

Analysis on the Reasons for the Intensive Resonance Among Mexican of the Film *Coco*

Jinhong Shangguan

The Affiliated High School of Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou city, Fujian province, 350001, China.
Corresponding author's e-mail: Vivian.wang@cas-harbour.org

ABSTRACT

In 2017, the blockbuster film, *Coco*, arouses intensively high resonance for people worldwide [5]. People in Mexico particularly have a strong feeling about it due to not only the touching story but also the high relevance about the culture of their own. It is worthwhile to learn and explore reasons why *Coco* is able to make such resonance globally and why *Coco* produced by the advanced animation company, Pixar, conveys a sense of familiarity and a sense of home for Mexican. The movie *Coco* is analyzed in three different aspect: the utilize of storytelling technique, the representations of some visual elements, and the effect of audio embedded. Some documentaries recording the experience of producing *Coco* from Pixar are also important materials as it reveals the exertion behind the scene. After the analysis, the conclusion is drawn: The movie, *Coco*, easily arouses emotional resonance for people across Mexico because the team faithfully depicts every cultural and Mexican elements into scenes, with a successful auxiliary of songs adapted from indigenous Mexican music and with myriads of well-designed storytelling techniques which keeps audience hooked and entertained.

Keywords: *Coco*, the day of the dead, storytelling techniques, dramatic tension, visual elements, lighting set, originally sound track

1. INTRODUCTION

Similar to the Chinese traditional holiday, tomb-sweeping day, people in Mexico have the Day of the Dead to show their respect and remembrance for the deceased. There are so many authentic cultural elements existing in *Coco* that it is well worth exploring further. The serendipity to start this research is the movie *Coco*, which successfully depicts this culture with a combination of reality and whimsy toward the dead world. The movie quickly became a blockbuster in Mexico not long before it was on the theater, receiving more box-office than the popular film at the time around the world, *Avenger*[4]. In other words, *Coco* reaches the bottom of audience's heart, not only conveying a touching story regarding the death culture in Mexico, but also visualizing those cultural elements in the film vividly. In the research, several dimensions such as the techniques utilized in storytelling, some audio-visual elements embedded in scenes regarding the Day of the Dead, lighting set implemented in scenes, and original sound track which has a custom flavor.

2. CULTURAL CONCEPTS

Falling on early November, the day of the dead is a significant holiday in Mexico, during which people clean the grave of their deceased ancestors, adorn tombs with daisy whose strong scent are believed to be able to guide deceased families back, and put candles on the ofrenda,

with incense burning in the air. There are scenes depicting these Mexican cultural behaviors in *Coco*. One of the most impressive examples is the scene of the funeral where people sit by tombs of their deceased and whisper their stories and love to them. It is such a emotional scene that it immediately communicates resonance among audiences. Although the time of the day of the dead (depending on which part of the Mexico but often in November 1st and November 2nd) is quite close to Halloween (October 31), they are treated as two different holiday and have separate meaning behind them. While Halloween focuses upon the grisly or frightening aspects of the death, the Day of the Dead is very much a celebration of their lives, a happy occasion to honor and remember loved ones who have passed away. [Publish on October, 2014 Differences Between Halloween&Day of the Dead][1]. Another visual element that arouses people's resonance is the facial painting. Miguel paints his faces white and black in order to disguise himself in the land of the dead. The current concept of the facial painting is to represent a deceased love one or an expression of themselves. What's more, painting face is a emblem of warm welcome of Mexican for their deceased ones, which also indicates Mexican's authentic and optimistic attitude toward. However, the concept is quite different in the distance past. In the past, facial painting is used to scare the dead away at the end of the festivities.

3. STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

Apart from relevant cultural concepts, storytelling techniques also play an important part in arousing Mexican's resonance and convey a sense of familiarity. The movie *Coco* not only well depicts every subtle holiday elements faithfully but also conveys the audience, especially Mexican, a sense of familiarity and a sense of home through myriads of well-organized storytelling techniques. These techniques render *Coco* the ability to attract the audience's attention constantly, to interact with the audience, and to entertain them. Through the whole story, one of the most evident storytelling technique implemented is planting and payoff, which excites a variety of cognitive effects that both recruit audience's tendency to prepare mentally for future events and enhance an artwork's aesthetic value. One of example in the movie, *Coco*, is the photo of Mama Coco's family. At the early stage of the movie, it can be indicated that the photo is an important tie that bounds Mama coco and her father together though the face of his grandfather cannot be seen by audiences due to a piece of lost on the photo, which not only conveys the audience a hint toward the future Miguel's encounter with grand grand grandfather, but also plants a clue to the happy ending, in which Mama coco finally embraces her lost memories after listening to the song, Remember me. It is these well-manipulated storytelling devices utilized in the movie that makes so many indications regarding the holiday, the Day of the Dead, become a sense of familiarity and a sense of condensation for Mexican.

4. DRAMATIC TENSION

Another well-implemented device is dramatic tension and they kept the audience entertained and attracted through the film. The movie *Coco* successfully uses this device to stick the audience to the journey of Miguel, making audience's feeling shift as the story progresses. One of the most successful implementation of this device will be the scene which Miguel's self-made guitar was broken into pieces by his grandma. The audience was immediately struck into the sad feeling when Miguel's ardent love for music was countered by his family's strict ban on anything regarding it. This dramatic tension creates audience's empathy and makes them have a strong positive expectation toward the future outcome. 5. This is because scenes like this one make the audience projects onto characters and into their situations; they identify and make emotional investments in their dramatic outcomes. They have a vicarious "stake" in the story through this projection mechanism.

5. VISUAL ELEMENTS

Visual elements in *Coco* also strengthen the connection between Mexican people and movie itself, for they are so

faithfully depicted and presented in the movie. As recorded in the documentary, *A Thousand Pictures A Day*, the team really made a detailed tour into Mexico in a down-to-earth way. The team visited households living in the alley one by one and recorded each of their experience to get inspiration for characters in the movie, which sets a strong connection between the reality on Mexico and the characters in the film. There are so many stuffs in the movie, *Coco*, which we can find the counterpart in reality, for instance, the colorful dead land was inspired by the Mexican City of Guanajuato, a municipality in central Mexico, where people use sets of different color palettes to decorate their houses. Another example that shows the relevance to Mexican is the dog Donte. As a vigorous and mischievous dog depicted in *Coco*, it not only adds a sense of vividness to the story, but also strengthens the relevance to Mexican people, as Donte's origin is the national dog of Mexico. Mexican people actually snuggle them to get heat in cold winter, which is called "heating therapy" in Mexico. It is believed that a deceased person cannot find his way to the dead land called Machlin in Mexico without the guide from this specific kind of dog. *Coco* follows this belief faithfully by making Donte Miguel's accompany through the exploration of the dead land. As the supervisor, Jason Katz, said "we were so surprised by how unique they were that we want them also to be the guide through Miguel's journey[5].

There are other elements in *Coco* bringing a strong sense of Mexican culture. Paper picado which is made of tissue paper is a great example to illustrate how down-to-earth the production team was when they were on the research trip to Mexico and how well cultural aspects are visualized. The production team went into a paper-picado maker's home and talk to him cogently about the concept behind it. The experience of it makes the team so obsessed with that they eventually, as seen on the beginning of the movie, adapted in the scene[2]. Other examples like Ella Bree case, which is not traditionally related to the Day of Dead but there are plenty of them existing on grocery stores along Mexican streets and Palacio de correos, which is the metropolitan post office in Mexico also shower myriads of Mexican vibrant culture and relevance on the movie. With a great performance presented on screen, this delicate, meticulous, and authentic reference to the origin make the movie much more stylistic and unique, not only making foreigners get knowledge of symbols of Mexican cultural, but evoking their resonance in emotion.

6. LIGHTING SET

Nearly every elements appeared in scenes were well presented, including the lighting in the background. It isn't something just emerge from a designer's imagination. Instead, it is based on real scenes, captured by Danielle Feinberg's photographs, the cinematographer and Director of Photography for Lighting at Pixar Animation Studios. As recorded in the documentary of the production of *Coco*, *A Thousand Pictures A Day*, Feinberg was totally impressed by the light and the atmosphere when she

walked into a barbecue market where there is light coming through the pale and greasy smoke rising from the grilled chickens, with a combination of another light beam which is the day light shining through the corrugated plastic panels above people's heads. These based-on-reality lighting sets were so familiar to Mexican that when they were depicted on the scenes of *Coco*, it evokes their memories regarding similar experiences to a certain barbecue market, which consequently and naturally conveys a sense of home and a sense of familiarity.

One of the examples of the implement of lighting in *Coco* would be the scenes in the cave where Miguel grand-grand-grand father reveals the secret of the song, Remember Me. The lighting not only contributes to the sad and nostalgic feeling in this particular scene, but also blends the natural light from the real world and the animation quite well. Another example is the scene when Miguel walks across the bridge made up of daisy to the land of the dead. Those Lights shining from the land of the dead reflect in the midst of fog above the bridge, rendering audience a ambiguous feeling and curiosity toward Miguel's further journey, thus hooking audience to the story even more. However, the decision about where to insert these lighting sets is often made with careful and deliberate thoughts, because the lighting should fit well into the scene and the emotion of the scene. There is often only subtle space where these careful design lighting set could sneak in, to help better render the atmosphere. When all these complementary lighting are well incorporated, there is huge difference in scenes.

7. ORIGINAL SOUND TRACK

The original sound track in the movie, *Coco* is the last but not the least element to be analyzed. In the *Coco*'s case, songs were composed in catching Mexican melody and with indigenous instruments, which both blends audience into the feeling of scenes and infuses their soul with the enthusiasm of Mexican holiday culture. Apart from the types of instrument, the style of music is also vibrant and vigorous, for example, the team used banda music, a kind of music that focuses on big sounds like brass and percussion, specifically from the mixe culture in Oaxaca[3] What is more, the movie's original songs drew from classic Mexican hits. As the Co-director Adrian Molina said that "they wanted the music to "embedded in Miguel's journey," not tacked on." [4]. The music incorporated during the progress of the movie is both related to Mexico and correlated to the feeling of the scene[4]. By seeking out local musicians who took the suggested songs and added adaptation and improvisation, the creator tried to get as authentic as possible. The mixture of Mexican artists' flavor of songs combines extremely well with the suggested ones, which brings even more authentication and indigenous element into the movie.

8. CONCLUSION

It is all these meticulous but significant elements ranging from storytelling technique to visual effect, and to original sound track that makes *Coco* not only a successful animation, but as well a visualization of Mexican people's purest love for deceased ones, endowing Mexican people a strong sense of familiarity and a sense of home. What's more, the wonderful touch of the original sound track which leads audience through Miguel's journey to the dead land is just like an icing on the cake, injecting the soul of Mexico into every scenes. With all this exertion mentioned, this faithful, whimsical, and delicate movie successfully strike into the heart of Mexican and arouse their emotional resonance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Last but not least, please allow me to convey my appreciation for people who helped me during the process of this particular research paper. My tutor is a extremely kind person who kept reviewing my proposal, no matter how bad it was when I first handed in, and inspired me to dig further toward my goal in this research. Another big thanks is to my Professor David. I was lucky enough to met such a talented and inspiring professor who later taught me a lot of knowledge regarding the culture behind films and plenty of practical storytelling techniques that can be utilized in my films.

REFERENCES

- [1] Differences between Halloween & Day of the Dead. Published on 16 October, 2014. Retrieved on: May 5, 2020.
<http://www.garzablancaresidenceclub.com/newsletter/differences-between-halloween-day-of-the-dead/>
- [2] Publish by: Pixar Central, on September 17, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBBnPhSLM9E&t=294s>. Retrieved on: May 5, 2020.
- [3] K. O'Neal. The Music Of COCO: Crafting A Love Song To Mexico. November 29, 2017. Retrieved on: May 6, 2020.
<https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2017/11/29/the-music-of-coco-crafting-a-love-song-to-mexico>
- [4] J. Hecht. Mexico Box Office: Pixar's 'Coco' Becomes Top-Grossing Film of All Time. November 15, 2017. Retrieved on: May 5, 2020.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mexico-box-office-pixars-coco-becomes-top-grossing-film-all-time-1058825>.

[5] Publish by: Pixar Central, on February 3, 2018.

Retrieved on: June 1, 2020.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=a1dZ3HmPi9M&t=1s>