

## Anthropomorphism in *Zootopia* to Depict a Socially Conscious Disney

### **Abstract**

Over the years, The Walt Disney Animation Studios (WDAS), shortened as Disney Animation or Disney, has created a vast number of animated and fictional movies that feature anthropomorphism. It has taken hyperreality to greater heights by incorporating human-like abilities to objects and animals. In particular to animals, walking on two legs, speaking human language, and going on a long and dangerous quest have long been recurring motifs of Disney's use of anthropomorphism, with their most popular use being their icon and mascot, Mickey Mouse. In the past few decades, Disney Animation has expanded from only using these three traits to represent humans to extensively integrated anthropomorphism in their animated films. Disney animals now encompass other abilities that are iconically human such as wearing clothing, driving vehicles, working jobs, having a political and economic structure, and now having social issues reminiscent of the issues we face in our regular human society. The purpose of this research paper is to further investigate other features of Disney's anthropomorphism and its ability to formulate social commentary on today's humans by analyzing the 2016 Disney animated film, *Zootopia*. This research paper uses qualitative approaches from prior research, journal articles, and the 2016 film itself to supply descriptive methods to back up its claims.

### **Introduction**

The Walt Disney Animation Studios has long moved away from its Disney Golden Age of princesses that previously reflected Walt Disney's aesthetic (Pallant: 2011). After his

death, the studio produced movies that flopped in the box office. What could be described as the studio's dark era, the films' plots were too deep into fiction that they did not grasp any attention. Entering the 2000s decade, Disney transitioned from its fairytale aesthetic to a more relatable plot with critical narratives that ultimately cemented their comeback. Needless to say, *Zootopia* is a product of this revival. According to Shearon Roberts, "*Zootopia*'s strong social critique advances this shift in this current era taking audiences out of fairy-tale worlds into a modern backdrop like *Big Hero 6* (2014)" (Roberts 2020, 264).

Released in 2016, *Zootopia* is set in a utopian animal society where predator and prey species of the animal kingdom live in harmony with one another. Animals have gone beyond instinctive savagery and have domesticated their way of life by metaphorically adapting how humans have progressed over time. Often, the film would remark how the predators and prey can coexist peacefully through Zootopia's Mayor Lionheart's slogan, "in Zootopia, anyone can be anything" (Fig 1). However, this ideal is soon disrupted when one prey goes "savage", transforming from the domesticated human-like persona to a regressed frenzy driven by animalistic desires to be aggressive and violent. This results in a growing panic in the Zootopia society as its citizens begin fearing the possibility of also regressing, causing a subtle panic among aware citizens. Investigating this sudden phenomenon is the bunny protagonist, Judy Hopps, who aims to join the police force, but in order to gain the recognition and praise she seeks in her department, she takes on this case as an investigator with no leads or whereabouts of the civil-turned-savage mammal. As the story progresses,

Judy encounters a con-artist fox named Nick Wilde who becomes her confidant throughout the story.



Figure 1: Zootopia Mayor Lionheart awards first-ever bunny cop and proclaims that “in Zootopia, anyone could be anything!” (source screenshot Disneyplus.com)

Zootopia’s narrative structure utilizes anthropomorphism to include social critiques that reflect upon American society's social issues of race, marginalization, and discrimination in its fairytale storyline. However, since Disney’s primary audience are children, Zootopia elevates anthropomorphism as a shield to make its films more universally kid-friendly. Despite Disney’s pivot to produce socially-conscious narratives that reflect the reality of its times, the studio does not hold back to include anthropomorphism in its successful animation formula. Nonetheless, The Walt Disney Animation Studios’ use of anthropomorphism integration in its films can send powerful messages and provide critical commentary on

America's current social and political climate such as racial discrimination and gender inequality.

### **Teaching #BlackLivesMatter In *Zootopia* Through Anthropomorphism**

Around this same time, movements, such as Black Lives Matter, which criticized the social structure of the United States towards the Black community, began forming in response to the growing criminalization and killings of African-Americans across the country. According to Sadlin, "The Black Lives Matter movement demands a reckoning with racist histories of dehumanization that constitute the often disavowed condition of possibility for modern politics founded on a particular Western humanist conception of "the human"" (Sandlin, 2018). The hashtag was more than just a social media campaign, it organized a movement where generations both old and new could understand and sought to humanize Black lives in the United States. It called for nationwide attention to the systematic discriminations or anti-Black sentiment that has long plagued the country.

#BlackLivesMatter bleeds through the narrative of *Zootopia*, where animals possess anthropomorphic features that symbolize forms of humanity. The film presents a suitable view of how humans do not always see one another's shared humanity. Instead, humans recourse to the primal instinct of acting out of fear to distinguish differences from each other rather than to fall back on shared similarities. In the film, the predators are used as an allegory to people of color, specifically Black folks, while on the other hand, the prey symbolizes the white community of the United States. All over *Zootopia*, prey animals began to express either repressed fear or newly-found prejudice against predatory animals from

their worry of being attacked, eaten, or violated by predatory animals all over the city. After Judy expresses her sentiment that predators are biologically driven to violence during a press conference, Judy sees the effects of her blurted-out-statement as Judy rides the subway (01:14:20). In this scene (Fig. 2), She sees a bunny mother pulling her daughter closer to her to avoid the predatory animal they are seated next to in the train. The bunny mother and daughter then look up to the tiger next to them with fear and suspicion in their eyes, hoping for the tiger to not regress back to savagery and ultimately hurt them.



Figure 2: Judy Hopps sees the response of preys “reverting” back to savagery

(source screenshot Disneyplus.com)

While in real life, predatory animals do come from a “heritage of violence and savagery” as part of their biological imperative (Sandlin and Snaza 2018, 12), the film attempts to argue against the idea of biological bases for the behavior of predators. *Zootopia* perpetuates the kinds of stereotypes that African Americans face every day in the United States and that the film’s “allegorical base affirms the most racist assumptions about black people—they come

from savagery” (Faraci, 2016). The analogy of African Americans being characterized as “predators” in the film reinforce the racist perspectives that often compare African Americans to “savages” or “animals”, which come from a long history of racism and the country’s slavery. While Judy Hopps is correct in stating that savagery stems from the DNA of predatory animals in real life, the film presents this statement as a form of allegory that behavior is not linked to race, particularly if it is used as a means to isolate or discriminate particular groups of people. Anthropomorphism is able to shield away from the real-life truth but still sends home the message that different groups of animals, whether you are predator or prey, are able to find common ground with one another and see past differences in a utopian society.

### **Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Championing Feminism Through Anthropomorphism**

Throughout the years, Disney Animation has frequently depended on a patriarchal idealization of femininity to create its female protagonists. In Disney films, male interests, and power are consistently valued over those of the female characters, who must submit unquestioningly to the male’s execution or orders. Pioneering and inspiring small mammals-alike, Judy Hopps is the first female rabbit police of Zootopia. For a small animal, this is no easy feat and it continued to be proven difficult for the heroine protagonist. Although Judy graduates at the top of her class in the police academy, she struggles to prove her worth to her chief superior and her peers. During police case briefings, Judy is often put up against big, domineering mammals that are all male and is often not given an actual police case to work on. Not only does Judy struggle to earn respect as the only woman in the

Zootopia police force, but she also grapples to manifest her worth in a hostile environment due to her small stature and endearing and soft appearance. Unlike the predator-prey racial allegory, the prejudice towards Judy's positionality "isn't levied at race, [but] it's hurled at women" (Maximilian, 2016).



Figure 3: Judy Hopps surrounded by Big Mammalian Male Officers During a Case Briefing  
(source screenshot Disneyplus.com)

In Fig. 3, Judy Hopps attempts to voice her abilities to be a true police officer and not just some “tokenized” bunny. Chief Bogo, Judy’s police superior, dismisses her sentiment and gives her parking duty in this dialogue:

BOGO (CONT'D): Officers Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, Delgado--  
your teams take Missing Mammals from the Rainforest District.  
Officers McHorn, Rhinowitz, Wolfard, your team take Sahara  
Square. Officers Higgins, Snarlov, Trunkaby: Tundratown. And  
finally, our first bunny, Officer Hopps.

BOGO (CONT'D) Parking Duty. Dismissed!

HOPPS : Parking duty? (runs after Bogo) Uh, Chief? Chief Bogo?

(Bogo looks around... then down to find Hopps)

HOPPS (CONT'D): Sir, you said there were 14 missing mammal cases?

BOGO: So?

HOPPS: So I can handle one. You probably forgot, but I was top of my class at the academy.

BOGO: Didn't forget. Just don't care.

HOPPS: Sir, I'm not just some "token" bunny. (00:14:57 – 00:16:31)

Not long after, Judy eavesdrops to hear a case of a missing otter. Desperate to handle a true investigation, Judy offers her help to Mrs. Otterson, the wife of the missing otter. Judy is given two days to solve this crime by Chief Bogo. Without any leads, Judy asks Nick Wilde for help from his underground connections. Although Nick becomes a sort-of sidekick to the film's protagonist, *Zootopia* does not evoke a romantic interest between the two. Judy and Nick are able to work together as platonic, sarcastic friends who have become a crime-fighting duo towards the end. Evidently, Judy is still able to shine in her own light without ending up with a romantic relationship at the end of the film.

## **Conclusion**

With the increasing nationwide consciousness of racial tension and gender discrimination, *Zootopia* is paramount to the progressiveness of Disney films. Although Disney has depicted negative stereotypes through anthropomorphism in the past, such the

Siamese cats with slanted eyes to portray Asian Americans in *Lady and the Tramp* (2001), the studio has come along way since its race and gender discriminating depictions. According to Beaudine, Osibodu, and Beavers (2017), “*Zootopia* is a children’s Disney movie that exposes systematic racism and racist stereotypes through the narrative of animals.” This is a crucial value to point out because parents do not think twice to monitor their children if they are watching a Disney movie, despite the inclusion of implicit, underlying themes of social and political commentaries. According to Müller-Hartmann (2007), “the morals or lessons that Disney films perpetuate may become an ethical outline for how children think about issues such as race and racism.” With the deaths of many African Americans such as Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and many more, Disney is heading towards the right direction of uplifting and integrating important issues in its films to educate children of the systematic and institutionalized barriers that many marginalized groups face today. It teaches children messages of privilege, race, and gender early on in their life. By using anthropomorphism to depict real-life issues, *Zootopia* is able to do subtle yet powerful exposures of racial profiling and gender discrimination that unfolds in its storyline. Although there are definite issues in *Zootopia* that could be worked on, such as pro-policing, implicit depictions of Black and Latinx communities as criminals in other supporting characters, and a white-savior complex through Judy Hopps, Disney is slowly but surely utilizes its platform to echo sociopolitical issues that are prevalent in today’s society. In shaping the “Zootopia” that America is working towards, humans must collectively work together to humanize as well as acknowledge but respect their differences. *Zootopia* is a

powerful film grounded in educating and entertaining the masses, which shows other Hollywood films that it is not a sacrifice of profit to incorporate culturally relevant themes in films, but it sends home a dynamic message of the importance of being politically educated and socially conscious.

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