

Symbolic Interaction and the Reproduction of Prejudice: A Sociological Interpretation of the Animated Film Zootopia

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Abstract—The animated film *Zootopia* takes a virtual society composed of animals as its carrier, metaphorically presenting core social issues such as prejudice, class differentiation, power imbalance and inclusiveness in the real world. Its character settings contain rich symbolic meanings and complete distinct symbolic reconstruction with the development of the plot. Taking *Zootopia* as the research object, this study comprehensively adopts the textual analysis method, theoretical analysis method and literature research method, and combines Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Gordon Allport's prejudice theory, as well as David Newman and Anthony Giddens' theories of social class and power structure to systematically analyze the symbolic meanings, reconstruction processes and social connotations of the animated characters. The study finds that the symbols of animated characters can be divided into essential symbols and constructive symbols, and their reconstruction needs to go through three core stages including the endowment of existing symbols, symbolic conflict and symbolic reconstruction. The main characters Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde break their inherent prejudiced symbols and complete their self-symbolic reconstruction through social interaction and their own efforts respectively. The symbolic reconstruction of characters not only reflects the phenomena of prejudice and inequality based on race and class in the real society, but also contains profound meanings of eliminating prejudice, realizing individual self-worth and constructing an inclusive social community. By interpreting the sociological logic of character symbolic reconstruction, this study provides theoretical reference and practical enlightenment for resolving group conflicts and promoting social inclusiveness in the real society, and at the same time makes up for the deficiency in existing studies that lack the systematic combination of character symbolic reconstruction and sociological theories.

Keywords— *Zootopia*; Symbolic Reconstruction; Sociological Theory; Prejudice; Social Inclusiveness; Social Class.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research Background and Research Purposes

Modern society is characterized by diversity and difference, yet social problems such as prejudice, discrimination and class differentiation still exist. These complex social phenomena are presented in various forms through mass cultural texts, and animation, as a symbolic and allegorical expressive carrier, can metaphorically bear the contradictions and problems of the real society. In particular, Disney's animated film *Zootopia* (2016), set in a virtual society of animals, explores issues such as conflicts between herbivores and carnivores, stereotypes, class mobility and power structure, offering profound

reflections on social inequality and inclusiveness in modern human society.

In recent years, sociological research on animation has increased dramatically, but most studies only stay at the level of general thematic analysis, lacking systematic analysis that combines the symbolic meanings contained in specific animated characters with sociological theories. *Zootopia* is not merely a children's animation; each of its characters symbolizes a specific group in the real society and reveals social relations, cognitive structures and the reproduction process of prejudice through symbols. Therefore, this study takes *Zootopia* as the research object, and its main purpose is to analyze the process of character symbolic reconstruction from the perspective of sociological theories.

The specific research purposes are as follows: First, to construct a theoretical framework for the symbolic reconstruction of animated characters based on sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism, stereotype theory and social class theory. Second, to explore the symbolic meanings and reconstruction processes of each character by analyzing the main characters of *Zootopia* (Judy Hopps, Nick Wilde, etc.). Third, to extract the content such as prejudice, class inequality and the importance of inclusiveness in the real society reflected by character symbolic reconstruction, and provide sociological enlightenment. Fourth, to strengthen the academic foundation of this study by applying the theories in the works of Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer, David Newman, Anthony Giddens and Gordon Allport.

Research Questions and Research Methods

To achieve the above research purposes, this study sets the following two core research questions and provides answers in combination with the research content.

Research Question 1

What are the symbolic meanings of the characters in *Zootopia* and what are their reconstruction processes? How can relevant sociological theories (dramaturgical theory, symbolic interactionism, prejudice theory) be applied to the analysis of these reconstruction processes?

The symbolic meanings of the characters in *Zootopia* fall into two categories: essential symbols and constructive symbols. Essential symbols are formed based on the innate characteristics of characters such as race and body shape, and have socially recognized fixed meanings. For example, the rabbit (Judy) symbolizes “weak and incapable of shouldering

important responsibilities”, the fox (Nick) symbolizes “cunning and untrustworthy, good at deceiving”, the sheep symbolizes “meek and weak”, and the lion symbolizes “power and bravery”. Constructive symbols are gradually formed and dynamically changed through character interaction and behavioral experience, which are the core achievements of symbolic reconstruction. In the end, Judy is reconstructed as a “brave and responsible police officer”, Nick as a “just and trustworthy partner”, Assistant Mayor Bellwether as a “dangerous and cunning power seeker”, and Mayor Lionheart as an “inclusive and responsible administrator”.

The reconstruction of character symbols goes through three core stages: First, the stage of endowment of existing symbols. Essential symbols are endowed to characters based on social stereotypes. For example, Judy is endowed with the symbol of “being unable to become a police officer” because of her rabbit identity, and Nick with the symbol of “a liar” because of his fox identity. Symbols in this stage are mostly influenced by prejudice. Second, the stage of symbolic conflict. Conflicts arise between characters' self-cognition, ideals and existing symbols. For example, Judy's desire to “become a police officer” conflicts with the inherent symbol of “a weak rabbit”, and Nick's inner yearning for “justice” conflicts with the external symbol of “a cunning liar”, which becomes the core motivation for symbolic reconstruction. Third, the stage of symbolic reconstruction. Characters break through existing symbols through social interaction and their own behaviors. For example, through solving cases and fulfilling her duties, Judy gradually breaks the inherent cognition and forms a new constructive symbol; Nick also breaks the inherent symbol of “a cunning fox” and forms a new constructive symbol of “a just and trustworthy partner” through cooperating with Judy and acting with justice.

The specific application of relevant sociological theories is as follows: First, Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, whose core proposition is that symbolic meanings are formed and reconstructed through social interaction. Applied to the analysis of character symbolic reconstruction, the meanings of character symbols are not fixed, but constantly reshaped through mutual interaction. The cooperative interaction between Judy and Nick makes both of them break the inherent cognition of each other's race: Judy gradually changes her symbolic cognition of foxes as “cunning”, and Nick also reconstructs his self-symbol with Judy's recognition. At the same time, self-concept is formed through others' evaluation. Nick re-recognizes himself and promotes his own symbolic reconstruction with Judy's comment that “you have a just heart”. Second, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which compares social behavior to theatrical performance, with the core of impression management and the switch between front-stage and back-stage behaviors. Applied to the analysis, characters adjust their behaviors according to scenes to manage others' impressions: Nick shows the front-stage behavior of “a liar” in society, conforming to the inherent symbol of “a cunning fox”, but shows his brave and just true self in the back-stage scenes of cooperating with Judy, and finally realizes the transformation of front-stage behavior to complete symbolic reconstruction; Judy abandons the front-

stage behavior of “a weak rabbit” and performs her duties as a “brave police officer”, reshaping others' symbolic cognition of herself through impression management. Third, Gordon Allport's prejudice theory, which holds that prejudice is an untested preconception, and stereotypes are over-simplified cognitions that endow all members of a specific group with the same characteristics and are reproduced through social culture. Applied to the analysis, the initial essential symbols of characters are essentially the products of stereotypes and prejudice. The cognitions that rabbits are “weak”, foxes are “cunning” and carnivores are “violent” are all untested prejudices, which not only endow characters with negative symbols but also intensify the conflicts between herbivores and carnivores. The process of character symbolic reconstruction is essentially a process of breaking such prejudices and eliminating stereotypes, and the symbolic reconstruction of Judy and Nick is a criticism and subversion of the prejudice that “race determines character and ability”.

Research Question 2

Based on the theories of social class and power structure, how does the symbolic reconstruction of characters in Zootopia reflect the problems of social inequality and inclusiveness? What real social phenomena does this reconstruction process reflect and what sociological enlightenment does it provide?

Based on David Newman and Anthony Giddens' theories of social class and power structure, modern society has a hierarchical structure with uneven power distribution. The dominant group controls the disadvantaged group through power, and class mobility is restricted by structural factors. This theory is fully reflected in the symbolic reconstruction of characters in Zootopia, clearly showing the core problems of social inequality and inclusiveness. From the perspective of the manifestation of social inequality, the social class in Zootopia is divided by “race + body shape”: large carnivores (such as lions) monopolize power and resources and are at the upper level of society, endowed with the symbol of “powerful and trustworthy”; small herbivores (such as rabbits) are at the bottom of society, endowed with the symbol of “weak and useless”, and their class mobility faces structural barriers such as stereotypes and discrimination. Judy, as a small rabbit at the bottom, yearns to realize class promotion by becoming a police officer but is initially assigned to the marginal post of traffic violation punishment, which is a direct manifestation of social inequality. As a herbivore, Assistant Mayor Bellwether is ignored in the power system and unable to obtain real power. This uneven power distribution pushes her to the extreme and makes her attempt to seize power by exploiting prejudice. The reconstruction of her symbol from “meek” to “cunning” is essentially a rebellion and alienation caused by social inequality.

From the perspective of the manifestation of social inclusiveness, the process of character symbolic reconstruction is a process of gradually breaking class barriers and realizing social inclusiveness. Judy breaks the inherent cognition that “a rabbit at the bottom cannot become a qualified police officer” through her own efforts and gains social recognition, and her symbolic reconstruction breaks the prejudice that “class

determines ability". Nick, a fox marginalized by prejudice, breaks the symbol of "a fox can only be a liar" and realizes his self-worth with Judy's understanding and cooperation, reflecting the possibility of mutual inclusiveness between different groups. Mayor Lionheart corrects his prejudice gradually from "suspecting all carnivores" and is reconstructed as the symbol of "an inclusive and responsible mayor", showing the importance of the dominant group abandoning prejudice to promote social inclusiveness. The symbolic reconstruction of these characters is essentially a criticism of social inequality and a pursuit of an ideal society of "equality for all and mutual inclusiveness".

The real social phenomena reflected by character symbolic reconstruction are mainly threefold: First, the universality and harm of stereotypes and prejudice. There are inherent prejudices based on race, class, gender and so on in the real society, just like the cognitive biases towards animals of different races in Zootopia. These prejudices will trigger discrimination and conflicts and hinder social harmony. Second, the reality of social class differentiation and uneven power distribution. The disadvantaged groups at the bottom face structural restrictions in class mobility, and their values and abilities are easily ignored, just like the occupational discrimination Judy faces initially. Third, the importance of inclusiveness and understanding under the coexistence of diversity and difference. Different groups coexist in the real society, and prejudice and estrangement will intensify social conflicts, while mutual understanding and respect are the key to resolving conflicts.

The sociological enlightenment it provides mainly includes three aspects: First, eliminating stereotypes and prejudice requires the joint efforts of individuals and society. In Zootopia, Judy and Nick break stereotypes and prejudice through their own efforts and mutual understanding. This enlightens us that in the real society, everyone should recognize and correct their own prejudices, and society should promote understanding and communication between different groups so as to eliminate stereotypes and prejudice. In particular, the dominant group should abandon prejudice against the disadvantaged group and promote the realization of social equality with an inclusive attitude. Second, the self-realization and class mobility of the disadvantaged group require efforts to break structural restrictions. Judy, as a small rabbit, is at the bottom of the social class, but she realizes her self-worth as a police officer and elevates her social status with her efforts and courage. This enlightens us that in the real society, the disadvantaged group needs not only their own efforts but also the society to eliminate structural barriers and provide equal opportunities to realize self-worth and class mobility. Third, social inclusiveness and community construction are important issues in modern society. In Zootopia, Judy, Nick and other animals strive to build an inclusive society by respecting differences and cooperating with each other. This enlightens us that in modern society, we should respect diversity and difference, and build an inclusive social community through mutual understanding and cooperation. Especially in the era of globalization, where multiple cultures, races and groups coexist, social

inclusiveness is an important foundation for social stability and development.

This study adopts the following research methods to solve the above research questions, ensuring the systematicness and rigor of the analysis.

The textual analysis method is adopted to decompose the image details, lines, scene settings and behavioral and personality characteristics of the characters in Zootopia in detail, focusing on exploring the symbolic meanings behind each scene and line, extracting the symbolic meanings, reconstruction processes and profound social meanings of the characters, and accurately grasping the social information and metaphorical connotations conveyed by the animation. Meanwhile, the theoretical analysis method is applied to systematically collect and sort out the sociological theories required for the research: using Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism to analyze the influence of character interaction on the formation and reconstruction of symbols; drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to interpret the impression management and social performance of characters; through Gordon Allport's prejudice theory to analyze the formation and reproduction mechanism of prejudice between characters; and relying on David Newman and Anthony Giddens' theories of social class and power structure to interpret the unequal structure of the virtual society, thus constructing an analytical framework for systematically interpreting the symbolic reconstruction of animated characters from a sociological perspective.

In addition, the literature research method is employed in this study to comprehensively collect, sort out and deeply analyze various literatures related to animated symbol analysis, relevant sociological theories and existing studies on Zootopia, clarify the achievements and limitations of existing studies, distinguish the differentiated characteristics and academic value of this study, and further strengthen the theoretical foundation of the research. In the research process, the core works such as Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism*, David Newman's *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, Anthony Giddens' *Sociology* and Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* are intensively studied, and the theoretical viewpoints therein are reasonably integrated into the research and analysis to ensure the accuracy and pertinence of theoretical application and provide a solid theoretical support for the analysis of character symbolic reconstruction.

II. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING STUDIES AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

(1) *Analysis of Existing Studies*

In recent years, research on animation has been carried out in various fields, and sociological research from a sociological perspective has also gradually increased. Existing studies on animation can be roughly divided into three categories: First, literary and aesthetic analysis of animation. Such studies focus on the plot, theme, aesthetic expression and film language of animation, mainly in the fields of literature and film studies. For example, studies analyzing the allegorical expression

methods and thematic meanings of animation are representative. However, such studies lack the combination with sociological theories and have the limitation of being unable to deeply analyze the symbolic meanings and social context of characters.

Second, research on the relationship between animation and social culture. Such studies focus on the ways in which animation reflects real social culture, values and social problems, mainly carried out in the fields of sociology and cultural studies. Some studies take Zootopia as the object, analyzing the metaphor of the conflict between herbivores and carnivores for racial conflict in human society, as well as the criticism of stereotypes and discrimination. However, most of such studies only mention the relevance to general social phenomena, fail to specifically analyze the process of character symbolic reconstruction, and often fail to systematically apply specific sociological theories.

Third, research on the symbolic analysis of animated characters. Such studies analyze the symbolic meanings contained in the appearance, personality and behavior of characters, mainly in the fields of semiotics and cultural studies. Some studies analyze the symbolic meanings of characters' colors, costumes and expressions, but due to the lack of combination with sociological theories, they cannot deeply interpret how character symbols reveal social relations, cognitive structures and the reproduction process of prejudice.

On the whole, although existing studies have partially recognized the social significance of Zootopia, there is a lack of systematic analysis that combines character symbolic reconstruction with sociological theories. This study intends to use the sociological theories of Goffman, Blumer and other scholars to specifically analyze the process of character symbolic reconstruction in Zootopia, make up for the limitations of existing studies and enhance the depth of sociological research on animation.

Theoretical Background

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory led by Herbert Blumer, which holds that human social behavior is realized through symbols, and the meaning of symbols is formed and changed through social interaction. In Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer argues that human beings take actions by interpreting the world symbolically, and everyone's behavior is formed in the interaction with others' behaviors. That is to say, human beings endow things, events and others with symbolic meanings, decide their own behaviors according to these meanings, and reconstruct meanings through interaction at the same time.

The core concepts of symbolic interactionism include meaning assignment, interaction and self-concept. Meaning assignment refers to the process in which human beings endow subjective meanings to things and events in the world, and such meanings are formed through social interaction. Interaction is realized through the exchange of symbols between human beings, and everyone's intentions and behaviors will influence each other. Self-concept is formed

through others' evaluation and interaction, and human beings adjust their own behaviors according to self-concept.

This symbolic interactionism provides an important theoretical foundation for the analysis of character symbolic reconstruction in Zootopia. Each character in Zootopia has a specific symbol, and the meaning of these symbols is formed and changed through interaction with other characters. For example, Judy Hopps is endowed with the stereotyped symbol of "weak and incapable of becoming a police officer" because of her rabbit race, but she reconstructs this symbol through interaction with other characters and forms a new symbol of "a brave and responsible police officer".

Dramaturgical Theory

Dramaturgical theory is a theory put forward by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which compares human social behavior to theatrical performance and analyzes the process of human impression management in society. Goffman holds that human beings play the role of "actors" on the stage of society and convey the expected impression to others through various "performances", a process known as impression management.

The core concepts of dramaturgical theory include stage, front-stage behavior, back-stage behavior and impression management. The stage refers to the space where human beings perform; front-stage behavior is the behavior intentionally shown to others; back-stage behavior is the private behavior not shown to others; impression management is the process in which human beings adjust and manage their own behaviors to convey the expected impression to others.

This dramaturgical theory is helpful for analyzing the behavior and symbolic reconstruction of characters in Zootopia. The characters in Zootopia switch between front-stage and back-stage behaviors according to their own roles and situations, and reconstruct their own symbols through impression management. For example, Nick Wilde is endowed with the symbol of "cunning and untrustworthy" because of his fox race, so he shows front-stage behavior in line with this symbol (acting as a liar) in society, but shows his back-stage behavior (his brave and just side) through interaction with Judy and reconstructs his own symbol.

Prejudice and Stereotype Theory

Prejudice and stereotype theory is a theory mainly discussed by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice*. Prejudice is a negative attitude towards a specific group and an untested preconception; a stereotype is an over-simplified cognition that endows all members of a specific group with the same characteristics. Gordon Allport holds that prejudice is formed and reproduced through social background, culture, education and other channels, and is deeply rooted in human cognitive structures.

Stereotypes are formed through symbolic interaction and influence social relations. In particular, the dominant group maintains its dominant position and reproduces prejudice by forming stereotypes of the disadvantaged group. Such prejudice and stereotypes are one of the main causes of social inequality, discrimination and conflicts.

This theory is of great significance for analyzing the conflict between herbivores and carnivores in Zootopia. In the

society of Zootopia, there are stereotypes such as carnivores being "dangerous and violent" and rabbits being "weak and incapable". These stereotypes trigger prejudice and intensify social conflicts. By breaking these stereotypes and prejudices and reconstructing their own symbols, Judy and Nick reveal the importance of eliminating prejudice and realizing social inclusiveness.

Theories of Social Class and Power Structure

The theories of social class and power structure are mainly discussed by David Newman in *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* and Anthony Giddens in *Sociology*. The theory holds that modern society has a hierarchical structure, and there are differences in resources, power and status among each class. Social class is formed by innate factors (birth, race, etc.) and acquired factors (efforts, education, etc.), and mobility between classes is restricted by structural factors.

Power structure refers to the way of power distribution and operation in society. The dominant group pursues its own interests and controls the disadvantaged group through power. Giddens holds that power in modern society exists in various fields such as economy, politics and culture, and the operation of power is an important factor in forming and changing social relations.

This theory is helpful for analyzing the virtual social structure of Zootopia. The society of Zootopia is divided into classes according to herbivores and carnivores, large and small animals, forming a structure in which large carnivores monopolize power and resources. Judy, as a small rabbit, is at the bottom of the social class. She attempts to realize class mobility through the occupation of a police officer but is subject to structural restrictions (stereotypes and discrimination). Through this setting, Zootopia metaphorically presents the social inequality and power structure of the real society.

III. THE SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ANIMATED CHARACTERS

The Meanings of Animated Character Symbols

Animated characters are not merely visual images, but social beings bearing a variety of symbolic meanings. Animation creators endow specific symbols to characters through their appearance, personality, behavior, background and so on, and these symbols symbolize people, groups and social phenomena in the real society. That is to say, the symbols of animated characters are the projection of the meaning of the real society in the virtual world, reflecting social concepts, values, cognitive structures and other contents.

The symbols of animated characters can be roughly divided into two categories: First, essential symbols. Such symbols are formed based on the innate characteristics of characters such as race, appearance and gender, and usually have socially recognized meanings. For example, in Zootopia, the rabbit symbolizes "weak and meek", the fox symbolizes "cunning and untrustworthy", and the lion symbolizes "power and bravery". Second, constructive symbols. Such symbols are formed and changed through characters' behavior, personality, experience and interaction. Different from essential symbols,

they are fluid and can be reconstructed through social interaction.

The meaning of animated character symbols will change according to the social context, and show diversity due to the creator's intention and the audience's interpretation. However, most animated character symbols reflect social problems, values and cognitive structures of the real society and convey social information to the audience. In particular, allegorical animations such as Zootopia simplify and present complex social problems through character symbols, guiding the audience to conduct social reflection.

The Process of Animated Character Symbolic Reconstruction

The symbolic reconstruction of animated characters refers to the process in which characters change and redefine the meaning of existing symbols through social interaction. This process mainly goes through three stages: First, the stage of endowment of existing symbols. Based on innate characteristics such as birth, race and appearance, characters are endowed with the symbolic meanings prescribed by society in advance. The symbols in this stage are mainly essential symbols, and most of them are formed by stereotypes and prejudice. For example, in Zootopia, Judy is endowed with the symbol of "weak and incapable of becoming a police officer" because of her rabbit race, and Nick with the symbol of "cunning and untrustworthy" because of his fox race.

Second, the stage of symbolic conflict. Conflicts arise between characters' self-cognition, aspirations, experiences and existing symbols. Such conflicts are the motivation for characters to carry out symbolic reconstruction and are mainly generated through social interaction. For example, Judy has a conflict between her aspiration to "become a police officer" and the existing symbol of "a rabbit cannot become a police officer". To resolve this conflict, she enters the police academy to study and strives to perform her duties as a police officer in Zootopia.

Third, the stage of symbolic reconstruction. To resolve conflicts, characters redefine and change the meaning of existing symbols through interaction with other characters, their own behaviors and experiences. The symbols in this stage are constructive symbols, formed through self-concept and social interaction. For example, in the process of solving criminal cases in Zootopia, Judy breaks the existing symbol of "a weak and powerless rabbit" and reconstructs a new symbol of "a brave and responsible police officer"; Nick also breaks away from the existing symbol of "a cunning fox" through cooperation with Judy and just behaviors, and forms a new symbol of "a just and trustworthy partner".

The Social Significance of Animated Character Symbolic Reconstruction

The symbolic reconstruction of animated characters is not only a story of character growth, but also contains profound social significance: First, symbolic reconstruction means the elimination of stereotypes and prejudice. By breaking the existing stereotyped symbols and forming new symbols, characters criticize the prejudice and inequality existing in society and guide the audience to break stereotypes. In

Zootopia, Judy and Nick eliminate the prejudice between herbivores and carnivores by breaking the stereotypes of their respective races and reconstructing their own symbols, conveying the importance of social inclusiveness.

Second, symbolic reconstruction embodies individual self-realization and class mobility. By breaking the constraints of existing symbols and forming new symbols with their own aspirations and efforts, characters realize their individual self-worth and complete social class mobility. This process metaphorically presents the process in which the disadvantaged group in the real society breaks through structural restrictions and realizes self-worth. Judy, as a small rabbit, is at the bottom of the social class, but she realizes her self-worth as a police officer and elevates her social status with her efforts and courage.

Third, symbolic reconstruction promotes social inclusiveness and the formation of a community. In the process of symbolic reconstruction, characters establish social relations and realize social inclusiveness through understanding, cooperation and respect with other characters. This conveys to modern society the importance of respecting diversity and difference and constructing a community. In Zootopia, Judy, Nick and other animals strive to eliminate prejudice and build an inclusive society by respecting each other's differences and cooperating with each other, emphasizing the importance of the formation of a social community.

IV. AN ANALYSIS OF THE SYMBOLIC RECONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTERS IN ZOOTOPIA

(I) *An Overview of the Animated Film Zootopia*

Zootopia, a 3D animated film produced by Disney in 2016, unfolds the story against the background of Zootopia, a virtual society where animals speak and live like human beings. Zootopia flaunts the ideal that "any animal can become what they want to be", but in fact, it hides problems such as conflicts between herbivores and carnivores, stereotypes, discrimination and class inequality. In this society, Judy Hopps, a small rabbit, has dreamed of becoming a police officer since childhood, but encounters obstacles due to the stereotype and discrimination that "a rabbit cannot become a police officer". However, Judy does not give up, graduates from the police academy with honors and is assigned to work at the Zootopia Police Department, but is only responsible for simple traffic violation punishment tasks at first. On the other hand, Nick Wilde, a fox, is hurt by stereotypes in his childhood and then holds the idea that "a fox must be cunning" and makes a living as a liar. To solve the serial incidents of carnivore violence in Zootopia, Judy has to cooperate with Nick. In the process of breaking stereotypes and prejudice together and revealing the truth of the incident, the two reconstruct each other's symbols and build Zootopia into a more inclusive society.

(II) *An Analysis of the Symbolic Reconstruction of Judy Hopps (the Rabbit)*

The Endowment of Existing Symbols: "A Weak and Powerless Rabbit"

As a small rabbit, Judy Hopps is endowed with the symbol of "weak and powerless, incapable of becoming a police officer" in the society of Zootopia. This symbol is formed by the racial characteristics of rabbits (small size, meek personality) and social stereotypes. In the childhood scene of Judy, when she says she "wants to become a police officer", the surrounding animals laugh at her and say "a rabbit cannot be a police officer, only a farmer". This plot shows that the stereotype of rabbits is deeply rooted in society.

According to Gordon Allport's prejudice theory, such stereotypes are untested preconceptions and reproduced through social background. In the society of Zootopia, rabbits have always been regarded as objects that need to be protected by carnivores or large animals, and "weakness" is considered an essential characteristic of rabbits. Although this symbol affects Judy's self-cognition, she does not submit to this symbol but strives to pursue her dream.

Symbolic Conflict: "A Rabbit Who Wants to Be a Police Officer" vs "A Weak Rabbit"

Judy has a fierce conflict between her aspiration to "become a police officer" and the existing symbol of "a weak and powerless rabbit". This conflict is further intensified after Judy enters the police academy. Most of the students in the police academy are large carnivores (lions, wolves, etc.) or large herbivores (giraffes, elephants, etc.), and Judy is at a disadvantage in physical conditions. The students and instructors laugh at Judy, claim that "a rabbit cannot become a police officer" and discriminate against her.

According to Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, human behavior is determined by symbolic meaning, and meaning is reconstructed through interaction. Through the evaluation and discrimination of people around her, Judy re-recognizes the meaning of the existing symbol, but she does not give up because of this but trains harder. Adhering to the belief that "a rabbit can also become a police officer", Judy graduates from the police academy with honors and is assigned to the Zootopia Police Department, but only responsible for simple traffic violation punishment tasks at first, encountering new conflicts.

Symbolic Reconstruction: "A Brave and Responsible Police Officer"

To solve the carnivore violence incident in Zootopia, Judy cooperates with Nick Wilde and reconstructs her own symbol. In the process of investigating the incident, Judy uses her body shape and racial characteristics to find clues that other police officers fail to find and track down the criminals. For example, she uses her small size to enter narrow spaces to collect clues and captures criminals with the agility of a rabbit.

According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, human beings show their own symbols on the social stage through impression management. In the process of performing her duties as a police officer, Judy abandons the front-stage behavior of "a weak rabbit" and shows a new front-stage behavior of "a brave and responsible police officer". By solving the incident, Judy changes the cognition of her colleagues and citizens in the Zootopia Police Department and forms a new symbol of "a rabbit can also become a police officer".

In addition, in the process of cooperating with Nick, Judy breaks the prejudice against carnivores. At first, Judy regards Nick as a "cunning fox", but in the process of investigating the incident together, she sees Nick's brave and just side and gradually corrects her prejudice. Through this process, Judy forms the cognition that "all animals are equal and should not judge others by their race", further improving the reconstruction of her own symbol.

(III) *An Analysis of the Symbolic Reconstruction of Nick Wilde (the Fox)*

The Endowment of Existing Symbols: "A Cunning and Untrustworthy Fox"

As a fox, Nick Wilde is endowed with the symbol of "cunning, untrustworthy and a liar" in the society of Zootopia. This symbol is formed by the racial characteristics of foxes (intelligent, good at hiding) and social stereotypes. In Nick's childhood scene, he tries to join the Boy Scouts but is rejected by other animals on the ground that "foxes are too cunning to join the Boy Scouts", and the animals even force him to wear a muzzle and laugh at him. This experience inflicts great harm on Nick and makes him form the cognition that "a fox must be cunning to survive".

According to Gordon Allport's prejudice theory, such stereotypes are reproduced through social culture and experience and are deeply rooted in human cognitive structures. In the society of Zootopia, foxes have always been regarded as liars who deceive others, and "cunning" is considered an essential characteristic of foxes. Nick submits to this symbol, makes a living as a liar and protects himself by strengthening this symbol.

Symbolic Conflict: "A Yearning to Be a Just and Trustworthy Being" vs "A Cunning Fox"

On the surface, Nick submits to the symbol of "a cunning liar", but deep down he yearns to be a "just and trustworthy being". This contradiction plunges him into symbolic conflict. This conflict becomes more obvious after Nick cooperates with Judy. At first, Judy regards Nick as a "liar" and forces him to be her partner in the investigation, but after seeing Judy's brave and responsible appearance, Nick gradually shows his inner conflict.

According to Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, self-concept is formed through others' evaluation and interaction. Nick receives Judy's evaluation that "although you are cunning, you have a just heart", which makes him re-cognize his inner yearning. Nick has a conflict between the existing symbol of "a cunning liar" and the new self-cognition of "a just partner", and strives to solve the incident together with Judy to resolve this conflict.

Symbolic Reconstruction: "A Just and Trustworthy Partner"

In the process of solving the carnivore violence incident together with Judy, Nick reconstructs his own symbol. He uses his intelligence to collect the information needed for the investigation and helps Judy advance the detection of the case. For example, relying on his understanding of various areas of Zootopia, Nick helps Judy track down clues and plays an important role in revealing the identity of the criminal.

According to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, human beings show their true selves through back-stage

behavior. In the process of cooperating with Judy, Nick abandons the front-stage behavior of "a cunning liar" and shows the back-stage behavior of "being just and brave". When Judy is in danger, Nick stands up to protect her and risks his own safety to reveal the truth of the incident. Through this process, Nick forms a new symbol of "a just and trustworthy partner".

In addition, in the process of cooperating with Judy, Nick heals his childhood trauma. Judy listens to Nick's past, understands and encourages him that "a fox can also be a just person", giving him courage. Through this process, Nick changes the existing cognition that "a fox must be cunning to survive" and forms a new cognition that "one can survive as a true self", further improving the reconstruction of his own symbol. In the end, Nick becomes a member of the Zootopia Police Department and Judy's partner, completely breaking the symbol of "a cunning fox".

(IV) *The Symbolic Reconstruction and Interaction of Other Characters*

In Zootopia, in addition to Judy and Nick, many other characters also show social significance through symbolic reconstruction. For example, Assistant Mayor Bellwether, as a herbivore, is endowed with the symbol of "a weak and meek sheep", but she yearns for power deep down and attempts to seize power by exploiting the prejudice against carnivores. Through the front-stage behavior of "a weak sheep", Bellwether deceives the surrounding animals in an attempt to obtain power, but her conspiracy is finally exposed, and she is endowed with a new symbol of "a dangerous and cunning sheep". This plot shows how prejudice and power trigger social conflicts.

Bellwether's symbolic reconstruction is essentially a product of social inequality and unbalanced power distribution. As a member of the herbivore group, she is in the power system but always in a marginal position and unable to obtain power matching her own demands. Such structural oppression makes her take prejudice as a tool to strive for power and eventually leads to her alienation. From the perspective of Goffman's dramaturgical theory, she maintains the front-stage performance of "being weak and meek" for a long time, hiding her back-stage nature of "yearning for power and being cunning and suspicious". The collapse of this impression management is not only a complete reconstruction of her personal symbol, but also reveals the distortion of individual behavior and the damage to social order caused by the combination of prejudice and power. When the disadvantaged group cannot realize their power demands through legitimate channels, they may incite conflicts by virtue of prejudice between groups, thus triggering social unrest. From the perspective of Allport's prejudice theory, Bellwether is both a user and a victim of prejudice. She incites opposition by exploiting the inherent prejudice of herbivores against carnivores, and is essentially also trapped by the prejudice that "herbivores are inherently weak and carnivores are inherently dangerous", and is finally pushed to the extreme by such prejudice. The tragedy of her symbolic reconstruction is a profound criticism of the double harm of prejudice to individuals and society.

In addition, Mayor Lionheart, as the mayor of Zootopia, is endowed with the symbol of "a powerful and brave lion", but after the occurrence of the carnivore violence incident, he suspects all carnivores because of prejudice and intensifies social conflicts. However, after the truth of the incident is revealed, Mayor Lionheart gradually corrects his prejudice and reconstructs the symbol of "an inclusive and responsible mayor". This plot metaphorically presents the process in which the dominant group abandons prejudice and realizes social inclusiveness.

Lionheart's symbolic reconstruction reflects the important driving role of the cognitive transformation of the dominant group in social inclusiveness. As a large carnivore, he is at the top of the social power structure, and his inherent cognition and behavioral decisions directly affect the social relations of the entire Zootopia. In the early stage of the incident, he was influenced by the prejudice that "carnivores are inherently violent" and took extreme measures to isolate carnivores, which is essentially the use of his own power to strengthen group prejudice and maintain the vested interests of the dominant group, and this is also a specific embodiment of the view in the theories of social class and power structure that "the dominant group controls the disadvantaged group through power". When the truth of the incident comes to light, he takes the initiative to correct his cognition and adjust his decisions after realizing the harm of his own prejudice. The reconstruction of his symbol from "arbitrary and prejudiced" to "inclusive and responsible" not only repairs the contradiction between herbivores and carnivores, but also sets an example for the dominant group to abandon prejudice and practice inclusiveness. This transformation is not accidental, but a linkage effect generated by the symbolic reconstruction of Judy and Nick. Judy's perseverance and Nick's sincerity break Lionheart's inherent cognitive barriers, making him see that "race does not determine character and behavior", thus promoting the reconstruction of his own symbol, which also confirms the core proposition of symbolic interactionism that "social interaction can promote the reconstruction of symbolic meaning".

The symbolic reconstruction of these characters is all realized through interaction. The symbolic reconstruction of Judy and Nick influences each other, and the symbolic reconstruction of other characters is also affected by the behaviors of Judy and Nick. Through this setting, Zootopia shows the influence of social interaction on the formation and reconstruction of symbols, as well as the driving effect of the symbolic reconstruction of different characters on social inclusiveness and community formation. In addition to Bellwether and Lionheart, the symbolic reconstruction of other minor characters in Zootopia is also inseparable from the interaction with Judy and Nick, and also bears profound social significance. For example, Chief Bogo of the police department is initially influenced by the prejudice that "a rabbit cannot become a qualified police officer", is full of doubt and contempt for Judy and assigns her to a marginal post. At this time, he is endowed with the symbol of "stubborn, prejudiced and bureaucratic". However, when he sees Judy solve a major case and fulfill her duties with her efforts, he

gradually abandons his prejudice, recognizes Judy's ability and takes the initiative to provide support for her, and his symbol is also reconstructed as "open-minded, fair and talent-valuing". Bogo's symbolic reconstruction reflects the cognitive transformation of grass-roots managers in the real society from "adhering to prejudice" to "respecting ability", and also embodies the important role of individual interaction in breaking inherent prejudice. Judy's practical actions, as an interactive signal, change Bogo's inherent cognitive symbol of "rabbit", thus promoting the reconstruction of his own symbol.

Another example is Judy's parents, who are representatives of the rabbit group at the bottom. They are initially bound by the stereotype that "rabbits can only make a living by growing carrots" and strongly oppose Judy's desire to become a police officer. At this time, they are endowed with the symbol of "conservative, content with the status quo and trapped by stereotypes". However, after Judy realizes her dream through her own efforts and gains the recognition of the entire Zootopia, they take the initiative to abandon their stereotypes, support Judy's career and even come to Zootopia to cheer for her. Their symbol is also reconstructed as "open-minded, supportive of their children and courageous in breaking inherent cognition". The symbolic reconstruction of Judy's parents metaphorically presents the process in which the disadvantaged group at the bottom breaks away from the constraints of stereotypes and realizes the improvement of self-cognition. Their transformation is not only a recognition and response to Judy's symbolic reconstruction, but also reflects the social logic that "individual breakthrough can drive the cognitive transformation of the group", and further confirms the core proposition of symbolic interactionism that "individual behaviors and interactions can break the inherent symbolic cognition of the group and promote the reconstruction of symbolic meaning".

The symbolic reconstruction of these characters from different classes and groups is interrelated and mutually influential, forming a complete system of symbolic reconstruction. As the core characters, Judy and Nick are the core driving force of the entire system. Through their own efforts and interaction, they break the inherent group prejudice and drive the cognitive transformation and symbolic reconstruction of a series of surrounding characters. The symbolic reconstruction of other characters, in turn, strengthens the significance of Judy and Nick's symbolic reconstruction and promotes the transformation of the social relations of the entire Zootopia from "prejudice and opposition" to "inclusiveness and harmony". From a sociological perspective, such multi-character linked symbolic reconstruction metaphorically presents the development path of "individual breakthrough - group linkage - social inclusiveness" in the real society: individual efforts can break inherent prejudice and realize the reconstruction of self-symbols, and the symbolic reconstruction of individuals generates a linkage effect through social interaction, driving more people to realize cognitive transformation and symbolic reconstruction, thus breaking class barriers, resolving group conflicts, promoting the society to develop towards a more equal and inclusive direction, and ultimately realizing the

construction of a social community. This is also the core value of the symbolic reconstruction of characters in *Zootopia*: reflecting the group relations and development predicaments of the real society through the symbolic changes of virtual characters, and providing a vivid metaphor and reference for the real society to eliminate prejudice, realize inclusiveness and build a harmonious community.

V. CONCLUSION

Taking the animated film *Zootopia* as the research object, this study systematically analyzes the process of character symbolic reconstruction from the perspective of sociological theories. The core research results are as follows: the symbols of animated characters can be divided into essential symbols and constructive symbols, and their reconstruction needs to go through three stages: the endowment of existing symbols, symbolic conflict and symbolic reconstruction, and contains profound social meanings of eliminating stereotypes and prejudice, realizing individual self-worth and promoting social inclusiveness and community formation; the main characters Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde both complete their symbolic reconstruction through social interaction and their own behaviors and experiences in the conflict with their own existing symbols, breaking away from the inherent symbols of "a weak and powerless rabbit" and "a cunning and untrustworthy fox" and being reconstructed as "a brave and responsible police officer" and "a just and trustworthy partner" respectively; Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Gordon Allport's prejudice theory, as well as David Newman and Anthony Giddens' theories of social class and power structure can be effectively applied to the analysis of character symbolic reconstruction, helping to clearly grasp their metaphors for the problems of inequality, prejudice and inclusiveness in the real society; the symbolic reconstruction of characters also reflects many real social phenomena: stereotypes and prejudice based on race, class and so on will trigger social inequality and conflicts, while individual efforts, mutual understanding and cooperation are the key to eliminating prejudice and building an inclusive society. Based on the above research results, this study draws the corresponding sociological enlightenment: eliminating stereotypes and prejudice requires the joint efforts of individuals and society, individuals should take the initiative to correct their own prejudices, society should build a platform for interaction and communication between different groups, and the dominant group should abandon prejudice against the disadvantaged group to promote social equality; the self-realization and class mobility of the disadvantaged group require both the persistence and efforts of individuals themselves and the society to eliminate

structural barriers and provide equal development opportunities; social inclusiveness and community construction are important issues in modern society, and in the context of globalization, respecting the diversity and difference of groups and breaking barriers through mutual understanding and cooperation are important foundations for social stability and development.

At the same time, this study also has certain limitations. The research object is only limited to *Zootopia*, which leads to the limitation of the universality of the research results; the research focus is on the two main characters Judy and Nick, with insufficient in-depth analysis of other characters; the sociological theories used in the research are relatively concentrated, lacking the supplementary support of other relevant theories. To make up for the above limitations, future research can further expand the research scope, take multiple animated films as the research object, analyze the commonalities and differences of character symbolic reconstruction, so as to improve the universality of the research results. At the same time, it can strengthen the in-depth discussion of minor characters and introduce more sociological theories to enrich the analytical perspective of character symbolic reconstruction and further deepen the depth and breadth of sociological research on animation.

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