



# Scenic Construction and Global Communication of Ethnic Minority Elements in *Zootopia 2* from the Perspective of Foucault's Heterotopia Theory: Centering on the Marsh Market

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**Abstract.** This paper takes Foucault's Heterotopia Theory as the core framework, and combines the theories of communication semiotics, cultural hegemony and cross-cultural communication to systematically analyze the logical scenic construction and in-depth global communication intention of Latin American and Southeast Asian ethnic minority elements in the Marsh Market in *Zootopia 2*. As the core heterotopian space of the film, the embedding of ethnic minority elements in the Marsh Market is essentially a cross-cultural communication political practice with space as the carrier, symbols as the tools and power as the core, reflecting the dual predicament of ethnic minority cultures being "othered" and achieving "limited breakthrough" in the context of globalization.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Heterotopia Theory, *Zootopia*, Cross-cultural communication.

## 1 Introduction

As a century-old dream-building film studio, Disney has exquisitely created the animated film titled *Zootopia*, a neologism combining "Zoo" and "Utopia". Etymologically, "Utopia" derives from the Greek words "ou" (no) and "topos" (place), meaning "a non-existent place" and implying its fictional nature. In contrast, the Greek "eutopia" means "a good place", thus its pronunciation and connotation both point to an ideal country that is beautiful yet unattainable.

This is precisely why audiences worldwide love the *Zootopia* series so much: it is not merely a simple family-friendly animation, but a work rich in political metaphors worthy of in-depth deconstruction. From the very beginning, the *Zootopia* animation has deliberately alluded to reality. For instance, the rabbit police officer hurries to the vehicle management office to check a suspect's license plate number, only to find that all the staff are slow-moving sloths. Children laugh heartily at the naive sloths on the screen, while adult viewers wear a bitter smile—the sluggish administrative procedures

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in real life are indeed as cumbersome as a sloth's movements. Species prejudice pervades *Zootopia*: rabbits are unfit to be police officers, foxes are all liars, herbivores are weak, and carnivores are brutal. Hence, some argue that this is far from a utopia; the profound ideas reflected in these phenomena clearly make it a dystopian fable of reality.

The social scenes depicted by the anthropomorphized animals on the screen are actually common stereotypes—for example, lions represent rulers and foxes symbolize cunning. As the plot unfolds, the true personalities of the animals always deviate from their corresponding traditional archetypes. The supposedly timid rabbit is brave and passionate, the supposedly cunning fox is kind and sincere, tiny animals become gang leaders, and giant animals are mere underlings. The film's main villain being a small sheep is even more unexpected. Using fables to interpret reality and anti-archetypes to oppose racism is the successful strategy that makes the film arouse resonance and strike a chord with audiences imperceptibly.

Therefore, *Zootopia* is neither a purely fictional utopia nor a simple dystopia, but a heterotopia often constructed through film scenes in contemporary media culture: it is both a reproduction of physical space and an ideological apparatus, carrying the negotiation of power, knowledge and identity [10].

Foucault first systematically proposed the concept of heterotopia in his 1967 work *Of Other Spaces*, defining it as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" [11,21]. Heterotopias are real, socially functional spaces that at the same time "deviate" from the mainstream order and become places that accommodate contradictions, fantasies and the Other. Unlike utopias, heterotopias are not fictional, but real "counter-sites" such as museums, colonial exhibitions, immigrant communities and amusement parks. They reflect, question or consolidate the mainstream order by "juxtaposing incompatible spaces" [11]. Obviously, the Disney animation industry is a clever cultural carrier that makes use of these elements.

Next, we will use Foucault's Heterotopia Theory to analyze with examples the scenic design of the Marsh Market, the most vivid and striking space in *Zootopia 2*.

## **2 The Marsh Market: Spatial Attributes of Heterotopia and the Foundation for Embedding Ethnic Minority Elements**

The concept conveyed by *Zootopia* has evolved from "carnivores and herbivores are essentially no different" in the first film to "we different animals do have differences but can still coexist harmoniously" in the second, transcending the values rooted in obvious mutual differences in the process of bridging stereotyped ethnic prejudices. This consensus-building process can be regarded as an "imagined community" as defined by Anderson, which shapes a "modern myth imagined by communities sharing a common history and origin" [1].

Heterotopia features six core principles: the symbiosis of exclusion and inclusion in the space of the Other, the multi-dimensional overlap of heterochronia, the game of discipline and resistance in heterotopia of power, the spatial isolation of heterotopia, the universality of heterotopia, and the functional transformability of heterotopia [11,28]. This theory provides a key perspective for analyzing spatial construction in communication media such as films: space is not a neutral container, but a representation of culture and power [18,24], and the scenic embedding of ethnic minority cultural elements is essentially a symbolic presentation of spatial power relations.

The Marsh Market fully conforms to Foucault's six core principles of heterotopia, and Latin American and Southeast Asian ethnic minority elements are the core symbolic carriers of its "heterotopian nature":

The mainstream *Zootopia* and the marginal Marsh Market form a space of the Other characterized by the symbiosis of exclusion and inclusion. First and foremost, the anthropomorphism of animals and the action-movie style realize the embodied imagination of heterotopia through the reversal of audio-visual images: anthropomorphic, bipedal furies expand from mammals to reptiles, and birds will be added in the third film as revealed in the post-credits easter egg, basically covering the mainstream animals of the phylum Chordata. More than two-thirds of the film's 108 minutes consist of chase scenes, with the camera repeatedly switching between Judy/Nick's chasing and being chased viewpoints. Together, these two elements form the most primitive form of utopian works—the travelogue. In the spin-off picture book of *Zootopia*, the snake Gary, led by Judy and Nick, truly tours the different districts of *Zootopia* as a tourist. Thus, the mainstream space of *Zootopia*, featuring skyscrapers in the city center and standardized public services, centers on terrestrial mammals, Western urban civilization and English-dominated official discourse. In contrast, the Marsh Market is a "marginal enclave" excluded by the disciplinary power of the mainstream—centered on reptiles, far from the city core, and labeled as "chaotic, primitive and uncivilized" [14,17].

On this basis, the film embeds Latin American elements such as tropical jungle vegetation, bodegas, the costumes and music of Mexican mariachi bands, as well as Southeast Asian elements including floating markets, stilt houses and houseboats. These symbols are not mere decorations, but construct a non-Western-centric spatial order: the Marsh Market becomes a "sanctuary" for ethnic minority cultures, and its traits of "diversity, hybridity and anti-order" stand in opposition to the "uniformity, regularity and civilization" of the mainstream city, embodying the core attribute of heterotopia—"inclusion within exclusion" [11]. These elements are not authentic reproductions of any specific country or culture, but cultural simulacra processed through Disney's "deterritorialization-re-signification". As the scholar Lisa Lewis put it: "Disney's global cities always create an illusion of inclusion through 'recognizable exoticism', yet in reality compress differences into a consumer spectacle" [19].

Foucault emphasizes that heterotopias can overlap different temporal dimensions, and the Marsh Market is a perfect example: the remnants of Latin America's colonial history (fragments of Spanish-style architecture, mixed-race cultural symbols) interweave with Southeast Asia's pre-colonial traditions (tribal totems, traces of island fishing and hunting civilizations), while integrating the modern time of globalization

[7,25]. For example, Nick Wilde and the hippopotamus police officer can only feed raw fish instead of gold coins to the juggling seals, a scene that vividly mirrors the condescending and exotic gaze of European and American tourists towards obscure exotic civilizations that do not accept electronic or credit card payments. The traditional transactions of Southeast Asian floating markets are combined with modern rapid transportation, and Latin American street graffiti has evolved from a symbol of colonial resistance to a form of global artistic expression [26]. This temporal overlap frees ethnic minority elements from the predicament of being "static cultural specimens" and turns them into a communication link connecting the past and the present, the local and the global.

Through the elaborate coding of three types of symbols—visual, auditory and behavioral—the film transforms ethnic minority cultural elements into communicative content understandable to global audiences. Heterotopia is a "mirror space" of power: it is both disciplined by mainstream power and a breeding ground for resistance [10]. In the Marsh Market, the representative figure is Officer Jesus Lizard, a typically Spanish name, and the voice actor, of Mexican descent, speaks with a Latin-tinged English accent. It is evident that mainstream power reinforces the "Other" status of ethnic minorities through linguistic discipline (English as the lingua franca, Spanish confined to internal community use) and spatial isolation (the Marsh Market being far from the core area) [27]; in turn, ethnic minorities strive for cultural discourse power through behavioral practices such as street juggling, mutual-aid trading and underground bar communities [5]. English dominates transactions and public communication in the Marsh Market as the lingua franca, while Spanish only serves as an ornament in personal names or accents. What's more, the background sound breaks the disciplinary norm of "quietness and order" in the mainstream city, and proclaims the presence of ethnic minority cultures with "noise and enthusiasm", forming a resistant communication of auditory symbols [16,26]. Behavioral symbols are the "living communication" of culture; the behavioral scenes in the Marsh Market turn ethnic minority elements from "static symbols" into "dynamic practices" through community practices and cross-cultural interactions.

The core of the case in this film shifts from pure criminal offense to "historical archaeology". The protagonists are no longer merely searching for a criminal, but for a hidden patent document—evidence proving that reptiles are the true inventors of Zootopia's climate regulation system. This narrative clearly reveals structural oppression and historical revisionism, directly replacing the biological predator-prey relationship with the survival relationship between the center and the margin.

In this sense, the Marsh Market has become a typical Foucauldian heterotopia:

It is a "crisis heterotopia": a refuge for marginal species (such as amphibians, reptiles and small mammals) that cannot integrate into the "mainstream Zootopia" (i.e., the European and American model of modernity), labeling them with "cultural characteristics" and rendering them "visible yet powerless". It is also a "compensatory heterotopia": it alleviates the audience's anxiety about real-world issues such as racial segregation and immigration exclusion by showcasing the superficial appearance of "pluralistic coexistence"[11].

### 3 The Communication Paradox of Heterotopia: Cultural Appropriation and Limited Emancipation

The Marsh Market in *Zootopia 2* is not a genuine space for cross-cultural dialogue, but an elaborately designed heterotopia—it allows the existence of differences, but only on the premise that these differences submit to the logic of mainstream narrative and capital. At the level of global communication, this construction not only responds to the era's demand for multiculturalism, but also safeguards Disney's core interests as a cultural empire.

As one commentator noted: "*Zootopia* is only an ideal in concept, far from reality" [13]. Foucault reminds us that all seemingly inclusive spaces may be the most exquisite cages of power. The core of Foucault's Heterotopia Theory lies in the contradictoriness of space, and the construction of ethnic minority elements in the Marsh Market falls into the communication paradox of "cultural appropriation" and "limited emancipation":

First, cultural appropriation is a domestication of ethnic minority symbols by mainstream power. Despite being a heterotopia, the Marsh Market is still domesticated by the Anglo-centric Western narrative and Disney's commercial logic under the global capitalist system. Both Latin American samba and Southeast Asian night market delicacies are stripped of their original cultural contexts, and their inherent local cultures and the spirit of resistance against colonialism are simplified into "entertainment symbols" and "consumer symbols" for the "exotic consumption" of global audiences [15,29]. This "cultural appropriation" is essentially the implicit communication of cultural hegemony [12]: ethnic minority elements seem to be "present", but in fact are defined by the mainstream discourse and lose their original resistance [3,4]. It performs a "purification function": transforming real issues such as colonial history, cultural exploitation and linguistic oppression into harmless local snacks and folk music, thus concealing structural inequality.

Second, the visual scenes of the Marsh Market adopt a collage-style coding: cramming Latin American Jesus Lizards and Southeast Asian green bamboo vipers—a venomous snake of island regions—into a single melting-pot scene. This coding is essentially a Western-centric gaze of the Other [22]: mainstream audiences (predominantly Western) divide the identity of "Self (Western civilization)" and "Other (ethnic minorities)" by viewing the Marsh Market and regarding ethnic minority cultures as an "exotic spectacle" [2,29].

Nevertheless, the communication breakthrough of ethnic minorities in heterotopia represents a form of limited emancipation. Despite the existence of cultural appropriation, the Marsh Market, as a heterotopia, still provides a limited space for the communication emancipation of ethnic minorities: the breakthrough of identity visibility—the "present communication" of ethnic minority elements breaks the "single civilization center" narrative of *Zootopia*, turning Latin American and Southeast Asian cultures from "absent" to "visible" [20,26]. Cross-cultural joint communication—cross-species/cross-ethnic cooperation constructs an "ethnic minority communication alliance", opposing the mainstream "divide and rule" strategy and laying the

foundation for the transformation of identity from "ethnic identity" to "cross-cultural identity" [6,8].

The "reconciliation" between the Marsh Market and the mainstream city at the end of the film—Mayor Horse announcing that Reptile Valley and the Marsh Market will be permanent settlements for reptiles—is not the "assimilation" of ethnic minority cultures, but the "limited acceptance" of heterotopia by the mainstream order. Ethnic minority elements have become part of *Zootopia*'s "multiculture", at least achieving the "limited legalized communication" of identity [17].

Disney has long adopted a strategy of "cultural hybridity" in global communication, but its essence is "selective appropriation". As Shohat and Stam pointed out in their 1994 work *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*: "Hollywood, by fragmenting Third World cultures into decorative symbols, not only meets the demands of the multicultural market, but also avoids genuine empowerment" [23].

The Marsh Market in *Zootopia 2* is a continuation of this logic: it uses Latin American and Southeast Asian visual codes to attract Latin American, Southeast Asian and Asian audiences, enhancing box office revenue and IP affinity; yet these cultural elements are stripped of their historical context and reduced to a "backdrop". The narrative is still dominated by Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, voiced by white actors; ethnic minority animal characters are mostly supporting roles or vendors, whose languages, beliefs and social organizations are not explored in depth, serving only as "diversity ornaments".

This "symbolic inclusion" is precisely in line with the "disciplinary space" as described by Foucault: seemingly open and diverse, it actually incorporates the Other into a manageable order through classification, naming and spatial isolation [9].

## 4 Communication Implications and Conclusion

Heterotopia is a communication carrier for breaking cultural hegemony: the communication of ethnic minority cultures should not be limited to "symbolic ornaments" in the mainstream space, but should construct heterotopian communication spaces and break the mainstream cultural hegemony through "otherness" [11,24].

Reject cultural exoticism and realize in-depth symbolic communication: cross-cultural communication should avoid simplifying ethnic minority elements into "spectacle symbols", instead delve into their original contexts, explore their historical, resistant and communal meanings, and realize the transformation from "exotic communication" to "in-depth dialogic communication" [2,26]. Strengthen the subjective communication rights of ethnic minorities: ethnic minorities should transform from "represented objects" to "active communicating subjects", and define their own cultural meanings through cultural practices, symbolic creation and community interactions [5,16].

With the Marsh Market as its core heterotopian space, *Zootopia 2* embeds Latin American and Southeast Asian ethnic minority elements into its scenic construction, which is essentially a cross-cultural communication political practice with space as the carrier, symbols as the tools and power as the core. This practice not only reveals the

predicament of ethnic minority cultures being othered and appropriated in the context of globalization, but also demonstrates the possibility of achieving a limited communication breakthrough through heterotopian spaces.

Foucault's Heterotopia Theory provides us with a key perspective: space is the intersection of culture and power. Ethnic minority cultural elements are not merely "decorative symbols", but communication tools for power games, practical carriers for identity reconstruction, and symbolic weapons for cross-cultural resistance [11,24].

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