On the Theme Construction of "Life and Death" in the Animated Movie *Coco*

2020, Vol.1 No.2
© Art & Design Research 2020
DOI: 10.37420/j.adr.2020.010
https://masonpublish.org

Fei Su*
College of Arts, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China
*Corresponding author, e-mail: 38654431@qq.com

Abstract

In 2017, Pixar's animated film *Coco* created a happy "ghost world" for the audience with its fantastic imagination. In the eyes of many people, the topic of "life and death" is extremely heavy, and it is even rarer to discuss this topic in publicly screened animated films. However, the high box office of the film and the praise of everyone confirms the success of Pixar's adventure. This article conducts an in-depth analysis of the film's values, story background, plot design, creative techniques, etc., with a view to summarizing the rules for the success of the film and providing lessons for Chinese animation film creation.

Keywords

Coco; Death Philosophy; Life Education; Theme Construction

Introduction

In November 2017, the animated film *Coco* was released worldwide.After it was released, the film quickly won the 21st Hollywood Film Awards, the 83rd New York Film Critics Association Award, the 75th Golden Globe Award, the 2017 Boston Film Critics Association Award, the 2017 Atlas Film Critics Association Award, and Criticism Best Animation Award.In addition, he was also nominated for the Best Animated Producer Award at the 29th American Production Association and the Best Animated Feature Film at the 90th Academy Awards. As the nineteenth animated feature created by Pixar, *Coco* proves with its box office and word-of-mouth strength that no matter how humans develop, the themes of life and death, family love and dreams can always arouse people's attention and heated discussions.

The Philosophical Propositions about "Life and Death" in the Animated Film *Coco*

Life and death are ancient philosophical propositions that human beings have been discussing. Different philosophers from ancient times to the present have different answers to this proposition."Pythagoras said it was the temporary release of the soul; Democritus said it was the necessity of nature; Hegel said it was love itself (Duan, 2017)". In 2017, the animated film *Coco* began to be released all over the world. The film tells the story of Miguel, a boy born in the shoemaking family, who loves music and wants to sing, but is strongly opposed by the whole family because music violates the family taboo. On the night of the Day of the Dead, Miguel accidentally broke into the world of ghost. In that world, he met the idols of the God of songs and their deceased relatives. While pursuing his music dream, he realized the importance of family affection. At the end of the story, Miguel gets the understanding and blessing from his relatives, who help him return to the world and pursue his dream freely. It is very rare in previous works to face the topic of life and death in animated films. Therefore, this attempt of *Coco* is not unbelievable. From the effect point of view, it has indeed played a role in attracting ideas.

Looking at the "Life and Death" in Mexican Culture from the Background of *Coco*

For people in New York, Paris or London, death is a word never mentioned, because some things can be said and others can't be said. On the contrary, Mexicans often talk about death, ridicule it, be intimate with it, sleep with it, celebrate it. Death is one of their favorite toys and their most eternal love (Paz, 2014). In the traditional concept of the world, death means the end of life and the death of everything, which makes people sad and taboo. However, the animation *Coco* boldly chose the theme of "life and death", and its story was inspired by the traditional Mexican festival-Day of the Dead.The Day of the Dead is a very important custom event for Mexico. It not only reflects the cultural characteristics of Mexico, but also reflects the optimistic attitude of Mexicans when facing death. Mexicans believe that the dead relatives have not disappeared, they will continue to live in another world, and on this day of the Day of the Dead every year, the dead relatives will return to the world to gather with their families. Therefore, every family will solemnly build altars, and put pictures of their ancestors and delicious food on the altar. People will also spread the fragrance of marigold on the road, and use golden marigold petals to guide the souls of the ancestors back. The opening part of *Coco* showed the audience that in a lively Mexican village, people carefully prepared joyous music and rich items, waiting for the night of the Day of the Dead. It was on that night that little boy Miguel strayed into the world of the dead because of his love for music. He found his relatives in this world and embarked on a dream seeking journey again. Although there are a lot of skeletons in the world of the dead, the feeling brought to the audience is lively and

warm. "As long as someone remembers, he will never leave." This sentence shows the optimism and openness of Mexicans in the face of death, and the family ties between families and relatives are the important source of this open-minded spirit." Life and death are inseparable, and every time the former loses meaning, the latter also becomes irrelevant (Paz, 2014). "Everything and everything cannot avoid the process from birth to death. What can last forever are the traces we leave in this world, and these traces will not disappear with the passage of time. The animation creator uses the dialogue of the characters in the film to express the values and philosophy of *Coco*—"Death is divided into the death of the body and the death of the soul. When his soul dies, we call it the'ultimate death'," Our story can only be told by people in the living world. The real death is that no one in the world remembers you." Coco is the name of Granny Miguel in the film. It is a soul character who does not have many parts, but protects the "memory" of the whole family. Coco's father, ektor, and his wife are together because of their love for music. After having a daughter, his wife shifts the focus of his life back to the family, while her husband ektor chooses to leave his wife and daughter to pursue the dream of music. "He wanted to sing all over the world, but I just wanted to settle down in my life, because my daughter was more important than music, so we had to make a choice for the life we wanted." From then on, ektor became a betrayer in the family and was gradually forgotten by later generations. As the daughter of ektor, Coco is also the only one who remembers him in the world. Although there are only a few scenes on the scene, it is because of her deep yearning for her father that ektor can never die in the world of the dead. At the end of the film, Miguel finds that with the passing of Mrs. Coco's life, ektor in the world of the dead is also disappearing. With the help of the ancestors, Miguel rushed back to the world. Before Coco lost consciousness, Miguel played "Remember Me" in front of her, the song ektor did for her daughter.

The warm melody reawakens the deep love and concern between father and daughter. At the same time, this song is very good to light up the theme of the film again-miss because of love, and get eternal life because of being missed.

Different Highlights of "Two Worlds" from the Setting of *Coco*

As we can see, the film constructs two different specific spaces, one is the real world where living people live, and the other is the undead world where the soul lives. Two unrelated worlds are connected at a special time point because of the boy Miguel, which makes us experience the different scene atmosphere and visual effect. Although the town where the MiGs live is a fictional village in the film, all the details come from the collection of Mexican customs and culture. The film is scheduled for the eve of the day of the dead. The residents of the town hung colorful festival paper cuts on the streets. The quaint and lively town is full of the atmosphere of the Day of the Dead. In the real world, the creative team focused on two main scenes. One is the altar of the MiG

family, which is the key point where the story of the two worlds takes place. Golden marigold adorns the multi-storey altar. The photos of the deceased family members are placed on the altar one by one according to their seniority. In front of the photos are the food that is unique to the Mexican Day of the Dead, death bread, sugar skulls, etc. There are also carefully decorated skeleton dolls and countless burning white candles. On the ground is a path paved with marigold petals, leading the souls of ancestors to return from the door to the altar. Miguel's grandma Coco sat at the altar, facing the torn-off photo of his father. Coco used her only memory to protect his father's soul in the undead world. Another important world scene in the film is the cemetery. Mexicans never think of graves as a place of pain and terror. They decorate cemeteries with joy, beautiful marigold, delicious food, and even invite bands to sing. In the animation film *Coco* in the saint Cecilia cemetery, the real construction of such a Mexican cemetery. People stay in the beautiful cemetery all night, searching for happy memories and waiting for the return of their ancestors. The creation team has a strict research on the details of the scene. It is precisely because of their accurate grasp of all aspects of Mexican culture that we can see a real world with rich texture in the film.

Different from our fixed cognition of the darkness and terror of the ghost world, *Coco* uses extraordinary imagination to show us a world of the dead with bright lights, colorful colors and high-rise buildings. Because there is no sunlight, in this world, everything is covered by romantic artificial purple light, charming colors, lively music, exquisite dinner, all night carnival. Pixar makes the world of the dead into a sea of joy, such an underground world even for children to watch without fear that they will be frightened. In addition to the arrangement of light, the architecture of the undead world also reflects the super imagination of Pixar's creative team. This is an extremely gorgeous Victorian style metropolis, in which the most representative tower stands in the water and connects the history of Mexico layer by layer through the rotating curve track, telling people about Mexico's past and present. From the bottom of the aboriginal pyramid, followed by the colonial period, the Mexican Revolution period, the industrial period, and all the way to the top, cranes are still constantly building a new era, forming a vertical sense of space different from the stable state of reality. In terms of architectural style, many scenes in the world of the undead are based on the Mexican city of Guanajuato. The colorful houses are painted to provide a relaxed and joyous carnival atmosphere. At the junction with the Marigold Bridge, an entrance and exit for the undead is set up. This is a very clever and interesting design. The undead scanned their faces through the computer at the entrance and exit, and compared them with pictures of him in the human world. If someone remembers you in real life, you can go in and out, and those who are not mourned will not be able to pass through, echoing the film's view that "life exists because of love".

See the Unique Character Performance from the Character Setting of *Coco*

The role is the most important symbol of a film. The film conveys emotions to the audience through the performance of the characters and promotes the development of the plot. Animation characters are often more easily accepted by the audience than real actors through humorous and exaggerated painting. *Coco* is full of a large number of skeletons. This is very risky for the animation with children as the main audience. As a result, Pixar's bold adventure was a success. The undead in the film were accepted by the audience for their exaggerated and humorous performance, and were called "the cutest skeletons in the world". In the film, these skeletons walk like living people and live in the world of the dead. Some of them dress up and attend dinner parties, some are conscientious and diligent, and others are helpless and waiting for the ultimate death. Although there is no flesh and blood and skin, it does not affect the emotional needs and expression of skeleton characters. The creator has designed many interesting performance details for the characters by using the special structure of human skeleton. For example, when ektor first discovered Miguel's identity, he was so frightened that his two eyes fell directly into his mandible; when customs officers saw a living man coming to the world of the dead, his chin fell directly on the table, and so on. Although they are all composed of bones, each skeleton character has its corresponding identity and story. They wear different clothes, continue their life and habits, and perform vividly in the creator's pen.

In addition to the vivid performance of the protagonist, the supporting role in the film *Coco* also has a very wonderful performance. Among them, eborgi is the guide of the dead in the legend of Mexico. They come from the traditional Mexican wood carving art. They are usually a mixture of concentrated animals with bright colors, which will lead the dead to the right path in the film, Miguel's great great great grandmother Melda's eporeggie is a majestic animal. It has the face of a leopard, the horn of a sheep, the wings of a bird, the hind claws of an eagle and the tail of a lizard. It is covered with blue-green colorful fur and bright eyes. In order to reflect the truth of the story, the creator also set many famous people in Mexican history as the role of the dead. For example, the negative role in the film-the god of song Dracus, his prototype comes from the well-known Mexican actor and singer Infonte Pedro. In the film, Dracus becomes a public idol because he steals the songs created by his partner ektor. It is in order to pursue the dream of the God of songs that Miguel comes to the world of the dead, which causes the beginning of the story. In addition, there is a Mexican surrealist painter Frieda, whose two eyebrows are connected together is an important feature of her. Even on the skeleton frame without fur, she still retains this feature, which is highly recognizable. Frieda designed a performance with strong color and symbolism in the concert of God of songs.

Limitations of the Expression of Meaning of Life in *Coco*

In the eyes of death philosophers, "life" and "death" are opposite and unified. Through the discussion of the value of "death", the film makes people realize the meaning of "life". Its essence is about how to endow the limited life with infinite value and significance. This is also echoing the viewpoint of the book "The Philosophy of Death" written by Mr. Duan Dezhi. And the meaning of life in addition to good feelings, there are many other aspects. Ancient Chinese sages also had their own philosophic views on the value of life, such as "killing one's body and becoming benevolent" mentioned in "the Analects of Confucius · Wei linggong" and "sacrificing one's life for justice" in Mencius · Gaozi. The pursuit of life is people's dream, and the process of pursuing dream is also the process of realizing their personal value. There are two main lines in *Coco*, one is about dreams and the other is about family affection. In order to pursue his music dream, ektor left his family and ended up in a tragic death in a foreign land. In the film, his belief in dreams is the strongest But decisively, after experiencing all this, he told MiG "Nothing is more important than his family. "The change of ektor's attitude towards dream shows the change of his values. From the point of view advocated by the whole film, the author thinks that it is not appropriate to use "dream seeking" as the theme word of the film title. Finally, although Miguel got the understanding of his family members and was able to adhere to his music dream, this is still a praise for the inclusiveness of family relationship, and the positive guiding role of "dream" for people is not emphasized, which is also the regret left by this film.

Conclusion

With the help of Mexicans' optimistic attitude towards death, the animated film *Coco* puts "life and death" and "kinship and dream" together, and explores it with warmth and humor, which has aroused heated discussion among the audience. Parents who were worried that the theme was too heavy could give positive life education to their children after watching the film. At the same time, through the interesting performance of the film, gorgeous colors, fantasy imagination, warm music to attract children's attention, get their love. Therefore, this is an animated film with philosophical thinking and high quality. Although there are still some shortcomings, it is perfect on the whole. Its successful experience is worthy of learning and learning from Chinese animated films.

Funding

This paper is the research results of the Project to Improve the Basic Research Ability of Young and Middle-aged Teachers in Guangxi Universities, "Research on the Development Status of Guangxi Original Public Welfare Animation" [No. 2019KY0498].

References

Duan, D.Z. (2017). *Philosophy of Death*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2.

Paz, O. (2014). The Lonely Labyrinth. Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Publishing House, 046.

Zhou, M., & Shen, H. (2012). Aesthetic evolution of animation creation theme. *Movie Literature*, (06).

Lu, F. (2017). *Semiotics of Animated Films*. Beijing: Science Press.