

Cultural Metaphor and Characterization of Music in *Zootopia**

Nan Zhao

Lingnan Normal University
Zhanjiang, China 114001

Abstract—The animated movie *Zootopia* gave a whole new definition to animal-themed movies. The film not only reached a new height of technology application and picture effect, but also perfectly interpreted the cultural metaphor behind the film intended to express to the audience through the expressive symbolic language (auditory art) of film music.

Keywords—*Zootopia*; cultural metaphor; character image; music

I. INTRODUCTION

Animated films, as a combination of commercial entertainment and cultural values, will play a fundamental role in industrial operation [1]. In general, many successful animated films arrange and render their plots in ways that are understandable to different cultural groups. At the same time, they will also make use of the metaphorical function of culture to enhance the cultural depth of films, promote the audience to accept and understand their cultural intention, and transfer their attention to the metaphorical advantages of content and visual aspects, so as to achieve a more ideal expression effect. *Zootopia* has a moderate content system, but it is recognized by people all over the world with the help of the metaphor model of animation, which is inseparable from its skillful application of cultural metaphor and perfect shaping of characters. In order to achieve the above effect and highlight its cultural theme, the film makes use of auditory aids other than visual — 21 background music pieces by Michael Giacchino, modern American composer (1967-) — to make the characters' images more three-dimensional and their personalities more complete. Music is more expressive of emotion than words. Music can be regarded as a unique expressive symbol, which can get rid of the limitation of time and space plastic arts, and enable people to release their thoughts and express or perceive the more profound aesthetic views hidden behind the film works more simply and intuitively through perceptual cognition. With the charm of music, this film interprets the positive significance of cultural metaphor for animated films, and also shows the important role that music can play in the shaping of character images.

II. ZOOTOPIA AND ITS CULTURAL EXPRESSION

The title *Zootopia* is taken from the combination of the English word "zoo" and "Utopia". Its implication is very

profound and obvious. In this film, carnivores and herbivores get along well, and together they construct a "utopia" world full of magic. Different from *Frozen* and *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia* first invented an urban system and then divided "animal cities" with modern characteristics according to the ecological model in the real world, including city center: zootopia, desert and glacier, rain forest and so on [2]. The film first depicts the protagonist Judy rabbit, who lives in rabbit nest town. She has always dreamed of becoming a police, but people around her do not understand her or even despise her idea. Therefore, in order to pursue her dream, Judy set out from the small town to the metropolis on her own, hoping to become a "rabbit police officer" in the "animal city" and realize her dream. But among the animal police, Judy was inevitably ignored. Neglected, she had to become a traffic police, writing ticket is all her work. However, ambitious Judy wants to further prove her ability, trying to solve the "serial disappearance of carnivore" case that caused panic in the animal world through her wisdom. Then, in the search for the truth, Judy meets Nick the fox, and they go through a lot of challenges and trials from initial distrust to eventual cooperation. During this time, they found that the case is not simple, behind the case hidden a huge conspiracy, which can even overturn the existing peace of the animal world — the deputy mayor, the sheep, who is docile in appearance and tolerant in heart, tries to scare the animals by means of conspiracy and public opinion, in order to eliminate all carnivores and animal civilization, so as to build a single empire dominated by herbivores. However, as more and more carnivores become more and more "barbaric", their harmonious relationship with herbivores is destroyed, and Judy's relationship with Nick is endangered by a biased remark. At the end of the film, Judy finds out why the carnivores can't control themselves, and after making up with Nick, they destroy the deputy mayor's plot, so that zootopia can come back to life and the carnivores and herbivores can continue to coexist peacefully.

In *Zootopia*, the film explores the deep-rooted conflicts between prejudice and race in contemporary society. In order to achieve the movie-watching effect suitable for young and old, during the shooting (or production) of this animated film, the main creative team fully expressed the "world view" and "animal identity" of zootopia with the help of cultural metaphor, making the idea and theme of the film more fluent and relaxed. *Zootopia* cleverly "stacks" the existing cultural impression of the society so that it can be well combined and

*Fund: Doctoral Research Funding Project.

each plays its own role. In the process of watching the film, the audience can understand the characters and the plot according to their own cognitive ability. For example, in *Zootopia*, Judy rabbit dreams of becoming a policeman one day, which is a metaphor for the struggle of "nobody" in modern society. The distrust and inherent mutual exclusion between carnivores and herbivores is a metaphor for the racism and prejudice and class antagonism that exist in today's society. Under these two clues, no matter what age group the audience is, they can read the story content with their own cultural basis. This kind of universal and direct filmmaking technique is of great help to condense the theme of animated films and perfectly shape the image of characters.

Zootopia embodies the typical "American values". If many of the plots in this film are carried out in the form of real people and events, it is bound to fail to be approved in some countries due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and expression technique, and of course, it cannot be released due to the risk of censorship [3]. However, with the help of cultural metaphor, the film theme can be explored in a more systematic and fuzzy form. In *Zootopia*, in order to achieve the metaphor of racial differences in American society, and to reflect the equal status between different races and groups, the film completely reproduces the differences among different classes, races and occupations in American society through visual metaphor. It also explains the irreconcilable contradiction between herbivores and carnivores in view of the objective reality, and expounds the "pride and prejudice" under the framework of "peace treaty". Of course, it should be noted that in order to achieve a better metaphorical effect, in *Zootopia*, the creators make full use of the music elements (that is, auditory tools), systematically metaphor and show the conflict between rights and freedom in American society, and play a key role in the shaping of characters.

III. CULTURAL METAPHOR OF MUSIC IN THE MOVIE *ZOOTOPIA*

A. Expressing the Truth of "Success by Action" Through Theme Music

The theme song "Try Everything" is also the only sound in the film. It is sung by Shakira (Colombian songstress, 1977-). This song has appeared twice in the film. About 10 minutes after the beginning of this film, music started for the first time. At that time, the protagonist Judy rabbit, who had just graduated from the police academy, got off the train. With "Try Everything", her dream of being a policeman began to come true, and then began her breathtaking and magical detective course. When Judy, the protagonist rabbit, successfully becomes a real Interpol after various thrilling experiences, the music is played for the second time. The theme song appeared two times in different scene, indicating that although the protagonist's journey to become a real police officer is full of intrigue and adventure, Judy solved one problem after another with the help of fox Nick, and maintained the persistent spirit of never giving up when encountering difficulties, and finally made achievements.

Through the cheerful and passionate melody and positive lyrics in the theme song Try Everything, this film makes a finishing touch to the theme of *Zootopia*, which is the cultural and emotional content that the film intends to express, and gradually reveals the cultural metaphor behind the story. As the theme melody of the movie Try Everything, the core lyrics of the song are "I won't give up, no, I won't give in". The cheerful lyrics of this tune appear repeatedly in this song and express the theme with the help of music. The impact effect on the idea to be expressed in the story content is far beyond the expression effect by the language symbol system. Just as the aesthetician Susanne K. Langer (1895-1982, German-American) said, "The emotion expressed in music has a correct understanding in line with the author's original intention, that is, the emotion expressed in music is the vent of the emotion actually existing in the composer's daily life."

From the perspective of the dominant motivation of the theme music, when the song Try Everything is played for the first time, the hero's mental process pops up on the screen, indicating that the hero will experience various mental processes and laborious actions, and finally achieve her life goal metaphorically. When the theme song stops and Judy gets out of the car to visit zootopia for the first time, she sees Shakira (Gazelle) in a red dress on the poster. At this time, the inspirational life of the rabbit Judy began, and her dream of becoming a police was slowly realized. As the story unfolded step by step, more music clips appeared in *Zootopia*, which played a very positive role in the cultural metaphor behind the story.

B. Cultural Metaphor Is Displayed Through Music

Judging from the overall perspective structure of the film music aesthetics, the music rhythm in the first half of the film is relatively mild and light, which is related to the development of the film's narrative skills and the plot [4]. With the development of the plot and the gradual emergence of conflicts, the rhythm of music in the second half of the film became tense, and music mostly adopted dissonant harmonic techniques and rapid up-down and down-step techniques to hint at the huge conspiracy behind the story: the deputy mayor (herbivore sheep) wants to break the peaceful and quiet social order that herbivores and carnivores maintain in zootopia, which brought the plot of the film to a climax.

The film is also excellent in that in addition to the theme song, other music parts of the film also play an important role in expressing the cultural connotation and metaphor the film intends to express. For example, with the characteristics of the opening of the classic Broadway play, the film starts with the line "Anyone can be anything" with the rhythm of music, which brings the conflict between herbivores and carnivores to the audience through musical lines with dramatic premonition of conflict (stage clamor).

The other representative song in this film is Foxy Fakeout, which is soothing and idyllic that is completely different from the melody style of Try Everything. Its appearance once again reflects the importance of music to

the expression of cultural metaphor in this film. With Foxy Fakeout, Nick the fox tells Judy about his childhood dream of becoming a "guard", but because of the fox's cunning and deceptive nature, he is not trusted by other animals and gives up his original intention after being insulted by other animals. Facing the conflicts resulting from the collision between rights and equality and racial discrimination in social reality, the realization of "utopia" that we expect to seek common ground while reserving differences and ethnic equality is so far away, which reflects the philosophy of "human nature is good" from the perspective of individuals.

In the part where the film gradually enters climax, the music that best reflects the gradual development of conflicts is The Nick of Time. The music begins with a tense melody and bass drum percussion to express the tense scene of Judy and Nick pursuing a wild jaguar "midnight roar" as they investigate the case, and then when Nick sees Judy being reprimanded by the rhino sheriff to confiscate Judy's badge, Nick stands up for Judy. At this time, Judy and Nick have overcome the bad feelings between herbivores and carnivores, and become true friends. On their way back from the cable car, music turns into the same soothing music style as Foxy Fakeout. When they came up with the idea of using traffic cameras to look for wild leopards, the music melody suddenly became light and clever again. The music also changed from the big drum in the beginning to the ensemble of strings and piano. The overall musical structure of The Nick of Time is appropriately consistent with the ups and downs of the story, so as to meet the audience's psychological expectations for an excellent film.

At the end of the film, Judy the rabbit and Nick the fox, who were supposed to be natural enemies, become the best partners. With the help of their own wisdom and courage, they caught the deputy mayor of sheep behind the scene and made zootopia calm again. The theme song Try Everything sounded again. With the help of the relaxed and dynamic rhythm, music interprets the optimistic life attitude of the characters in the film, and reflects the philosophy of "success depends on action", which also implies the value of "individual heroism" advocated by the American society.

C. The Theme of the Film Is Sublimated Through Music

In *Zootopia*, DJ rhythm is very strong and hot. In the second half of the film, music not only foals and renders the cultural metaphor, but also makes the "story behind the story" more strongly condensed and sublimated. For example, when the theme song is played again, it not only shows the characters' joy in realizing their dreams, but also shows the animals' longing for their future work and life. Although Judy was fully prepared for "Try Everything", she did not know that there was no bumpy road. Only by facing the reality and constantly "Try Everything" could she achieve the ultimate goal of individual motivation, and the real world become more beautiful and harmonious with the convergence of individual abilities and wisdom. When the theme song played at the end, the whole city began to celebrate the victory carnival. The music, which represents the voice of animals, explains the profound theme that the film hopes to express.

IV. THE PERFECT PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS IN THE ZOOTOPIA BY MUSIC

A. Highlighting the Image of the Characters Through the Inspirational Music Theme

The background music in *Zootopia* has a relatively strong psychological resonance, appeal and driving force, which has become the spiritual bond to interpret the inspirational theme and highlight the image of the mission in the film. It can be said that music has played a strong foil role in the image building of the characters in *Zootopia*. For example, from the music's perspective, Shakira in *Zootopia* is the real music protagonist, because the audience can see that the rabbit and the fox, which exist as natural enemies, are the perfect partners in the film. To deepen the description of the two protagonists, the film opens with a Broadway musical, so that the relationship between Judy the rabbit and Nick the fox can fully reflect the inspirational "never give up". In this way, Shakira's "Try Everything" appears in the scene. Although this music is relatively famous, it does not make the audience feel improper. On the contrary, it serves as a good foil to the theme of the film and concretizes the characters.

B. Enhancing Characters with Musical Performances of Different Rhythms

For example, at the beginning of the film, Judy was training in the police academy with music "Mad at me" in the background and music "Tichet to Write" in the background when Judy had just become a traffic policeman and was seriously writing a ticket, which fully demonstrated Judy's positive and optimistic character. The rhythm of "Mad at me" consists of two parts. It starts with a fast, aggressive syncopated rhythm, and ends with a slow, flowing melodic line. With this music, the film pictures of Judy's training in the police academy show the audience the audiovisual effects of music, which are surging, passionate and soothing, and express her feelings directly, showing Judy's strong-willed character of not giving up her dream of police in the process of training in the police academy. At the end of the song, Judy, against a soothing background of music, successfully participates in the graduation ceremony by passing the police academy test. The melody of the second part of music is very similar to the episode For the Love of a Princess in the film *Brave Heart*. It gives audience a kind of idea of making the world go on forever and filling the human beings with love. Meanwhile, it also implies Judy's sense of mission of "individual heroism" and pride after being awarded a police badge. This song Mad at me and the film scene fit in with each other, achieving the goal of perfectly shaping the character image through the metaphor of music.

The music scene in the middle of the film, "Walk and Stalk," is in jazz style. The cheerful, witty tune perfectly combined with Judy's surprise when she discovered that Nick had cheated her out of sympathy by turning the large red ice cream she had bought for Nick into smaller pieces to sell to mice and selling ice cream sticks to other animals as redwood. This scene not only adds humorous comedy color

to the success of the film, but also naturally reflects the kindness of Judy and the cunning personality of Nick.

In the second half of *Zootopia*, the film further enhances the characters. Among them, Capital Cities directly expresses the theme of the film with the song Safe And Sound. With the help of continuous small "symbols", the theme of the film is becoming more and more positive, which can arouse the audience with inspiring emotions. In addition, Helen Ward makes full use of her beautiful voice to describe the tense detective adventures of the two characters in *Zootopia*. With the help of the complete tone after variation, the characters fully and systematically show various clues and possibilities in the film, so that the characters can be enriched through symbiosis, cooperation and empathy among the opposing species. More importantly, against the influence of music, the inspirational atmosphere of the film has been strongly highlighted, and more and more characters are gradually in a deep integration environment based on reverse thinking. [5]. During this process, Billy Swan sings "I Can Help". With the help of the rich soft rock music form, this song renders the image of Judy rabbit and gives the best interpretation to the friendly behavior of Nick fox. After that, the music rhythm in the film became more and more intense, which could not only fully express the applied image and positive attitude of Judy rabbit, but also enhance the image of Judy rabbit and Nick fox [6]. Finally, when radical singer Iggy Azalea appears at the end of *Zootopia* with the song "Change Your Life", the characters in the film appear in front of the audience once again. This not only helped shape the character, but also greatly improved Judy's strong image in the film by rapping Change Your Life repeatedly. This kind of passionate music helped *Zootopia* shape the character to an unprecedented height.

It is worth mentioning that this film not only adopts the metaphor of postmodernism in the expression of the central idea and the shaping of the characters, but also adopts the aesthetic thought of the inclusiveness and integration of the old and the new of post-modernism in the structure of the film. For example, at the beginning of the film, the traditional Broadway stage play mode was adopted to directly present the theme, and Judy's lines on the stage directly expressed the social contradiction to be shown in the film — the natural law that carnivores and herbivores are natural enemies. The film also adopts the basic traditional form to develop the story. However, the film's final ending is not the traditional sudden happy ending, but a creative end that combines scene music, Work Slowly and Carry a Big Shtick, and humorous picture. The music uses the adagio melody to foil the picture — the foxy civil servant, Mr. Flash the sloth, is a slob at work. Judy caught him speeding and opened the window with his face glazed and his mouth open, causing the audience to laugh with the background music. The humorous ending of the film is in sharp contrast with the slightly tense atmosphere at the beginning of the film, which exactly conforms to the aesthetic principle of novelty and balance in post-modern art aesthetics.

V. CONCLUSION

In the world animation film market in recent years, *Zootopia* can be said to be a very excellent and successful animation film. The film received a high rating of 9.5 points on Douban, grossed \$1.02 billion at the global box office and won the best animated film award at the 89th Academy Awards. The movie *Zootopia* has been a huge success both commercially and humanly. The most successful part of this film lies in that it not only relies on superb animation techniques and exquisite story arrangement, but also subtly imprints music into the plot of the film, and expresses the social class contradictions and characters behind the film through the metaphor of music. It is worth mentioning that in terms of artistic philosophy, the film has similarities with the Chinese cartoon *Nezha* in July 2019. Both of them express the subjective materialism of "man conquers nature" through metaphor, and the philosophy of life that regardless of origin and national boundaries, one will eventually achieve the ideal results with their own efforts.

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