XVIII. US-MEXICAN ENCOUNTERS IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN FILM

ENCUENTROS ESTADOUNIDENSES-MEXICANOS EN LA OBRA CINEMATOGRÁFICA NORTEAMERICANA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Re-animating Mexicanidad: Mexican Cultural Representations in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017)

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In the last decade, Hollywood studios have produced two feature length animations centering on Mexico's *Dia de los muertos:* Reel FX Creative Studios' *The Book of Life* (2014) and Disney Pixar's *Coco* (2017). Through their differing exploration of Mexican cultural heritage onscreen, both animations serve contrasting ideological functions that contribute to larger cultural discourse about the relationship between Mexico and the US. *The Book of Life* was released two years prior to the controversial presidential campaign of Donald Trump and offers a typical depiction of Mexico as an exotic other. In contrast, *Coco*, a film produced during the time of the election and released in the US eleven months after Trump's inauguration, has been described as subversive filmmaking due to its detailed and positive representation of Mexican cultural heritage in a climate of increasing political antagonism towards the country (del Barco 2017). This article explores how these respective cultural depictions of Mexican heritage relate to the industrial structures that produced them as well as the differing socio-political climates in which they were produced and released.

Keywords: Animation, Mexicanidad, Day of the Dead, *Coco, The Book of Life.*

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1) Introduction

Animation is a cinematic art form; Hollywood is synonymous with filmmaking and in keeping with this reputation, it is home to world-class animation. Animations, particularly those aimed at children, tend to depict fantastic and ultimately joyful stories with narratives located in both real and imagined geographical locations. Reel FX Creative Studios' *The Book of Life* (2014) and Disney Pixar's *Coco* (2017) are no exception to this trend. These two recent examples of Hollywood 3D computer-animated fantasies focus on Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration, bringing to life depictions of small Mexican towns alongside elaborate imagined worlds that seek to represent the Land of the Dead. Both films revert to the musical, adventure and comedy genres and though similar in a superficial sense, their approaches to cultural representation are markedly different when viewed within the socio-political contexts of early twentieth century and modern-day US-Mexico relations.

This article seeks to interrogate two recent examples of Hollywood animation that take Mexico, its people and the notion of Mexican identity – Mexicanness, or *mexicanidad* – as its central premise. Drawing on key interpretations of the evolving concept of *mexicanidad* throughout the twentieth-century reflective of shifting political ideologies, I examine the historic relationship between Mexico's cultural representation and its relationship with the US, notably the tourism industry. The filmic case studies selected are significant given not only their thematic proximity but also, crucially, the timing of their production and dissemination.

While *The Book of Life* was released two years prior to the 45th presidential election in 2016, won by populist Republican candidate Donald Trump, *Coco* was produced during this time and released in the US eleven months after Trump's inauguration. The Trump campaign, launched 16th June 2015, was characterized by hate-speech including the now President's classification of many Mexican immigrants as "criminals, drug dealers, rapists" (Trump in Ye Hee Lee 2015) as well as his persistent narrative around the campaign promise to build a wall on the Mexico–United States border paid for by the Mexican State. Likewise, since his inauguration, Trump's government has demonstrated intensifying antagonism toward Mexico. Seen in the context of

this socio-political climate, this article examines how these Hollywood animations approach the representation of Mexican cultural heritage and to what degree their interpretations engage with the notion of *mexicanidad* originally forwarded by Mexico's own government administrations for national and international consumption in the early twentieth century.

The Book of Life, directed by Mexican animator/filmmaker Jorge R. Gutiérrez is produced, among others, by renowned Mexican auteur Guillermo del Toro. The story transpires across three keys locations and multiple time periods: a museum in the US, attended by an unruly group of children; an ostensibly fictitious town in Mexico known as San Ángel; and the otherworldly Lands of the Remembered and Forgotten. In the present, a mysterious museum guide (Christina Applegate/ Kate del Castillo) reads to the US children from the eponymous Book of Life; she recounts the tale of Manolo Sánchez (Diego Luna), Joaquín Mondragón (Channing Tatum) and María Posada (Zoe Saldana), a group of childhood friends in San Ángel, turned rivals in adulthood by their burgeoning love triangle. Their romantic rivalry is the subject of a wager by two mystical figures La Muerte (voiced by Kate del Castillo) and Xibalba (Ron Perlman) who govern the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten respectively. The film was commercially successful in the US and beyond, grossing just over $50 million domestically and just under $50 million abroad across 3,113 theaters.[1]

Co-directed by American animator/filmmakers Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, *Coco* tells the story of Miguel Rivera (Anthony Gonzalez), a 12-year-old aspiring musician who rebels against his family's seemingly inexplicable ban on music. After Miguel finds himself lost in the Land of the Dead he has 24 hours to seek a family member's blessing or become one of the dead. Similar to *The Book of Life*, *Coco*'s narrative unfolds in both the Land of the Living (here a fictitious present-day Mexican town known as Santa Cecilia) and the Land of the Dead. The film features an all-Latinx cast including famed Mexican actor Gael García Bernal. Produced by a much larger, more established studio Disney Pixar's *Coco* grossed almost $210 million domestically and nearly $600 million abroad across 3,987 theaters.[2]

2) *Mexicanidad*

Mexicanidad, also known as *lo mexicano,* constitutes the affirmation of Mexican culture. The term carries a rich and complex history that comprises various evolutions of meaning forwarded by different ruling powers over time. My analyses of this term will begin in nineteenth century Mexico with the advent and growing popularity of still and moving image technology. While

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[1] See Box Office Mojo (2015).
[2] See Box Office Mojo (2018).

my examination of *mexicanidad* is largely limited to its use with regard to visual culture and tourism the term has also been defined and interrogated extensively in Mexican cultural criticism and literature.[3]

The arrival of the photographic and cinematic apparatuses to Mexico in the nineteenth century enabled new forms of cultural expression and augmented the capacity of the image to be dispersed more broadly. For example in 1902 ahead of Mexico's centenary of independence and in what John Mraz describes as "the culminating act of Porfirian propaganda" (Mraz 2009: 40), dictator Porfirio Díaz commissioned a visual record of State-owned church buildings. The project was indicative of a new understanding of Mexican identity, one that would celebrate the nation's Europeanization instead of rejecting its colonial past, as per the independence movement. The reframing of these churches, once symbols of colonial occupation now historical monuments, represents an ideological reframing of the conquest as shared Mexican heritage.[4]

Scholarly work tracks a further evolution of Mexican identity via image-making to the photographs of Mexican and foreign photographers (primarily European and US) at the start of the twentieth century. German photographer Hugo Brehme for example turned to the people and landscape of the country as subjects. According to Mraz "[m]odern scholars of Mexican photography argue that Brehme constructed 'a graphic system of *lo mexicano*,' creating a 'visual vocabulary' of *mexicanidad*, that constitutes 'the base of today's national identity'" (in Mraz 2009: 79). Indeed Brehme's depiction of Mexico at this point in time is one that persists in contemporary understanding and will be explored in relation to *The Book of Life*. In his work regional specificity is reduced to picturesque images featuring sombrero-clad *churros*, women in *china poblana* dresses alongside images of local tradespeople, goods and exotic fauna. This imagery formed the essence of a new *mexicanidad*.[5]

In the post-revolutionary period government policy once again sought to unite a disparate nation through the concerted construction of a shared national identity.[6] One of the earliest outputs linked to this initiative is the Mexican muralist movement (1920s). The re-definition of *lo mexicano* was driven largely by Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos. By

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[3] The work of Octavio Paz, particularly *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) famously provided a definition of Mexican identity (*mexicanidad*). His literary coevals José Revueltas and Carlos Fuentes, however, disputed the essentialist nature of these myths. Elsa Cecilia Frost interrogated the notion of *lo mexicano* further in her book *Las categorías de la cultura mexicana* (1973) Likewise authors have continued to challenge the limits of this cultural identity and its representation into the present. See also Luz Arredondo (2005).
[4] See Mraz (2009: 40).
[5] See Mraz (2009: 79).
[6] See Pick (2010: 178f.).

coupling educational reforms with these cultural projects, Vasconcelos sought to bring together complex visual narratives of nationhood on a grand scale in public spaces. These narratives captured historical periods such as Mexico's indigenous origins, the colonial period, and the Revolution and attempted to bridge these starkly contrasting époques into one cohesive unifying thread. In this context, the evolving notion of *mexicanidad* comprised an explicitly racialized dimension based on eugenics termed by Vasconcelos as "la raza cósmica". This so-called cosmic race represented an amalgamation of Mexico's previous races into one powerful cosmic being.[7]

Similarly, Mexico's hugely successful cinema industry, particularly during the period known as the Golden Age (1935-1960) provided a new platform for defining *mexicanidad*. This was composed chiefly of a carefully established star system that mirrored the Hollywood framework and provided recognizable archetypes of Mexican identity. Celebrities such as María Félix and Dolores del Río, Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, and Cantinflas (Mario Moreno) all embodied different aspects of this proposed identity and nuanced acceptable gender roles and stereotypes of the time. The national cinema industry provided codified representations of morality for intersectional audiences seeking to understand their societal place and role in the age of modernization.[8]

Crucially, however, the purpose and impact of a constructed *mexicanidad* is not limited to its national audience; a shared notion of *lo mexicano* also plays a part in foreign perception of Mexico, particularly that of US tourists. From this perspective, the creation of *mexicanidad* comprised part of a State campaign to re-brand Mexico's image to foment tourism and, by extension, encourage foreign investment in the country. This approach originally emerged during *porfiriato,* the period between 1884 and 1910 when General Porfirio Díaz controlled Mexico through continuous non-consecutive reelection punctuated by puppet presidents. The Porfirian regime sought to "correct the 'errors' of world opinion concerning Mexican climate, politics, and society" (in Mraz 2009: 31) by photographing and propagating a more desirable image of Mexico. This was mainly achieved, at the time, through a celebration of Mexico's colonial past as exemplified in Díaz's photo-project concerning colonial churches across the

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[7] See Baker (2015: 13). As scholars have noted certain races are erased from this narrative, namely African, Asian and other ethnic groups not in keeping with the government's framing of Mexican history, see González (2010). Likewise, despite the incorporation of Mexico's indigenous past to this narrative, the underlying message and ideological aim is a whitening of the nation that points to a racist mentality (in which darker skin tones are considered reflective of barbarity and lack of cultivation and lighter tones are associated with civilization), see Franco (1985). While this article does not explore the racial dimensions of the two animated films to this extent, the pervasiveness of this racialized representation persists at the time of writing and can be observed in the form of lighter-skinned animated protagonists in both films.

[8] See Monsiváis /Bonfil (1994).

country, a move that favored European culture over Mexican but simultaneously also emphasized the country's architectural and thus historical richness compared to the less established US.[9]

It is from the 1930s until the 1950s where *mexicanidad* became a crucial tourism tool. As Alex Saragoza writes, this involved "the gradual, selective appropriation of cultural forms to 'image' the country through the articulation of notions of national identity and its attendant heritage" (Saragoza 2001: 91). Co-sponsored by the State and the private sector, tourism (an industry that relied particularly on the US economy) transformed into a fundamental expression of a carefully commodified national cultural identity. This blanket identity was forged from a patchwork of distinct regional art forms that would come to symbolize an image of Mexico produced mainly for US consumption. Thus cultural forms that are specific to certain groups and areas, such as the performance of the *jarabe tapatío* to mariachi music or the *poblana china* dress, come to represent identity on a national scale. Néstor García Canclini labels this phenomenon "the dissolution of the ethnic into the national" (García Canclini 1993: 65). While positive to a degree, Canclini argues that this method of homogenizing difference under the banner of national unity simply serves to depoliticize and distort a more complex and conflict-laden reality.[10] As such touristic representation is largely removed from the political while historically, as discussed, Mexico's construction of Mexicanness for national consumption is distinctly more politically engaged. It is in this political context that Mexico's multifarious indigenous roots were largely reduced to Mayan and Aztec histories and artefacts, with the pyramid as an iconic emblem of this.[11]

Alongside this selective distilling of regional specificity into a bland national typicality, touristic narratives descended into hyper-dramatic spectacle and pageantry.[12] *El día de los muertos* is a prime example of this and notably forms the backdrop to both the animations discussed in this article. Other examples include bullfighting, the *voladores* (flyers) of Papantla, the *toritos* with fireworks, and charro-style mariachis, a selection of which also appear in both filmic narratives.

The touristic promotion of Mexico in the 1930s and 40s (chiefly to US Americans) was primarily found in this ostensibly essentialist cultural depiction. The touristic gaze of this period focused on difference and the exotic and was thus forged around the notion of an 'us' and 'them'

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[9] See Mraz (2009: 40).
[10] See García Canclini (2010: 65).
[11] See Saragoza (2001: 100).
[12] See Saragoza (2001: 98f.).

narrative. That is to say, *mexicanidad* both nationally and abroad was concentrated into this dichotomy of difference. As is argued in Saragoza:

> In this sense, tourism constructed the nation as "an assertion of its opposition to other communities and identities" where "to assert 'identity' in the relational form [was] to display 'difference' forcibly in the public sphere (Carter / Donald 1993 in Saragoza 2001: 109).

It is this emphasis on difference, particularly in the context of growing divisive populist discourse during the Trump era that will be observed in relation to the filmic texts in the remaining sections of this article. Thus, *mexicanidad* can be viewed all at once as a touristic tool that packaged Mexican cultural stereotypes for US consumption and a positively received though ideologically-driven example of cultural assertion in Mexico itself. These foundations for the representation of cultural heritage both nationally and abroad serve to explore the depiction of *mexicanidad* in *The Book of Life* and *Coco*. While this article does not seek to explore the presence of *lo mexicano* exhaustively in both films, it is worth highlighting their engagement with *mexicanidad* and how this is navigated via recent Hollywood representation before and during the Trump administration.

3) *The Book of Life* (2014)

Released the year prior to the start of the Trump campaign, Reel FX Creative Studios' *The Book of Life* (2014) provides an interesting starting point for the exploration of Hollywood depiction of Mexican cultural heritage in animation proposed in this article. *The Book of Life* is clearly intended as a positive and celebratory depiction of Mexican culture, the affectionate way that the film introduces its Mexican focus testifies to this. In the opening scenes of the film a group of unruly children arrive to a city museum where a friendly female tour guide leads them to a secret wing of the museum for an alternative tour. It is in this space that we encounter the titular book. As the mysterious museum guide begins her introduction to the origins of the Book of Life and the veracity of the stories it holds, she states "[t]here is one thing we know for certain, Mexico is the center of the universe".[13] Her words are accompanied by parodic images which present Mexico first in the form of a sombrero-shaped galaxy (Figure 1a) and then, as the digital imagery imitates a superzoom effect, as the planet earth where a mustachioed North American continent with an arrow pointing to the would-be facial fulcrum is captioned "CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE" (Figure 1b).

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[13] Interestingly one explanation of the toponymy Mexico is said to be an agglutinate of the Nahuatl words 'Mextli' (moon), 'Xitle' (center) and the suffix 'Co' (in the), therefore meaning "in the center of the moon" (see Arredondo 2005: 11).
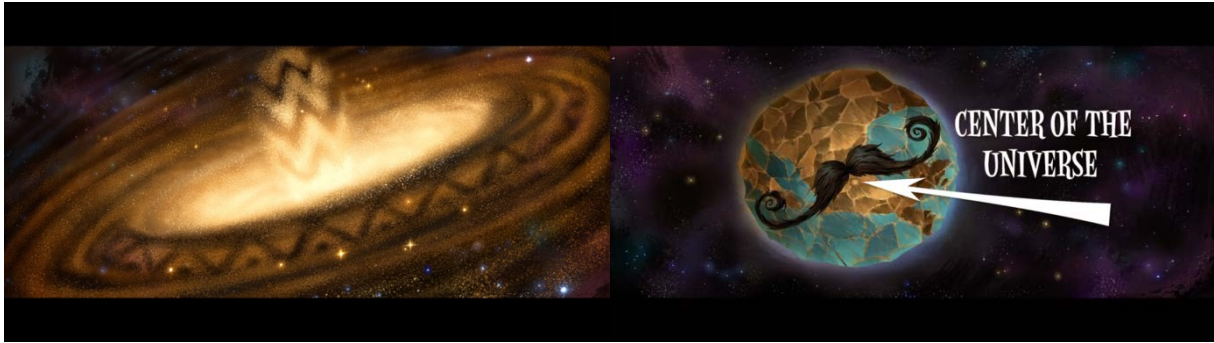
Figures 1a; 1b: Mexico is the center of the universe (in Gutiérrez 2014: 02':42"-03':00").

The images draw on the typical visual signifiers of an early twentieth century Mexican *campesino* (peasant) captured in the work of foreign photographers including Paul Strand, Edward Weston and of course Hugo Brehme. These cursory symbols, which playfully introduce the setting of the story, are offered as emblematic of Mexico as a whole, as opposed to a specific social class within a particular cultural context. Adjacent to Canclini's assertion that in such contexts the ethnic is filtered into the national, here the representation intersects class and nation with the rural working class representing all of Mexico.

Indeed, the film supplies a perfect example of a touristic gaze and in doing so engages closely with the characteristic visuals of a typical depiction of *mexicanidad* for an US audience. The film's very narrative cements the viewer's role as outside observer; we discover the world of Manolo, Joaquín and María via the museum-tour experience of a group of American children. The tour guide leads the children to a special, secret wing of the museum where upon entering she announces "[b]ehold children, the glorious beauty of Mexico". Here they encounter an ancient chamber lacquered with pseudo Mexican curios such as enormous and vibrantly colored skull heads that are vaguely reminiscent of the Olmec colossal heads, and all peppered by a *papel picado* bunting (see Figure 2). It is in this exotic setting – that of the mystical and mysterious museum wing, where the children and audience experience the story of Manolo, Joaquín and María.

Throughout the unfolding of the plot, the 'us and them' binary is reasserted, punctuating the structure of the sub-narrative at regular intervals in the story. In one example, when María and later Manolo appear to have died, the animation cuts back to the children in the museum. Their story is disrupted, relegated even, by the reactions of the children hearing it and who are shown to take precedence. While it can be observed by the children's concerned reactions that they empathize with the characters, these interruptions to the interdiegetic world constantly remind the viewer of their distance from the world depicted. There is a continual reinforcement of a specific reality (that of the children in the museum) against the fiction of San Ángel. These

jarring cuts are not 'limited' to shocking twists in the story but also occur when the children make commentary on the plot itself, a metanarrative technique that also questions the validity of the depiction.

Figure 2: "Behold children, the glorious beauty of Mexico" (in Gutiérrez 2014: 02':03"-02':05").

In this way, the viewer is reminded that they are watching a story within a story, creating yet further distance between the Mexican protagonists and the cinematic audience. Under these circumstances the viewer's experience parallels that of the US children and not the protagonists of the love story, aligning the viewer thus more with those outside of Mexico than within it. The audience then, much like the children, is simply a short-term visitor to this Mexican town and deeper engagement with the lives of its citizens is limited.

Perhaps most indicative of this fact is that the townspeople of San Ángel, including the three chief protagonists, are all digitally rendered as toy wooden figures, presented to the children in miniature form prior to the telling of the sub-narrative (see Figure 3). Though there are other fully animated Hollywood features where toys protagonize the narrative and co-exist with humans,[14] in the case of *The Book of Life* the artistic decision to represent the subplot characters as toys results in a further separation of the two parties: the children are real like the viewer

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[14] Prime examples of animated features that comprise toy protagonists are seen, for example, in Disney's successful *Toy Story* (1995-2019) franchise, the classic tale of *Pinocchio* (1940) also produced by Disney as a two dimensional animation and, to some degree, Dreamworks' *Shrek* (2001). It is important to note, however, the following concessions: in *Toy Story* the adult humans are largely absent from the narrative; Pinocchio is the only animate toy in his universe and his personal ark culminates in his becoming a 'real' boy. Finally, in *Shrek* the characters are all drawn from fantasy and coexist in a fairytale land, and thus no distinction is made between toys, humans and animals for example.

while the purportedly esteemed Mexicans are toy-people. Thus, though the manner in which the figurines are presented highlights their importance (they are protected by a wooden chest), despite their carefully assembled display they are still reduced to lifeless objects resembling souvenirs. These figurines, as well as the museum chamber in which they are found, thus represent a commodified Mexico, curated for a US audience.

In keeping with this essentialist depiction of Mexicanness, the film also includes countless cultural clichés. For example in terms of music, the soundtrack mixes contemporary songs, at times performed in mariachi style, with classics of *mexicanidad* such as the *jarabe tapatío*. The male protagonists are archetypes of machismo spectacle: Manolo the sensitive guitar-playing torero and Joaquín the lauded military hero. Largely, the fictional town of San Ángel is constructed on a touristic understanding of *lo mexicano*. The town, which is itself shaped like an acoustic guitar, is a further reminder of this fact.

Beyond the film's reliance on clichéd cultural tropes and its constant pendulum cuts between the US child audience and the Mexican love triangle, a temporal divide further buttresses the assertion of difference between Mexico and the US. The sub-narrative takes place during an indeterminate past that visually recalls porfiriato but can be located somewhere after the revolution (1910-1920) due to explicit references thereof within the plot. This once again separates the US children from the Mexicans, while their story takes place in our shared present, that of the Mexicans is consigned to an unspecified past. In the same vein, the town of San Ángel is also far removed from any larger civilization is therefore even further distanced from an attempt to align this depiction of Mexican society with a more faithful and realistic present-day equivalent.

The one attempt the filmmakers make to bridge the gap that it so forcefully constructed during the narrative takes place in the final moments of the film. In keeping with the genre of fantasy to which it pertains, the real and imagined fictitious worlds of the sub-narrative converge when the museum guide reveals herself as La Muerte. From their own culturally iconic yellow school bus, the US children wave goodbye to the guide who transforms into her true form and reunites with her own love interest, Xibalba.

Figure 3: "All of these wooden figures represent real people in our story" (in Gutiérrez 2014: 04':25"-04':29").

Despite this largely superficial engagement with Mexican culture, *The Book of Life* received predominantly positive reviews in the US though critics focused their praise mainly on the high quality of the animation.[15] Nonetheless, as explored here and in accordance with Simon Abrams' review, *The Book of Life* "preaches tolerance while lamely reinforcing the status quo" (Abrams 2014). In the context of Mexican cultural identity, the status quo relates to the film's heavy reliance on a polarizing narrative that separates the viewer from the Mexican protagonists of the film and relies on dated *mexicanidad* clichés.

4) *Coco* (2018)

Unlike the toy Mexicans that populate the imaginary town of San Ángel in *The Book of Life,* Disney's *Coco* is protagonized by a twelve-year old boy named Miguel and his family (both living and dead). The film is significant not least because it was produced and released during a period of pervasive and pernicious populist discourse attributed to then-presidential candidate (and now US president) Donald Trump.

Populist discourse is forged around reductive binaries; it seeks to create two antagonistic identities, placing itself on the side of 'the people' and in doing so opposes itself to so-called 'elites'.[16] This dichotomy lends itself to the creation of further moralistic antagonisms such as

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[15] See Scheck (2014), Snetiker (2014) and Stewart (2014).
[16] See Mudde (2004: 544).

'good' and 'bad' or 'pure' and 'corrupt'. However, as part of this simplification of political identity, groups that do not constitute part of the 'elites' but in some aspects do not sit comfortably within a shared understanding of 'the people', are also targeted for their difference. Within populist discourse, minorities are often depicted as a protected group that, although it does not hold power itself, benefits directly from the rule of the elites. Such is the case for Mexican immigrants during the Trump campaign. Trump's public labelling of many Mexican immigrants as "criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc." highlights their exclusion from the classification of 'the people'. Once again, Mexicans and their culture are relegated to a position of 'otherness'. In this context an 'us' and 'them' binary based on cultural difference, as is the case in *The Book of Life*, becomes problematic. It is perhaps for this reason that *Coco* results a more complimentary, rich and even challenging depiction of Mexican cultural heritage than its coeval animated feature. Instead of leaning into the notion of mexicanidad that characterized twentieth century tourism as with *The Book of Life, Coco* evolves its engagement by narrativizing the relationship between contemporary life and Mexico's cultural past.

Though *Coco* relies on many of the same narrative tropes and clichés as *The Book of Life*, as one example both films center around Mexico's day of the dead celebrations, it asserts a more detailed examination of cultural products and celebrations. Its timely release places the film at the center of high tensions and debates regarding the current and future relationship between Mexico and the US during this presidency (2017-2021). These tensions have been stoked not only by the President's slandering of Mexican immigrants but also his campaign promise to "build a wall" on the Southern border. In addition, his administration's termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and its zero-tolerance policy on families entering the US at the border that resulted also in the forced separation of children from their families.[17] These policies and the rhetoric that accompanies them intends to create societal divisions in which 'the people' are established as law-abiding citizens, while immigrants are placed in direct opposition to this, with their behavior and humanity construed as resultantly 'illegal' or 'criminal'. Thus *Coco* has been identified by some reviewers as 'subversive' for its positive approach to Mexican identity and cultural heritage in such a volatile political climate.[18]

What is being labeled subversive here is the well-researched and detailed celebration of Mexican cultural identity that draws heavily on the tradition of popular visual culture. Indeed the film is fraught with visual references to figures like political lithographer José Guadalupe Posada whose famed *calavera* cartoons would posthumously come to be associated with *Día*

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[17] See Hirschfeld Davis / Shear (2018).
[18] See del Barco (2017).

de los Muertos and iconic feminist artist Frida Kahlo. The potency of these references is strengthened by their specificity. Arguably, the most powerful example of this is the film's dialogue with Mexico's cinematic Golden Age and the characters and celebrities that populated this time. Ernesto de la Cruz, one of the primary characters of the film and ultimately its villain, is a guitar-playing actor/singer idolized by the young Miguel. De la Cruz is based on real-life Golden Age film stars such as Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, heartthrobs of the period known for playing the singing *charro* in countless films. In addition to the film's inspirational derivation, stars from the Golden Age also make appearances in the film itself with de la Cruz surrounded by his would-be contemporaries including Negrete and Infante as well as María Félix, Cantinflas, Dolores del Río and wrestling film icon El Santo (Figure 4). While plot and mise-en-scene in *The Book of Life* mingles playfully with broad cultural themes and touchstones such as bullfighting, mariachis, sombreros and moustaches, it is through this acute attention to detail that *Coco* attempts to produce a more thoughtful image of *lo mexicano*. Thus *Coco,* despite being a Hollywood production, does not pander to US expectations of Mexican cultural identity but alternatively produces an image of Mexico that is recognizable and beloved to a Mexican audience. It is arguably for this reason that the film was so well-received in Mexico, where it is now the highest-grossing film in the country's box-office history.[19]

Figure 4: All-star sing along in *Coco* (in Unkrich 2018: 59':42").

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[19] See McNary (2017).

Another characteristic that simultaneously sets the film apart from *The Book of Life* is the intermingling of past and present. While, as previously discussed, *The Book of Life* re-imagines Mexico in a non-specific historical period as a toy-populated fantasy-land, *Coco* is assertively set in the present. Although Miguel harbors nostalgia for the past, seen in his obsession with the life and work of de la Cruz, he is dressed in more modern attire – namely jeans, trainers and a hoodie. The intermixing of past and present onscreen takes place when Miguel travels inadvertently to the Land of the Dead. Here, he encounters his own ancestry in a world that is conscientiously constructed as a visual layering of cultural meaning through design. The animated city of the Land of the Dead incorporates key architectural periods from Mexico's Mesoamerican and colonial past, layering these vertically to create a visual architectural timeline that articulates Mexico's complex history (Figure 5). These details, combined with countless other considerations, work to produce a warm and welcoming environment that is intended to honor the culture.[20]

Figure 5: The foundations of a society (in Unkrich 2018: 24':20").

In this sense the film's subversive quality is largely seen in its positive affirmation of Mexican cultural heritage, a chief hope of the film's director Lee Unkrich for the project given the current political climate (Huerta Ortiz 2017).[21] In terms of explicit political content however, the film offers relatively little. The singular notable example is the border-crossing scene 25 minutes

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[20] See Robertson (2017: 6).
[21] See Huerta Ortiz (2017).

into the film. When Miguel's deceased relatives walk him over the marigold bridge to the Land of the Dead they arrive at the border control. While waiting in the re-entry line, an over-the-shoulder shot captures Miguel glancing over to the 'departures' gate. The shot pans right to show a long shot of a border patrol agent. A cut brings the viewer closer to the action with a medium shot that captures the agent using her equipment to scan faces of travelers to identify their right to travel, in *Coco* this right is determined by whether there are corresponding pictures of the deceased at their families' *ofrendas*. The first couple's pictures appear on the agent's monitor with a green light above indicating a positive match. After another positive traveler is allowed through, in this case literally given the green light, Hector enters the frame from the right impersonating Frida Kahlo. The camera cuts to a visibly awestruck Miguel who continues to observe the departures desk. In this instance, given that Hector does not have a picture on an *ofrenda* his travel is denied. The agent's screen is filled by a red cross and the previously green light on the monitor now shines red. In an attempt to negotiate with the agent, Hector pulls off his Frida costume but she replies "no photo on an *ofrenda*, no crossing the bridge". The situation is clear, there are rules relating to crossing the border and he does not have the right to do so.

Given the failures of his first and second attempts to cross legally, Hector runs towards the bridge and is visually captured through a series of cuts and leftward pans that see him leapfrog a security guard as he hurries towards the crossing, all interspersed with a reaction shot of Miguel who is still watching. Nonetheless, as he reaches the bridge a tracking full shot follows behind him and as he sinks through the petals the shot shortens and travels round to capture Hector head-on in a close up that reveals his exasperated expression as he is lifted away by security. As Hector is dragged back to the gates, the film cuts to a long shot that now pans right to follow the movement. When he reaches the center of the frame the depth of field shifts to focus on Miguel in the foreground with his Tía Rosita both watching the scene.

The purpose of the sequence is to introduce the character of Hector to the audience, a character whose storyline is centered entirely on redemption. He is presented in this first sequence as a likeable criminal but, as we will later discover, he is in fact wrongfully believed by his family to have abandoned them and is the victim of both murder and theft. Thus, a parallel is drawn between Hector and other immigrants (including those that may have entered the US legally): by learning his backstory the audience is enabled to understand his motivations. He is humanized and the viewer can thus empathize with him and his desire to cross the border. While the analogy is fairly basic, the presence of such a sequence as a part of this kind of narrative arc is rendered more powerful due to the timing of the release of the film. The film as a whole provides an antidote to the increasing intensity of the domestic tensions between the US

government under Trump and its approach to immigration. On the 25th of January 2017, just five days after his inauguration, Trump signed two Executive Orders (EOs) directed at immigration: 'EO 13767: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements', which sought to "secure the southern border of the United States through the immediate construction of a physical wall on the southern border". The second: 'EO 13768: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States', radically expanded the boundaries of who is considered a priority for deportation as well as the definition of what constitutes criminal behavior for immigrants.[22] These recent EOs rapidly intensified a pre-existing trend in immigrant criminalization and have resultantly produced increases in apprehensions, detentions and deportations.[23]

Both measures supply further evidence of the ongoing targeting of chiefly Latinx immigrants[24] and highlight the malignant focus of Trump's rhetoric regarding the US/Mexican border. Thus though *Coco* is only subtly subversive, the film's engagement with these issues marks a compelling attempt to challenge false narratives and portray Mexican people and culture with greater complexity. Mexican actor García Bernal, who voices Hector, acknowledged this point outright at the film's Hollywood premiere:

> I want to dedicate this film to all the children who have ancestors from Mexico and Latin America. In this moment, these kids are growing up with a lot of fear because the established narrative says that they come from families that come from rapists, murderers, and drug traffickers. We are such a complex and profound culture, and these kids need to be empowered to stand up and say that what is being said about them is a complete lie (García Bernal in Fernandez 2017).

Unlike the sub-narrative interruptions of the children in the museum during *The Book of Life*, the constant cuts to Miguel during the border crossing sequence remind the viewer that the next generation is watching. This testifies to the timeliness of the Disney Pixar release.

5) Conclusion

The 2016 US presidential elections bore witness to a political period characterized by a divided electorate. These divisions were rendered yet larger by the hostile populist rhetoric of the Trump campaign which sought to villainize immigrants crossing the US/Mexican border. Both films discussed in this article provide positive and engaging depictions of Mexican cultural heritage and are notably informed by notions of *mexicanidad* that date back to the twentieth century.

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[22] See Federal Register (2017).
[23] See Alvord et al. (2018).
[24] See Provine / Doty (2011).

While both films are effectively 'selling' Mexico to national (in this case the US) and international audiences their respective approaches to this exchange are ultimately impacted by the socio-political climates in which they were produced and released. Despite blatant similarities (*Día de los muertos*), and a difference of less than three years in terms of release date, the films' differing levels of critical engagement with Mexican culture and its presentation onscreen are highly revealing.

Though positive in its depiction of Mexicanness, *The Book of Life* exhibits a touristic gaze, an engagement with Mexico as 'other'. Mexico is appealing and wondrous but innately different from the US. It depicts a Mexico congruent to the blanket identity forged from images of mariachis and sombreros, essentialized and produced mainly for US consumption often by foreign photographers. Engagement with Mexico takes place from an outside perspective, and although it is positive, it does not interrogate its stand or question the othering and exoticization of Mexicanness in the US.

Coco on the other hand, produced in a climate of intense anti-immigrant rhetoric, engages more deeply with Mexico and its culture. Instead of presenting an essentializing image of Mexico, *Coco's* well-researched story allows viewers to experience the country through the eyes of a young Mexican boy. The characters are voiced by Latinx celebrities and the story features an abundance of carefully curated references to Mexican history and pop-culture.

In contrast to *The Book of Life, Coco* feels much more like a Mexican story than a story about Mexico. In the context of the US political and social climate of the time, it is this small but crucial difference that makes *Coco* a mildly subversive film. Mexico then becomes not an exotic other but a place recognizable and beloved to a Mexican, and a Mexican-US audience. Through subtle engagement with political issues such as the border-crossing scene, and the celebration of a diverse selection of Mexican culture and history, *Coco's* portrayal of Mexican people and culture stands in contrast to the rhetoric prevalent during the Trump campaign.

Filmography

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