for the prosperity of

consumer culture. In the film, the grand and exquisite scenes of Zootopia metaphorically represent the contemporary "landscape society", which is what the renowned French philosopher Jean Baudrillard referred to as the "consumer society". Baudrillard once clearly pointed out, "We are in a situation where 'consumption' controls the entire life." The essence of consumption is "a systematic manipulation activity of symbols", and "to become an object of consumption, an item must become a symbol." In the contemporary landscape society, objects have long transcended the category of ordinary consumer goods and become a symbolized existence. Symbolic consumption has become a representation of status and relationships among social members. We constantly consume material products and services, and in essence, we are also consuming symbols and meanings. It is the accumulation of matter, symbols and meanings that has forged the modern and diversified landscape society.

Zootopia uses a large number of adaptations of real-world advertisements and brands to metaphorically represent the consumption culture of modern American capitalist society. The landscape design in the film has a high degree of consistency with the landscape of modern society, as if it were a true reproduction of the commercial boom in modern American society. The logo of the smart phone used by Judy is a bitten carrot, resembling an iPhone. When the bodyguard of the gang leader, the polar bear, was surfing the Internet, the web search page showed "Zoogole Phones", which was compared with the real search engine Google. Meanwhile, the advertisements in the film are more obvious: The brand endorsed by the singer Xia Qiyang is PREYDA, which corresponds to the luxury brand PRADA in reality. The yoga wear endorsed by Lemmings is named "Lululemmings" based on its English name (lemming), corresponding to the yoga clothing brand Lululemon. The clothing brand BEARBERRY, endorsed by polar bears, corresponds to the British luxury brand Burberry. The "JUST ZOO IT" on the huge billboards in the city corresponds to Nike's advertising slogan in reality — JUST DO IT.

Just as Guy Debord pointed out in "The Landscape Society", capitalist society is gradually evolving into a landscape society composed of images of consumer goods, which to a certain extent reflects people's worldview that is being materialized. In Animal City, different kinds of animals all enjoy the same technological progress and consumption feast. And the film, through the perspective of the protagonist Judy walking, presents the vast, enclosed and surrounding landscape of Animal City, like a dreamy palace, mirror hall, illusion corridor... This visual rhetoric regards the shopping center as the Garden of Eden, thereby making the landscape society also a mirror image of utopian desires, reflecting the nostalgic desire of human society for the original paradise. Of course, the audience can also realize that the so-called Utopian Paradise is merely an illusory existence, a kind of visual reproduction of the landscape.

5. Conclusion

Since its release, "Zootopia" has sparked widespread thinking and heated discussions. For children, this is a vivid and interesting fairy tale, depicting a peaceful and beautiful animal world. What adults see, however, is a realistic film rich in cultural metaphors. The film presents a distinctive dimension of thinking about utopia. By using metaphorical techniques, it evokes the audience's resonance with familiar

objects, creating a sense of déjà vu. Meanwhile, the integration of heterogeneous elements also promotes the audience's in-depth understanding of the political and social issues in the film, thereby enabling the audience to establish a sense of boundaries at the psychological level and further enhancing the appeal of the narrative. Overall, "Zootopia" accurately captures the needs of audiences of different age groups. With its cute character designs, dazzling special effects, and profound questioning of the essence of utopia, it has truly created an animated masterpiece suitable for the whole family to enjoy together, and has also made the audience have a deeper yearning and expectation for the utopian ideal.

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