

# Narrative Strategy of Death Theme in Animated Films Under Children's Cognitive Perspective

## A Case Study of Pixar Animated Film *COCO*

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**Abstract**—*COCO* is an animated film with the Mexican traditional festival Day of the Dead as story background, which shows the dead and the Land of the Dead in the form of a story. According to data from the IMDb<sup>1</sup> website, the global box office of the film reached 800 million US dollars, which means that so many children have watched this film with death theme and full of skeletal dead characters. How *COCO* talks about the story with the theme of death from the perspective of children is the focus of this paper. This paper is based on the theory of children's psychology and hermeneutics as theoretical support. The research object is the narrative strategy of animated film with death theme and with children as audience targeting. The focus on children's perspectives is mainly due to the lack of children's discourse; children's cultural background and life experience will have an impact on related sub-conceptual cognitions; especially in the face of the death theme of animated films, children aged 5-9 are almost complete in a state of passive acceptance. If it is not handled properly when the animation company makes animated films with death theme, it will increase the children's fear of death, which will have a negative impact on the children's psychology and may bring lifelong injury. *COCO* introduces this new world of the Land of the Dead with the eyes of a child named Miguel, and also takes him as an opportunity to promote the development of the story, and treats life and death with a new perspective. Therefore, this paper will comply with the characteristics of the development of children cognition, in the perspective of children, to explore the narrative strategy of the Pixar animated film *COCO* with death theme.

**Keywords:** *children, children cognition, animated film, COCO, death theme, narrative strategy*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The research object of this paper is children aged 5-9. Children at this stage begin to be puzzled and curious about death, but can only passively accept the information of death from other places, and cannot read and think deeply. Death is a taboo and reserved topic in many countries, especially in the East, which avoids talking in front of children. In

<sup>1</sup> Source:  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=pixar1117.htm>

addition to real life, animation is an important channel for children to contact death, especially internationally famous animated films. They have a large coverage and a wide range of influences. If the interpretation of death is improperly handled, it will have an unpredictable impact on children's death concept.

*COCO* is a 2017 American 3D computer-animated fantasy film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures. Based on an original idea by Lee Unkrich, it is directed by him and co-directed by Adrian Molina. The concept for *COCO* is inspired by the Mexican Day of the Dead holiday. The story follows a 12-year-old boy named Miguel who is accidentally transported to the Land of the Dead, where he seeks the help of his deceased musician great-great-grandfather to return him to his family among the living.

The animated film *COCO* is meticulously carved in narrative. With laughter and warmth, the contradictions between dream and family, life and death are unblocked and reconciled. Adults and children all can find what they want from the film. The characters full of sense of humor and the warm and positive energy theme of "Family Affection is the most important", coupled with a large number of music matched emotions to the story, *COCO* has the effect of letting the audience touch their heart.

Chinese people are afraid to talk about death, and children's death education is even more lacking. After the release of *COCO*, almost everyone agrees that if you want to provide a story for children to face death, it is difficult to find another animated film which is more lively, interesting and moving than *COCO*.

### II. CHILDREN'S DEATH COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS

A. *A psychological experience is mostly based on fear and sorrow, lacking an overall cognition of death*

"Death Acceptance" is generally subdivided into three levels that are neutral death acceptance, approach-oriented

death acceptance, and escape-oriented death acceptance. On the whole, children are the most vulnerable group in society. Their psychological experience of death is mainly fear and sorrow, and fear is the most primitive feeling of human beings, also is the most basic emotion in the face of death.

Hungarian psychologist Maria Nagy used experiments to infer the three stages in children's understanding of death, which corresponded well to the stage of child cognitive development proposed by Piaget<sup>2</sup>. He proposed the stage of 5-9 years is the anthropomorphic period, children of this period know that death is the end of life, but they don't think that they will die and also don't want to die. They regard death as unpredictable and esoteric. They have not yet formed the true understanding of death, that is, death is an inevitable, natural and universal phenomenon. Children cannot grasp the concept of all deaths and lack the overall cognition of death before the age of 10.

*B. The cognition of death is a dynamic process of continuously forming and developing*

From the physiological point of view, death means the end of life. Children's cognition of death also has a certain stage of development. For the understanding and cognition of death, childhood is in a process of continuously forming and developing and gradually deepening.

For the development of the concept of death for children, in addition to the age factor, individual cognitive ability, psychological factor, and mass media etc. are important influencing factors. Mass media such as television, film, and the Internet all contribute to form great individual differences in the development of the concept of death for children.

Film exists as an artistic narrative. As an art form affiliated with the film, animation can mobilize various audio-visual languages, and has unique artistic features such as virtuality, exaggeration and education etc. To use animated film to express a positive view of life and death can undoubtedly lead to the viewer's thinking, while for children the education of view of life and death is positive to the levels in "Acquiring scientific and rational concepts, developing positive emotional emotions and developing self-help and helping skills".

III. NARRATIVE STRATEGY OF DEATH THEME IN *COCO* UNDER CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

*A. A comprehensive display of the Land of the Dead, using anti-traditional forms of expression of death*

As animated films whose audiences are mainly children, traditional expressions generally use indirect skills to express death, while *COCO* adopts a completely different performance strategy. The characters in the film are happy to welcome the arrival of the Day of the Dead. This narrative style gives the audience a great understanding of traditional Mexican culture and beliefs. The Mexicans' attitude towards

death is very open-minded, and they believe that death is not the end of life, but the beginning of new life. They celebrated the completion of the life cycle with joy, and people mourned the dead people without sorrow, even singing and dancing, celebrating the festival with their deceased relatives. In the film, in order to participate in the singing competition, Miguel breaks into Ernesto's mausoleum to borrow his guitar but accidentally touched the magic and went to the Land of the Dead. The film has portrayed and characterized the world of the Land of the Dead, breaking the inherent impression of the cold and horror of the Land of the Dead, giving people the feeling that death is only let people from the real world to another space, a world of the Land of the Dead that is even better than the real world, and keep living.

The Mexican Day of the Dead described in *COCO* is very dazzling and cheerful. The color is bright and rich; the human settlement after death described in the film is like a future city. Compared to the horrible Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival and Western Halloween, there is no sad atmosphere in the film to commemorate the dead. Death is recognized and accepted by everyone. Death is not only not so terrible, and even a little happy. The film uses the familiar life scenes of the audience to creatively project it into the world of the Land of the Dead, describing the unspeakable world of the Land of the Dead in a beautiful way to the children, eliminating the child's horror of death. On the children's level, this narrative strategy is extremely successful.

*B. As a visual symbol of the Day of the Dead, the design of the skeletal dead is vivid and interesting*

The traditional image of the skeletal dead is generally terrifying. The most challenging aspect of *COCO's* character design is the design of the skeletal dead, but in this animated film, the image of the skeletal dead is just a visual symbol that appears as a traditional symbol of the Day of the Dead. In the history of animation, it is not without works of using skeletal dead as the protagonist, for example Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* and Henry Selick's *Coraline* used a lot of skeletal dead characters.



Fig. 1. The lead draft manuscript of the skeletal dead.

In order to determine the image of skeletal dead, the production team spent three years creating some very attractive but not horrible images ("Fig. 1"). In order to let the image of the skeletal dead and the audience establish communication, and the image of the skeletal dead is more suitable for children to watch, the design is very anthropomorphic. The facial expressions of the skeletal dead

<sup>2</sup> Jean Piaget (9 August 1896 – 16 September 1980) was a Swiss psychologist known for his work on child development.

are rich; they have eyeballs, hair and beard, and black eyebrows and red lips as ordinary people ("Fig. 2"). These designs make the skeletal dead not only not horrible, but a little vivid and lovely.



Fig. 2. The image of skeletal dead in *COCO*.

In the image setting, each skeletal dead has different dress up details. Let people feel that death is not terrible, but it just changes a place to live. People can still continue their hobbies, wear what they want to wear, and do what they want. When they are still remembered by their living relatives, go and see the person they want to see. The film does not restrict children's imagination, based on real life, adding more detailed design, creating vivid and interesting but different images of the skeletal dead, so that children can better accept the skeletal dead style without fear.

#### C. Considering the children's feelings considerably in the processing of language related to death

*COCO* is very delicate in story and the processing of detail, and language processing is also very well, take the description of death as an example, it hasn't used any horrible words, such as "hell" or "the infernal world", not even "the other world" or "the unknown world". The film calls the real world "the land of living" and the dead world "the land of ancestors", which can not only express the narrative in an appropriate way, but also minimize the feeling of terror from the perspective of children. It fully considers the psychological feelings of children and also offers a sufficient imaginary space to the children.

#### D. Having various themes in parallel such as the themes of dream and family, diluting the theme of death

Although the Day of the Dead is a story clue, Pixar who is good at storytelling would not to use an animated film to discuss the serious topic of life and death in a solemnity. Death is only one of the plots. All the warm elements of the human world contained in the story: dreams, family, memories, adventures, love, affection, these universal feelings display successively in the film, let audience follow the characters of the film happy together, sad together, experience the joy of success together, and participate in the gathering of loved ones across life and death. Not only that, but the film also brings out a third kind of emotion: forget. In the film, if the dead person is forgotten by their living relatives, he/she will leave the world of the dead, namely "the ultimate death." The clever narrative strategy makes death unload the responsibility of moral education, resolves

the sad sentiment of death, and emphasizes family affection. It can create a warm atmosphere at the end of the film, sorrowful but not woeful, and find a psychological exit for death. Let children be moved, touched and thought.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The theme of *COCO* actually refers to the serious topic of death. Generally speaking, for an animated film with children as the main audience, death is an area that is less likely to be touched because the children themselves are young, puerile and passive. Once the performance is not appropriate, it is very likely to cause harm. In the view of life and death, traditional Chinese Confucianism has an evasive attitude towards death. However, the theme of death is not a restricted area for children animated film. As long as the creators know how to narrative that adapt to the cognitive development stage of children's life experience, such an animated film will become a good expression medium for death education.

The narrative strategy is the core of the film, which reflects what kind of ideas the director wants to present to the audience and in what way. Pixar's style always has a beautiful fairy tale appearance and profound theme. *COCO* breaks the taboo of an all-age level animation theme: the fear of death. It conveys a normal attitude to face death, uses a mitigating approach to let children know about death, and uses a variety of themes to weaken the discomfort caused by the theme of death, delivering a sad but innocuous, soft and subtle emotion experience and human care. The social response brought by the film also proves that the narrative strategy of *COCO* is very successful.

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