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Disney's *Zootopia* and the illusion of equality: Interrogating neoliberal ideologies and the myth of meritocracy

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Abstract
Disney's *Zootopia* (2016) presents itself as a utopian allegory of diversity and inclusion, yet beneath its vibrant animation lies a sharp critique of neoliberalism's core tenets: meritocracy, colourblind politics, and systemic inequality. This study interrogates how the film's narrative and world-building expose the contradictions of neoliberal ideology, arguing that *Zootopia* simultaneously reinforces and subverts Disney's traditional tropes to challenge the myth of a post-racial, egalitarian society. Neoliberalism as an economic and political project prioritizes individualism, free-market logic, and the erosion of collective welfare. *Zootopia*'s portrays a hyper-capitalist metropolis, where protagonists Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde navigate systemic barriers masked by the rhetoric of "anyone can be anything." The film's laissez-faire economy and emphasis on self-reliance, mirror real-world neoliberal discourses that obscure structural inequities. The movie's predator-prey dynamic allegorizes racialized hierarchies and the limitations of colourblind ideologies. Power operates under neoliberal governance, weaponizing diversity to maintain dominance. *Zootopia* also subverts Disney conventions by rejecting romanticized individualism in favour of collective solidarity; critiquing neoliberalism's failure to address intersectional oppression. *Zootopia* serves as both a product and a critique of neoliberal culture, urging audiences to confront the persistence of systemic bias despite illusions of progress.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, meritocracy, systemic inequality, colourblind racism, individualism, *Zootopia*

Introduction

Zootopia' s Neoliberalist Agenda

Zootopia, the 2016 Disney animated film, presents a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of neoliberal ideologies, warranting a critical examination of its contextualization within Disney's oeuvre. The movie illustrates the ways in which colorblind beliefs help justify the maintenance of systemic racism in our criminal justice system (Nelson). The discourses within *Zootopia* that promote neoliberal values such as consumerism, individualism, and "small government" are interrogated by Alice Marianne Fritz ("Buy everything"), neoliberal identity politics of the movie has been critiqued by Dan Hassler-Forest ("Life Isn't Some Cartoon Musical") and a few other critics, but what this study attempts to do is to examine how it serves both as a critique and as a celebration the ideology in question.

Neoliberalism is a complex and multilayered political philosophy and a term used to signify the late 20th-century political reappearance of 19th-century ideas associated with free-market capitalism. It is an economic philosophy that originated among European liberal scholars during the 1930s as a response to the perceived decline in popularity of classical liberalism, which was seen as giving way to a social liberal desire to control markets. "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2). It has been a significant factor in the proliferation of conservative and right-libertarian organizations, political parties, and think tanks, which are predominantly advocated by them. Neoliberalism is often associated with a set of economic liberalization policies including privatization, deregulation policies, globalization, free trade, and reductions in government spending. (Rutar).

Neo-liberalism's influence on the film industry is a multifaceted phenomenon that has shaped the types of movies produced, marketed, and consumed. (Cooper). The emphasis on market forces and profit maximization has led to a prevalence of blockbuster movies that prioritize spectacle and entertainment value over artistic expression or social commentary resulting in a homogenization of cinematic styles and narratives with many films conforming to familiar genres and formulas. Neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism and meritocracy has perpetuated existing power structures, limiting representation and diversity in front of and behind the camera. Despite these criticisms, many movies have emerged as critiques of neoliberalism's effects, such as increased income inequality, environmental degradation, and erosion of social nets. Films like *The Big Short* (2015), *99 Homes* (2014), and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) offer scathing critiques of neoliberalism's dominant ideologies by creating alternative narratives, experimenting with innovative storytelling, and promoting social change. Through these counter-narratives, cinema has emerged as a powerful tool for critiquing and resisting neoliberalism's influence.

Disney's Animation Movies and *Zootopia*

Animation movies have been a staple of modern entertainment, captivating audiences of all ages with their vibrant visuals, engaging storylines, and memorable characters. From classic Disney films like *Snow White and Bambi* to modern blockbusters like *Frozen* and *Inside Out*, animation movies have evolved significantly over the years, incorporating cutting-edge technology and innovative storytelling techniques. With the rise of studios like Pixar, Dreamworks, and Illumination, the industry has become increasingly diverse, producing a wide range of films that cater to different tastes and preferences.

Zootopia is a buddy cop action-comedy film directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore. The film was produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. *Zootopia* is set in a modern, civilized society of anthropomorphic animals, where Judy Hopps, a young and ambitious rabbit, becomes the first rabbit to join the Zootopia Police Department. She teams up with Nick Wilde, a charming and cynical fox, to solve the mystery of a series of disappearances of predators, uncovering a sinister plot by Bellwether, a seemingly benevolent sheep, to perpetuate prejudice and fear against predators. Through their investigation, Judy and Nick challenge their own biases and prejudices, and ultimately expose Bellwether's plot, bringing her to justice and becoming heroes and symbols of a more inclusive and equitable society.

In the first reading, *Zootopia* appears to be a classic Disney tale of overcoming prejudices and achieving success through perseverance and determination. However, upon closer examination, the film reveals itself to be a nuanced commentary on the neoliberal ideology that underpins contemporary American society. Set in an anthropomorphic animal kingdom, Zootopia critiques the notion of meritocracy, highlighting how systemic inequalities and biases perpetuate social and economic disparities. The film's protagonist, Judy Hopps, a rabbit from a marginalized community, embodies the neoliberal idea of individualism and self-reliance, yet her journey also exposes racism and sexism which hinder her social mobility. Through its narrative, *Zootopia* critiques the neo-liberal ideology that has come to define Disney's brand of capitalist fantasy.

Zootopia's world-building is unparalleled in the Disney canon. The film's vision of a modern, cosmopolitan city is a marvel of imagination and creativity, a true masterpiece of cinematic storytelling, with the film's clever use of animal puns and its meticulous attention to detail in designing the city's various neighborhoods and landmarks. *Zootopia's* exploration of complex social issues is timely and timeless. The film's portrayal of a society where animals from different species and backgrounds must navigate and confront their own biases and prejudices is a powerful commentary on social and economic disparities. This is evident from the tense relationship between predators and preys, as well as its portrayal of how systemic inequalities limit opportunities for marginalized communities. The film's portrayal of a hyper-capitalist society, in which animals are encouraged to pursue their passions and interests in the name of economic growth and development, highlights the emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance.

***Zootopia's* World-building and its Neoliberal Undertones**

Zootopia presents a seemingly utopian world where animals have evolved to live in harmony with one another. The film's world-building is meticulously crafted, showcasing a thriving metropolis, but beneath its charming surface, *Zootopia* conceals certain ideologies that exact critical examination. The city of *Zootopia* is a hub of capitalist activity, with various businesses and corporations operating freely. The film's protagonist, Judy Hopps, is a fervent believer in the merits of hard work and individual responsibility. Judy's rise through the ranks of the Zootopia Police Department is depicted as a testament to her determination and hard work. However, this narrative glosses over the fact that Judy's success is, in part, facilitated by her privilege as a rabbit from a middle-class background, her cultural capital. This oversight reinforces the notion that individual merit is the sole determinant of success, ignoring the impact of systemic barriers and inequalities.

Zootopia's world-building also disseminates the myth of a level playing field. The film's city is depicted as a vibrant, cosmopolitan metropolis where animals from all walks of life coexist and thrive. However, this facade of inclusivity belies the fact that certain groups, such as predators, are marginalized and excluded from positions of power. This mirrors how neoliberal societies often mask systemic inequalities behind a veneer of meritocracy and equal opportunity. The film's portrayal of the character of Nick Wilde, a sly and charismatic fox, embodies the ideals of self-reliance and entrepreneurship. As a small business owner, Nick is depicted as a resourceful and cunning individual who has managed to succeed despite the odds being against him, as it is believed that those who are unsuccessful are simply not trying hard enough. Also, the film's villain, Bellwether, is a sheep who is revealed to be the mastermind behind the conspiracy to oppress predators. Bellwether's motivations are portrayed as being driven by a desire for power and control, rather than by any systemic or structural factors, as individuals are solely accountable for their successes and failures, rather than being influenced by broader societal factors.

Zootopia underscores the principle that a society is driven by competition and self-interest. The film's city is depicted

as a hub of entrepreneurial activity, where animals are encouraged to pursue their passions and start their businesses assuming that economic growth and prosperity are best achieved through the free market and individual entrepreneurship, rather than through collective action or government intervention. *Zootopia*'s society is propelled by the concept of progress and modernity. The film's city is a sleek, modern metropolis, with all the trappings of an advanced, technologically driven society. Progress and modernity are reckoned inherently desirable and they can be achieved through the adoption of new technologies and the pursuit of economic growth. Social problems can be solved through individual initiative and community effort, rather than through collective action and government intervention. Karen D. Sweeting opines that the "film illustrates how bureaucracy limits democracy through issues of governance, accountability, diversity, inclusion, social equity, justice, and race relations" (158).

The film's depiction of a thriving, elite neighborhood of Little Rodentia perceives gentrification in a positive light and as a reckonable force that can revitalize urban areas. But it turns a blind eye towards the fact that gentrification often displaces low-income and marginalized communities, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities. It also raises questions about the role of technology in shaping social relationships. A futuristic, high-tech society where animals use advanced technology to communicate and navigate their environment establishes the idea that technology is a neutral tool that can be used for the betterment of society.

Despite these criticisms, it is essential to acknowledge that *Zootopia* does attempt to subvert some neoliberal ideologies. The film's portrayal of systemic inequality and prejudice, particularly in the character of Judy's experiences as a rabbit in a predominantly carnivorous police force, is a commentary on the persistence of these issues in society. Furthermore, the film's emphasis on community and collective action, is embodied in the character of Judy's partnership with Nick Wild the fox. *Zootopia* is a commentary on the complexities of our society, highlighting both the progress we have made and the challenges that still lie ahead.

Meritocracy, Individualism, and their Discontents

Zootopia critiques individualism is through its portrayal of Judy's journey as a police officer. Judy's ambition was fueled by her desire to make a difference and to prove herself as a capable individual. She was determined to overcome the stereotypes and biases that existed against rabbits, who were often seen as being too small or too weak to be effective police officers. As a child, Judy was shown to be very determined and hardworking, practicing her police skills and training herself to become a better officer. She was also shown to be very idealistic, believing that she could make a difference and create a better world for all animals. Her determination and hard work ultimately paid off, as she became the first rabbit police officer in Zootopia and solved a major mystery that threatened the city.

Judy's boss, Chief Bogo, is a skeptical and dismissive character who doubts Judy's abilities as a police officer. Despite her hard work and determination, Judy is constantly belittled and marginalized by Bogo, who sees her as an appointment to show that they support equality. She is never trusted by Bogo and when Judy attempts to investigate any significant cases Bogo prevents her. Bogo thinks that she is just a rabbit and she won't have the ability and potential to solve the cases. So, she is first given the duty as a parking officer where she is assigned to issue parking tickets in the city of Zootopia. At that time a case of missing animals is reported at the police headquarters. Judy badly wants an opportunity to show her talent to the world, so she requests Chief Bogo to give her a chance to solve one missing case. Judy with her courage and talent solves the case along with the help of her fox friend Nick Wilde. Through this, she shows the world that through individual effort and talent, one can rupture the stereotype and prove that one's potential is based on their talent and not physical appearance.

Nick Wilde is also a victim of inequalities and discrimination. Nick's childhood was marked by bullying and prejudice. As a fox, Nick was often stereotyped and discriminated against by other animals, who viewed foxes as sly and untrustworthy. As a result, Nick grew up feeling like an outcast and developed a cynical and sarcastic attitude as a way of coping with the bullying and prejudice he faced. His ambition as a child was to become a part of the Junior Ranger Scouts, a prestigious organization that promoted community services and outdoor skills. However, Nick was rejected because of his species, which further consolidated his feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. As an adult, Nick became a con artist and a scammer, using his cunning and charm to make a living on the streets of Zootopia. Through the friendship with Judy Hopps, Nick was able to confront his past and find a new sense of purpose and belonging. Later, Nick becomes a police officer like Judy. These two characters' life experiences portray how systemic inequalities and biases can thwart meritocracy, and how individualism can disseminate the myth that success is solely the result of individual effort and talent.

The movie critiques individualism through its portrayal of Judy's relationships with other characters in the film. Judy's partnership with Nick Wilde, a sly and charming fox, is depicted as a key factor in her success as a police officer. Through their partnership, Judy and Nick overcome their limitations and achieve a common goal. This highlights the importance of collaboration and collective effort in achieving success and critiques individualism. Beneath the façade of the harmonious coexistence of animals, the film reveals a complex web of systemic inequalities and biases.

The film's villain Bellwether's actions perpetuate the myth that personal effort and talent are the determinants of success. She uses her position of power to manipulate and control others. By blaming the victims of a corrupt society for their circumstances, Bellwether shifts the focus away from the systemic issues and onto the individual. Bellwether's character also serves as a commentary on how those in positions of power can use their privilege to maintain the status quo. As a sheep, Bellwether uses her innocent and harmless appearance to her advantage, manipulating others and hiding her true intentions. The film suggests that success is not exclusively the result of individual effort and talent, but rather the result of a complex interplay between individual agency, systemic inequalities, and collective effort.

Colourblind Politics and its Consequences: Investigating Systemic Racism and Bias

Colourblind politics is an ideology that advocates for ignoring racial and ethnic differences and treating everyone

equally regardless of their background. Proponents of colourblind politics argue that this approach promotes equality, meritocracy, and individualism. However, critics contend that it ignores the historical and systemic inequalities that exist in society, perpetuating systemic racism and bias. The film *Zootopia* critiques colourblind politics and its consequences. *Zootopia* offers a powerful commentary on the limitations of colourblind politics and the need for a more nuanced understanding of systemic racism and bias. The film's protagonist, Judy Hopps, believes that anyone can achieve their goals, regardless of their species or background, as long as they work hard enough. Judy's mantra, "Anyone can be anything," reflects her colourblind worldview, which emphasizes individual merit and achievement over systemic inequalities. However, as Judy navigates the complexities of Zootopia's society, she begins to realize the flaws in her ideology. She encounters barriers, biases, and prejudices that prevent her from achieving her full potential. Judy discovers that the police department's hiring practices are biased against predators, despite their qualifications and abilities. Bellwether, who appears friendly and non-prejudiced, is revealed to be a mastermind of prejudice and discrimination. Her actions demonstrate how colorblind politics can be used to mask and perpetuate racism and bias. Bellwether's intention in the film is to control the population of Zootopia, particularly the predators, whom she believes have historically oppressed and marginalized the prey species. Through her cunning and charm, Bellwether creates a narrative that portrays the predators as a threat to the safety and well-being of the prey species, using this fear to justify the marginalization and oppression of the predators.

The character of Nick Wilde, a fox who is stereotyped and marginalized, illustrates the ways in which systemic inequalities can limit individual opportunities and outcomes. Despite his intelligence and abilities, Nick is forced to navigate a society that is stacked against him, perpetuating negative stereotypes and biases. The film's world is populated by animals that are divided into different species, each with their unique characteristics and abilities. However, this diversity is also a source of tension and conflict, as different species have different levels of power and privilege. The police department's bias against predators is a prime example of systemic racism, as it perpetuates negative stereotypes and biases against a particular group. Similarly, the film's portrayal of the predators as "savages", highlights how racism and bias can be used to maintain power and privilege.

Subverting Disney Tropes." Satire and Irony to Criticize Neoliberal Values

Disney movies have long been a staple of modern entertainment, captivating audiences with their memorable characters, catchy soundtracks, and timeless storylines. However, beneath their innocuous surface, many Disney films convey complex and often contradictory messages about neoliberal values, making their stance complex and multifaceted. Beneath their glossy surfaces, many Disney films employ satire and irony to critique neoliberal values.

Zootopia subverts Disney tropes, particularly in the areas of traditional Disney heroines, stereotypes and expectations, romance tropes, villains, and storytelling. Judy Hopps, the film's protagonist, is a strong, independent, and determined rabbit who doesn't need a male hero to rescue her. This subverts the trope of the "damsel in distress," where the female protagonist is often depicted as weak and in need of rescue. Judy's character also pokes fun at the traditional Disney princess archetype, as she is a realistic and relatable character. Another means is its portrayal of stereotypes and expectations. The film's depiction of predators (e.g., foxes, wolves) as the minority group and prey (e.g., rabbits, sheep) as the majority group challenges traditional Disney stereotypes. This reversal of expectations serves to highlight the absurdity of stereotypes and the importance of challenging our assumptions. Benjamin Clawhauser, a cheetah police officer, also pokes fun at the idea of token minority characters.

The film's portrayal of Judy and Nick's relationship as a platonic friendship, rather than a romantic partnership, subverts the conventional Disney trope of the romantic plot. The film's portrayal of the overly dramatic and cliched romance between Gazelle and her partner also serves as a commentary on the absurdity of traditional Disney romance tropes. *Zootopia* also subverts traditional Disney villains through its portrayal of Bellwether, who is a complex and nuanced character with a compelling backstory and motivation. Her character highlights the dangers of prejudice and stereotypes, as she uses these to manipulate and control others.

Zootopia also critiques neoliberal ideology through its presentation of a supposedly "post-racial" society. The utopian society where animals have supposedly transcended prejudice conveys that we live in a "post-racial" society. However, the film suggests that this is a myth and that racism and prejudice can persist even in societies that appear to be tolerant and inclusive. Bellwether, a sheep who is revealed to be a racist and a bigot, betrays the racist underbelly of Zootopian society.

The movie also interrogates class and economic inequality. The upscale Rainforest District where animals are priced out of their homes, point to gentrification and economic inequality Judy Hopps, a rabbit from a poor background, achieves success through hard work and determination, but also benefits from her privilege and access to resources. This satirical portrayal of economic opportunity serves to underscore the irony of economic inequality, where those who are already privileged have greater access to resources and opportunities.

Conclusion

Zootopia presents a nuanced and thought-provoking commentary on the dangers of neoliberalism and systemic inequality. Through its portrayal of a society that appears to be post-racial and post-prejudice, the film critiques neoliberal ideologies and advocates for a more equitable society. *Zootopia* serves as an important cultural artifact, one that challenges us to think critically about the world around us and to work towards creating a more just and equitable society. The film's portrayal of the Rainforest District, which is depicted as a tourist trap that commodifies the culture of the animals who live there, serves as a commentary on how diversity can be commodified and exploited for profit. *Zootopia* critiques how identity is performed and policed in society, and highlights the power of language in shaping our perceptions of ourselves and others. The film exemplifies that language can be used to perpetuate systemic inequality. It highlights the intersectionality of oppression, demonstrating how different

forms of oppression can intersect and compound. *Zootopia* serves as a call to action, encouraging viewers to recognize how systemic inequality persists, even in societies that appear to be just and equitable. It highlights the need for continued activism and advocacy to pursue a more just and equitable society.

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