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Cultural Intersection and Technological Connotation in the Film *Coco* (Postprint)

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Abstract

The film *Coco* was released worldwide, eliciting widespread cinematic fervor through its profound humanistic heritage and exquisite mastery of cinematic artistry. The film not only achieved a remarkable market resurgence in China, but also realized global cultural dissemination, which is attributable, to a certain extent, to Pixar's successful strategy of cross-cultural expression. Behind this impressive impact, the high-fidelity restoration of traditional Mexican cultural elements, the subversive interpretation of the theme of death, and the internationally leading technological standards of animation production all constitute factors contributing to the film's success.

Full Text

Preamble

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Cultural Intersection and Technological Connotation in the Film *Coco*

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Abstract

The worldwide release of *Coco* sparked a cinematic sensation through its profound humanistic heritage and masterful artistic execution. The film achieved not only a remarkable resurgence in China but also successful global cultural

exportation, attributable in large part to Pixar's effective cross-cultural communication strategy. Behind its stunning impact lie several key factors: the meticulous restoration of traditional Mexican cultural elements, an unconventional treatment of the death theme, and world-class animation production technology.

Keywords: *Coco*; Mexico; Cultural intersection; Technology

Introduction

At the end of 2017, *Coco* premiered worldwide, igniting a movie-watching frenzy with its deep humanistic legacy and perfect artistic mastery. Co-produced by Pixar Animation Studios and Disney, the film stood as Pixar's only original animation in recent years, showcasing the unique charm of traditional Mexican culture while becoming the fastest-growing animated film in Mexican box office history. In 2018, it won two Academy Awards—Best Original Song and Best Animated Feature—establishing itself as Pixar's most popular animated film of the past decade. Simultaneously, *Coco* triggered a box office boom in China, becoming another American animated film to surpass one billion RMB following *Zootopia*.

Driven by globalization, consumerism, and global media dissemination, cross-cultural animation distribution has become an inevitable cultural phenomenon. *Coco*'s breakthrough across cultural barriers—achieving both a successful comeback in China and global cultural export—depends considerably on Pixar's successful cross-cultural expression strategy. By analyzing the core competencies of this film, which narrates themes of family, dreams, life, and death, we can discern Pixar's eclectic cultural consciousness. The specific application of its cross-cultural communication strategy holds significant implications for the domestic animation industry. From a cultural fusion perspective, the sensational effect stems from multiple factors: the high-fidelity restoration of traditional Mexican cultural elements, the return of human emotions, the anti-conventional treatment of death, and international top-tier animation production.

Selection and Integration of Foreign Cultural Materials

Cross-cultural communication represents an interactive exchange process between heterogeneous cultures of different nations. In *Coco*, the transplantation, transformation, and reconstruction of Mexican cultural elements received unanimous acclaim, realizing Pixar's nationalized narrative strategy and providing audiences from various countries with connotations and values distinct from their own national cultures. The film presents scenes of Mexican storytelling, embedding a moving narrative within its cultural core and guiding global audiences of diverse cultures and ethnicities to construct meaning and value through communication and exchange.

The creative team undertook extensive preparation, drawing deeply from local Mexican culture to ensure every detail of the country's rich exoticism was authentic. Director Lee Unkrich noted: "Mexican folk art combines skeletons with

cheerful festive colors, which triggered my imagination, and the more I learned about the Day of the Dead, the deeper its impact on me.” The filmmakers traveled to Mexico multiple times for location shooting, researching and examining Mexican lifestyles and the traditional Day of the Dead festival over seven years.

The film successfully encodes and decodes non-verbal symbols that construct physical space while demonstrating profound understanding of Mexican daily life. Through non-verbal signs, Mexican cultural elements manifest in food, clothing, housing, and transportation, with meanings that audiences from different countries and regions can parse and expand to some extent, effectively serving the overall narrative. The film’s scenes employ Mexican elements through colorful, imaginative architecture, with many streets, churches, and cemeteries reflecting actual local locations. Colorful paper cutouts typify Mexican style, appearing densely hung in streets and alleys both in the living world and the realm of the dead, where festival decorations create a carnival atmosphere alongside paper cuttings, flowers, and music. Grandma prepares traditional tamales for Miguel, while offerings include sweet cakes, pumpkin, and chicken with pico de gallo—all distinctly Mexican flavors. Character costumes, particularly the unique large-brimmed straw hats worn by performers and singers, exhibit distinctive Mexican style, while characters’ demeanor and movements experientially convey Mexican cultural characteristics.

The application of traditional Mexican culture extends beyond superficial scene-setting and character design to encompass the Mexicanization of social life, with this reality-based approach better explaining deeper cultural connotations. Respect and worship of cultural icons constitute one of Mexico’s national characteristics. Additionally, the social role of older Mexican women predominates in family life, where they generally engage in domestic production or agriculture while bearing substantial family responsibilities. Miguel’s grandmother serves as the family’s backbone, commanding respect from all members. Many Mexican customs share similarities with traditional Chinese culture despite the geographical distance. For example, on the eve of the Day of the Dead, Miguel lights candles and pine incense at home, setting up an altar illuminated by candles and decorated with brightly colored marigold petals, photographs of deceased family members, and blessing cards—a scene bearing much in common with Chinese ancestor worship rituals.

The plot centers on the Mexican Day of the Dead, an important traditional festival that UNESCO declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. During the celebration, Mexicans hold costume parades and cemetery worship activities. Mexican tradition holds that deceased spirits can cross the marigold bridge to return briefly to the living world during the Day of the Dead. Paths from cemeteries to homes are covered with orange marigold petals, whose distinctive scents and brilliant colors guide spirits from the underworld to reunite with surviving family members. The Day of the Dead thus becomes not only a time to remember ancestors but also to reunite with them. Through cross-cultural communication, Pixar creates an ideal, beautiful

utopian virtual world, narrating realistically and credibly while interpreting the Mexican nation' s unique cultural characteristics one by one.

Packaging and Dissemination of Universal Values for “Cultural Identity”

To reduce resistance to cross-cultural communication and eliminate cultural discounts, Pixar emphasizes disseminating publicly recognized universal values. A film' s cultural values and narrative content form the core and foundation of cross-cultural communication, which must coexist with heterogeneous cultures. To obtain cultural identity, differences must be eliminated, and disseminating universal values represents the primary means of achieving cross-cultural communication.

The universal aspirations of people across different countries and regions encounter minimal communication barriers in cross-cultural contexts, easily triggering viewers' empathy and cultural identification. *Coco* transcends pure entertainment to promote universal cultural values, creating a convergence point between Eastern and Western nationalities and cultures. In cross-cultural communication, “universal values” enjoy high cultural recognition, encompassing themes of familial love, freedom, ideals, and dream-seeking. In *Coco*, Pixar reflects on the harmony between family belonging and ideal pursuit to satisfy emotional and spiritual needs. The story constructs plot conflict through two beautiful elements: the boy Miguel' s musical ideals and pursuit, and the reconciliation and warmth of intergenerational family relationships, with these two threads linking the entire narrative. Thus, the film achieves broad universality in its main narrative strategy while identifying the audience' s emotional pain points.

The Emotional Element of “Affection” and Audience Aesthetic Perception

While culture has national boundaries, “affection” can transcend them. Although the film' s surface content features the Mexican Day of the Dead and death theme, its core and highlight remain the protection and praise of “family” and the maintenance and promotion of familial concepts. Through Ector and Miguel' s journey, the film provides a detailed argument for the ultimate choice of family supremacy. Pixar allows Miguel, a dreamer, to enter the magnificent dream world of the Land of the Dead, where his pursuit of musical dreams guides him to discover his family' s blood ties. Miguel meets his great-great-grandfather Ector in the afterlife, who loved music in his lifetime and left home to wander for his artistic dreams. However, haunted by memories of his daughter Coco, Ector eventually realized that if forced to choose between music and family, family mattered more than dreams. Before he could return home, Dracus murdered him, and his family believed he had abandoned them—a misunderstanding lasting over a century. Later, when Miguel learns in the afterlife that his great-grandmother is about to pass away and that Ector' s ghost might

disappear forever, he too chooses family over dreams, gradually realizing that while years change, love remains eternal and loved ones come first.

The memories and thoughts of loved ones keep spirits alive in the underworld—a response of affection that cannot be broken despite separation. Miguel’s great-grandmother, in fragile health and facing memory loss, has her memories awakened when Miguel plays “Remember Me” on his guitar, the song composed by his great-great-grandfather for his great-grandmother. The moving melody rekindles Coco’s memories of her father, and they are subsequently reunited in the realm of the dead. While music initially alienates family members, it ultimately rekindles the fire of kinship. Affection represents the most tender emotion in people’s hearts and the most touching content. This universal value of accompanying family members has touched audiences across all countries and social strata. The film’s delicate portrayal of the undead’s inner emotions also shines in its performance, as universal values of human affection, love, and dreams continue in the world of the dead, full of warmth and emotion. Family and kinship align with the Chinese nation’s traditional cultural view that values family ties, naturally generating strong reactions in Chinese theaters.

The “Dream” and “Inspirational” Theme

Thematically, *Coco* represents an animation blending strong Mexican traditional culture with American spirit and individualism—an American inspirational animated film pursuing musical dreams. Pixar perfectly integrates the dream theme, incorporating narrative elements such as musical aspirations, mental growth, and adventures in the undead world within its entertaining expression. The protagonist is 12-year-old Miguel, a country boy living in a small Mexican town with four generations of shoemakers. While his family hopes he will inherit their traditional craft, Miguel remains obsessed with music and strives to pursue it. Aspiring to become a great musician like his idol Drakus, Miguel crosses into the world of the undead, embarking on a “dream journey” in a mysterious space where he receives his relatives’ blessings, making his musical dream come true. This unyielding spirit reflects the film’s “inspirational” theme.

“Dream” serves as the film’s main thread, with Miguel’s artistic pursuit linking the story through a progressive narrative pattern. Miguel’s great-great-grandfather abandoned his family to pursue his musical dream and never returned, prompting his great-great-grandmother to establish a family rule forever forbidding music, which has been considered a curse ever since. Miguel fights against this dream-killing ancestral tradition, secretly learning Drake’s music on a home-made guitar hidden from relatives and even attempting to attend a music festival. When discovered, his entire family opposes him, with his grandmother believing music brings bad luck and smashing his guitar. The question of whether Miguel should follow his heart or meet family expectations persists throughout the film. The two paths can be harmonized, as the film integrates individualism into the family’s overall values, reflecting both identity and collective good.

Miguel travels to the world of the undead to “seek his dream,” which should resolve the root cause of his family’s generations-long musical prohibition. Solving this problem would allow Miguel to guard his musical dream. During his journey, he meets his great-great-grandfather, uncovers the secret behind his family’s musical ban, and eventually facilitates reconciliation between his great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother. Since then, Miguel’s pursuit of musical dreams has supported his entire family. The “Dream-Quest” theme satisfies the spiritual needs of rebellious teenagers seeking to realize their ideal values—an adventurous and imaginative group that finds solace in Miguel’s continuous efforts to “follow his dream.” Miguel dreamed that “one day I could be as successful as Dracus,” and finally succeeds on the musical stage of the Undead City. His experience pays tribute to dreams, fulfills specific target audience needs, and inspires all dreamers.

Anti-Canonical Performance Strategy for the Death Theme

Pixar’s strong tradition and advantage has always been “telling a good story that young and old can understand,” and through *Coco*, the studio presents a theme often avoided: death. In the real world, death-related festivals are generally solemn and peaceful, while films depicting the afterlife typically emphasize a dark, cold atmosphere—a world of horror that is usually unpleasant and even requires rejection. Since cartoon audiences are typically children and teenagers, the “life and death” theme can harm their spirits and even cause nightmares. The presentation of the underworld in film and television may frighten children, leading parents to avoid such themes. Consequently, death rarely appears in traditional underage films, and when occasionally explored, it is often expressed symbolically.

Coco combines “death” with film and animation, successfully depicting the world of the undead as a warm and dreamy scene, demonstrating a new and unique plot development trend on the “death” theme. In this colorful underground world, death is no longer cold and bleak but possesses life’s warmth. The 105-minute film spends over 70 minutes in the space of the dead. By cleverly borrowing from Mexico’s real-world Day of the Dead, director Lee Unkrich courageously transforms the world of the dead into a carnival, creating a vibrant and dynamic realm that represents a breakthrough in the film’s death theme representation strategy.

The “City of the Dead” created by Pixar fundamentally overturns childhood perceptions of the “other world”—the underground world proves more dynamic than the real world, an extraordinary secret realm. Theatrical lighting effects include bright fireworks, and under blooming marigold light and candlelight, the tone remains brilliant without a hint of darkness or horror. The background music is bright and smooth, everything joyful and noisy. The central “death theme” possesses human warmth, transforming death from cold, depressing, and violent to warm, achieving stunning cinematic effects suitable for children and aligning with standard “family-friendly” animated films.

The entrance to the Land of the Dead is well-organized, with a golden bridge connecting yin and yang. Walking across the bridge reveals intensely dazzling, shining petals composed entirely of marigold crowns. Mexican tradition believes marigolds preserve the sun's energy to illuminate the dead's return to the earthly world. The human world maintains optimistic peace with the joy and pleasure of the undead space. The film portrays characters with distinct, convincing personalities, and the dead's emotions possess a human glow. Dead men, women, and children bear skeletal faces—seemingly grotesque and horrific images yet as full of human feeling as when alive. The spirits of the dead live happily, almost forgetting death's psychological disturbance; rather than hell, the underworld resembles “another world.” Death becomes less fearful, and living in the dead world represents a beautiful life, even more vibrantly unusual than the world of the living. *Coco* proposes an exciting assumption: death is not the soul's end, the soul does not disappear, and the dead depend on living relatives' memories to maintain existence. Once no one remembers them, the dead ultimately face “final death.” The ritual is not sad remembrance but a happy reunion atmosphere, highlighting the Mexican people's relaxed, open-minded attitude toward life. In romantic purple glow, the deceased in festive attire cross the marigold petal bridge to reunite with living relatives, singing and dancing through the night in celebration. The world becomes a sea of revelry. *Coco* combines the “life and death” theme with “film and animation” through fantastical imagination, achieving remarkable effect in analyzing death while creating warmth. It enhances audiences' deep understanding of life's richness, meets expectations and spiritual aspirations across different countries and regions, and achieves “family fun” in animation promotion.

Cutting-Edge Animation Technology Creating a Visual Feast

With devout workmanship and the most advanced computer technology, Pixar fine-tuned *Coco* to create an unprecedented, incredibly charming visual spectacle, shaping what may be called the most brilliant world of the undead in cinema history. The film's special effects are complicated due to its pursuit of innovation, even reaching extremes in many aspects—undoubtedly another masterpiece of animation production technology that redefines Pixar's technical advantages and innovative qualities.

During *Coco*'s creation, the director envisioned showing audiences the underground world through splendid stunts, creatively projecting the “world of the living” into the “city of the dead” through imagery, ultimately creating a magnificent, warm, and friendly city of the dead. The “Undead City” becomes a dazzling, charming Victorian-style future metropolis with gorgeous, dreamy plazas, tall buildings lining the streets, and well-connected traffic—everything orderly and full of hope and light. The “City of the Dead” uses yellow tones to create a peaceful, beautiful world.

The background design's image expression presents new technological challenges, from various theatrical lighting effects and sparkling petal bridges to layered,

colorful tall buildings. The undead film even includes familiar architectural facilities—public elevators, commercial buildings, opera houses, customs agencies—all treated with high realism. Character design proves highly expressive, with all details repeatedly refined. Under director Lee Unkrich’ s 3D graphics, all images find prototypes in the living world, creating a realistic feeling that makes audiences want to touch this undead world. The people in the “City of the Dead” possess lovely skeletal appearances; the skeletons have 127 bones (80 visible) with painted mouths, eyes, eyebrows, facial wrinkles, body hair, and fluttering clothing folds—all excellently detailed. The undead display lively body movements, can cry and laugh, and even roll their eyes. These skeletal undead become alive here, expressing joy, anger, sadness, and shock, even dancing, effectively establishing a happy atmosphere. Miguel’ s guitar playing features fluent, smooth fingering and strumming rhythm changes that are lifelike and flowing like water. “Singers,” “security guards,” “police officers,” and other characters are no different from real people, their rich, exaggerated expressions surprising audiences. In the story, the hero’ s body gradually fades like a fading peach blossom—gorgeous and poignant. Overall, the world of the Dead combines sophisticated cartoon style with a high degree of design, culminating in a fantastical feast of the Mexican dead city that reaches the highest production level.

Conclusion

Through music and dreams, Pixar delivers a novel, anti-canonical lesson on death in *Coco*, conveying the studio’ s values. As a typical case of multicultural transformation and integration, *Coco* freely employs Mexican elements in its subject matter, narrative background, and color palette, completing Pixar Animation Studio’ s global transplantation of Mexican culture. The film perfectly combines Mexican symbols with mainstream American values, spreading American culture worldwide. In this seemingly frightening story, “life and death” is retold from a pleasant perspective, integrating the film’ s literary, technical, and entertainment aspects into a unified whole. While animation technology develops exquisitely, compared with advanced production concepts and mature techniques, the film’ s connotation and spiritual essence constitute its true vitality. The communication strategy emphasizing higher universal values, particularly the praise and promotion of emotions, represents the key to Pixar’ s strong cross-cultural communication success.

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