

# Interpreting Zootopia from Dystopia

Rui Chen, Zhenzhen Shi,\* Xinlang Zhu

Jinjiang College, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, Jiangsu 212000

---

**Abstract:** Based on the current era background, dystopia has attracted enormous interest. As a successful animation, Zootopia, is often used as a case study by scholars from all walks of life, but few have explored its connection to dystopia. The aim of present study is to investigate dystopian elements in the film Zootopia. Through the definition of dystopia, the clarification of relationships between utopia and dystopia, the article analyzes some specific details in Zootopia combined with the current social situation. This may give people a deeper understanding of the practical significance of dystopia.

**Keywords:** Dystopia; Zootopia; Utopia

---

## 1. Introduction

Zootopia is no doubt considered as a success within the film industry as it received rave reviews and was named one of the top ten best films of 2016 by the American Film Institute, and received an Academy Award, Golden Globe. With its fantastic description about the dreamy place—Zootopia, it tells us a story about a rabbit Judy chasing her dream with a fox Nick who helps her during their adventure. From the name of it, we can deduce the dreamy place Zootopia consists of zoo and utopia may be a place where various animals live with harmonies and happiness just like Judy thought before she came to the Zootopia. However, the creator of the film didn't make a real utopia place. On the contrary, uncover false beauty, we can find out that what the creator created is more like a dystopia place and the article will introduce this piece in detail later. Studies over the past two decades have provided important information on dystopia. While a variety of perspective of the term dystopia have been suggested, the article will use some of them to interpret Zootopia. The objective of this study is to help people have a better understanding of the Zootopia and realize the importance of dystopia in today's society better.

## 2. Theoretical prerequisites

Speaking of dystopia, utopia, as its antonym of it, always comes to people's mind. The term utopia was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516 from the Greek words for "no" and "place." Since that time, the term has served as the name for a genre of fiction that describes societies deemed to be either nearly perfect or nearly perfectly horrible. The terms dystopia or antiutopia have sometimes been used to characterize the latter (e.g., Kateb, 1963).<sup>[1]</sup> It is a "bad place," but a fictional one. There are plenty of bad places in reality; dystopias are the very bad places of fiction, of invented reality. As such they are the products of a human desire to fantasize about extremity.<sup>[2]</sup> Dystopic moments or spaces exemplify or portray spatially or temporally limited rather than all-pervasive evils, real as well as imagined.<sup>[3]</sup> Contrary to the perfect ideal country of utopia, dystopia is often associated with bad, violence and poverty. However, the relationship between utopia and dystopia is more complex than this. This phenomenon not only in literature, but also in our real life. More and more examples indicate that there are many utopia elements in dystopias. In the meanwhile, many dystopian elements are in utopias. The Zootopia shows us this complex phenomenon excellently. The director has built a perfect utopia with his own hand, but what seems perfect is not so perfect because animals with different personalities and different races live together, the weak try to get greater rights to protect their own safety, the strong are unwilling to give up the rights they already hold. Violence, crime frequently came up. These nouns representing dystopia appear in this perfect utopia.

As the shortcomings of the seemingly perfect utopia revealed little by little by the dystopia, the animals in Zootopia experienced from panic to confrontation until finally solved the exposure of the shortcomings. Dystopia is meant to reveal the shortcomings of utopia ideas and expose the shortcomings of society. I feel like if you peek deep into these things they kind of reveal that the world

can – and probably will – get better, because that’s how I’ve always felt myself.<sup>[4]</sup> Through the dystopian elements in the film, the story is pushed to one climax after another. The reversal of the plot reveals a social ill that already exists. The mayor’s conspiracy was exposed, the cause of the predators’ madness was revealed, and with the efforts of the protagonists, the problems were solved eventually. Zootopia seems to return to its original tranquility. If we peek deep into these things, it seems that the world can really change for the better.

### **3. Findings and Discussions**

Dystopia makes readers think critically about the world they want to live in.<sup>[5]</sup> Zootopia created a world that humans dream of. There, any animal can be what it wants to be. But the setting of the animals is not human, they are still animals. In the meanwhile, they have been suppressing their inner madness. At this point, even a small crisis could crush this perfect world.

#### **3.1 The dystopian character of the mayor’s storyline**

In this film, the mayor of Zootopia, a lion exactly knew where the missing mammals were, but he pretended not to know and asked the police to look for it. The truth of the matter was that the animals were not missing, they all went crazy and attacked every animal indiscriminately. The mayor falsified the illusion of disappearance simply because all the lost animals were predators, and experts suspected it was biology which caused such things happened. The mayor, who was also a predator, feared that the exposure of the incident would make it difficult for him to stand in the position of mayor again. The mayor became the image of the typical monarch in a dystopia. As the leader of Utopia, it seems that he was defending the country everywhere, considering that he was protecting the country. But in fact, it was his own actions that really dealt a fatal blow to the country. The mayor Lionheart did not disclose the truth of the matter, not because he was worried that other animals in Zootopia would panic when they found out, but only because he was worried that he might not be able to be mayor again. Until the end, he thought he was protecting his citizens, but in fact, no matter how well he hid it, even if Judy didn’t find it, as more and more predators disappeared, the other animals would eventually find out. This is not the protection of his citizens, this is the protection of his own power.

In dystopia, it seems that people in adversity is familiar. They are eccentric and disillusioned. The younger generation are more idealistic, while the politicians are either opportunistic moralists or simply lazy.<sup>[2]</sup> The mayor prefers to see his own interests as his main goal, but Judy tends to be more idealistic when it comes to difficult situations. She is willing to devote herself to understanding the truth and solving problems.

#### **3.2 The dystopian character of the animals that lived in the city**

As mentioned above, in such a utopian world, animals have been suppressing their inner madness, so they are extremely vulnerable. In the face of such events, the crisis of herbivores and predators is imminent. This is dystopia. The law of survival hidden in the hearts of animals has not been truly erased from their memories by animals. That’s animal nature, engraved in DNA that can’t be changed, and stereotypes about different species. The panic displayed by the animals is perhaps the most dystopian moment. At that moment, all ideal kingdoms proved to be mere illusions, and crises and panics were always present. In the end, though, the madness of all predators was not in the DNA as experts and most animals first thought, but a wildflower that drove any animal who eat it crazy. However, the film reminds us everywhere that although we see a beautiful utopian world, in which animals are transformed into humans and become part of a civilized society. It seems that they all entered a more advanced civilization. But herbivores still have not separated from their weak identity, and the strong still belong to predators. Even in such a utopian world, racial discrimination persists. I want to acknowledge that what Zootopia does far more daringly and successfully than most if not all of its Disney predecessors is directly confront implicit racial bias. Its narrative explicitly poses the social problem of what it might mean if individuals presumptively and unthinkingly imposed negative, false stereotypes on a minority of their fellow citizens.<sup>[6]</sup> Judy, who has just arrived at the police station, is assigned a job not as a police officer in the true sense of the word, but as a traffic policeman. Nick, because he was a fox, was discriminated against by other animals at a young age. They considered foxes to be cunning and untrustworthy. It seems that all animals exist in the DNA stereotypes of different species. Little bunny can’t compare to strong predators, let alone be qualified for a police position.

### **4. Conclusion**

In Zootopia, Judy and Nick solved mysteries again and again during their expeditions and uncover the truth of events. The process was tortuous. Although the place is called the utopia of the animal world, it has hidden dystopian elements. Whether it is the selfishness of the mayor lion or the law of the food chain that is almost instinctive in the heart of the animal. It shows us the shortcomings of the so-called perfect society exposed by dystopia.

When the film is projected into real life, the imperfections of today’s society seem as frightening as dystopian descriptions. But

as the article mentioned above, dystopia still has its social realities, and even this fear can bring us more critical thinking in reality, rather than indulging in utopia dreams.

Are the arts important in modern society? Of course, they are. “Art is not a mirror to hold up to society but a hammer with which to shape it”— Bertolt Brecht. Through the article, it could be concluded that art, including dystopias, can help us better understand the world we live in.

## References:

- [1]Discriminating Utopian from Dystopian Literature: Why is Walden Two Considered a Dystopia? Bobby Newman, Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, and Queens Services for Autistic Citizens, Inc., *The Behavior Analyst* 1993,16,167-175 No.2 (Fall)
- [2]When the Night Has Come: Images of Dystopia and Catastrophe in Recent British Writing, Aleks Sierz, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Volume 42, Number 3, September 2020 (PAJ 126), pp. 28-40 (Article)
- [3]News from Somewhere: Enhanced Sociability and the Composite Definition of Utopia and Dystopia, GREGORY CLAEYS, *History*, April 2013, Vol. 98, No. 2 (330) (April 2013), pp. 145-173 Published by: Wiley
- [4]Dystopia Introduction by Aleks Sierz, Dennis Kelly, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*,2021, Vol.9, No.1, pp.77-80, ISSN2195-0156
- [5]The importance of the concept of dystopia in modernism, Hayotxon Usmonovna O’rinova,”*Science and Education” Scientific Journal*, April 2023 / Volume 4 Issue 4
- [6]Audience, Implicit Racial Bias, and Cinematic Twists in Zootopia, DAN FLORY, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77:4 Fall 2019