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# REPRESENTATION OF MEXICAN CULTURE IN ANIMATION FILMS FOR CHILDREN

*An analysis of *Coco* and *The Book of Life**



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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the media in the United States of America have portrayed Mexicans negatively. Not only media influences the perception of a cultural group, films also shape this image. In regards to Latinx representation in film, there is a lack of main Latinx characters in animation films for children. This thesis analyses two films, *Coco* from Disney•Pixar and *The Book of Life* from Reel FX Creative Studio, on their portrayal of Mexican culture during times of negative discourse on Mexicans in the United States of America. This research demonstrates that both films have taken a different approach in representing Mexican culture, namely that *Coco* was produced by an Anglo-American director, an outsider, as well as Latinx consultants, insiders. The primary audience for *Coco* was both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, insiders, and Anglo-Americans, outsiders. On the other hand, *The Book of Life* was created by a Mexican director, the insider, for an Anglo-American audience, outsiders. This analysis shows that both films aim to portray a positive image of Mexican culture, however producing this for different audiences and therefore also selecting different features of Mexican culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the representation of Latinx characters in American films has grown, possibly due to the growing size of the Latinx population in the United States of America (King, Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2010). The basis of the representation during the 1990s was the uniqueness, i.e. the difference between the Americans and the Latin-Americans in appearance, of the ever-growing minority (King et al., 2010). Berg (2002), involved in research on the subject of Latin images in film since 1988, wrote a book titled *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*. In this work Berg (2002) includes critical essays on the representation of films made before 2000, remaining wary of the notion that Latinx representation is improving. Although the representation is growing, still only 3.1% of the speaking characters are Latinx and they are rarely a main character (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper, Case, Yao & Choi, 2017). In film-making, there is a trend of including more diverse characters, however this is a slow process. In regards to Latinx characters, they are included more often, but the representation is often done in a stereotypical way.

Generalised images of a national or ethnic group in any media can result in the emphasis on stereotypes as well as creating prejudices. Stuart Hall (1997) studied representation with a focus on identity and ethnicity, stating that when media discourse is negative about a particular cultural group it increases the presence of racial prejudice to that group. This is the case in the United States of America in discourse about Mexico, adopting the concept of *othering*. Othering, as described by Holliday, Hyde & Kullman (2010), happens when a person of an unknown group is seen as foreign, which leads to the creation of the *us vs. them* dichotomy. The ‘us’, in this case the Americans, perceive the ‘them’, the Mexicans, as different and inferior (Valdivia, 2010). In “The Discourse of the Illegal Immigration Debate: A Case Study in the Politics of Representation” Mehan (1997) argues that the United States of America adopts the

*us vs. them* concept through information providing media in daily discourse, stating that Mexicans take jobs meant for Americans and misuse social services. Payan (2016) observes that other subjects in discourse related to Mexico are drugs, illegality, and immigration.

Children form a particularly impressionable social group. Zabel (2006) describes that children are susceptible to external influences, especially in the case of representation of national cultural groups. The representation of national cultures can either be done via positive stereotypes or negative stereotypes, which in turn influences how children see and interact with people from another nationality as well as how they see themselves (Zabel, 2006). One of the external influences present in the life of children is animation films, especially from one of the leading film production companies: The Walt Disney Company (henceforth referred to as Disney). Buckingham (1997) argues that due to the immense popularity of Disney films, this is where children will first encounter fairy tales. A result of this is that Disney plays an instrumental role in the representation of cultures. In *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films*, Booker (2010) describes the critique on Disney for using stereotypical descriptions of gender and race, which shows that they are not certain on how to handle the representation of cultures in a non-stereotypical manner.

This thesis discusses the representation of Mexican culture in the Disney and Pixar film *Coco* (2017) as well as the Reel FX Creative Studios film *The Book of Life* (2014) during a trend of negative discourse in media in the United States of America about Mexico. These two films have been released in the last five years, making them recent films. The target group of both films is children. The approach to representation of Mexican culture in both films is analysed, both on language and visual markers of culture, as well as the primary audience of the films. While both films portray Mexican culture, *Coco* created a version for both non-Mexican viewers as well as Mexican viewers, without alienating one or the other, while *The*

*Book of Life* focused more on portraying Mexican culture for a primarily Anglo-American audience.

## METHOD

The corpus of this study consists of two films. These two films have been selected based on the criteria that they are recent animation films aimed at children, released in the last five years, and centre around Mexico and *Dia de los Muertos*. Both films are feature-length films created by American production companies. *Coco*, the first film, was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company since 2006, henceforth referred to as Disney•Pixar, similar to the way it is portrayed on the posters of the film. The film lasts one hour and 49 minutes. The second film is *The Book of Life*, produced by Reel FX Creative Studio and released by Twentieth Century Fox. This film lasts one hour and 35 minutes.

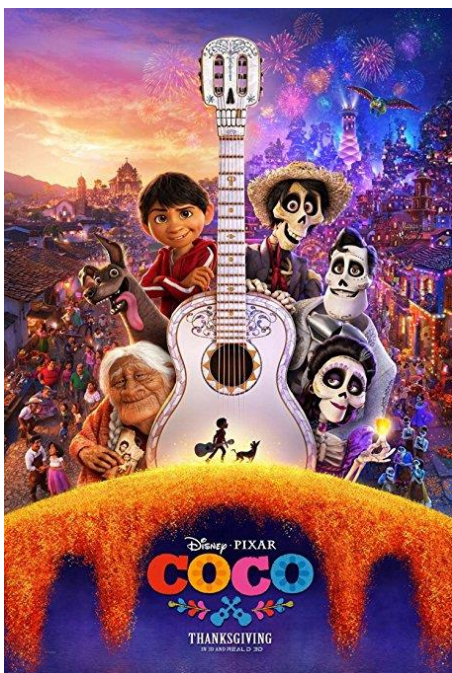


FIGURE 1. POSTER OF COCO, 2017

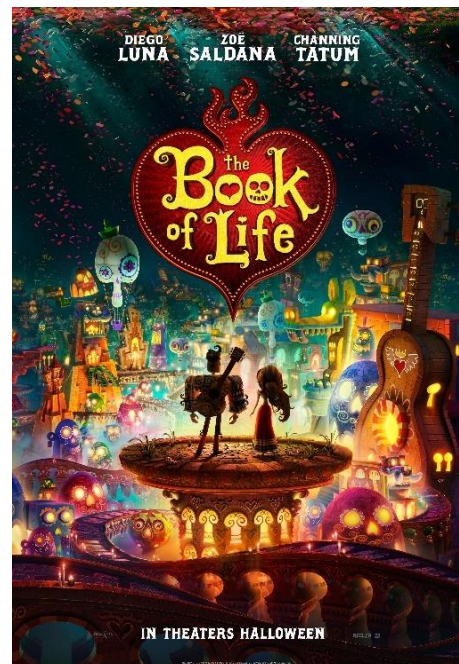


FIGURE 2. POSTER OF THE BOOK OF LIFE, 2014

## PROCEDURE

This research aims to provide insight into the representation of Mexican culture in animation films for children during a trend of negative discourse in media in the United states of America

about Mexican people. The researcher analysed the materials and created categories during this process via thematic analysis, which is defined as: “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, p. 79). These categories are language, accent, heritage of the individuals involved in the film, framing of the story, release of and response to the film, and visual markers in relation to Indigenous and Hispanic elements.

The following research questions have been formulated, based on the information given above:

- ✓ Main question: In what way and for what audience is Mexican culture represented in *Coco* and in *The Book of Life* during times of negative discourse in media in the United States of America about Mexicans?
  - ❖ Sub question 1: In what way is Mexican culture in *Coco* and *The Book of Life* represented based on language use?
  - ❖ Sub question 2: What is the primary audience for *Coco* and *The Book of Life*?
  - ❖ Sub question 3: Which visual markers of Mexican culture, concerning both Indigenous and Hispanic elements, are visible in *Coco* and *The Book of Life*?

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

In the first chapter, Literature Review, the existing research regarding the representation of national cultures in Disney films, as well as the representation of Latinx characters are discussed. In the second chapter, the theoretic framework is introduced with key concepts and definitions. The third chapter answers the first sub question, combining analysis and theory, on the subtopic of language and accent. The fourth chapter focuses on the second sub question in the same fashion as the first, with analysis of the primary audience of the films. The fifth chapter concerns the third sub question, focusing on visual markers of culture. The last chapter discusses the research question, future research and the limitations of the research.

# 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1 REPRESENTATION OF CULTURE BY DISNEY

Disney has created numerous films for children and, since they are a recurring feature in the lives of children, they are often subject of research in the field of representation. Disney began producing animation films in 1927, Mickey Mouse being their first successful film (Pallant, 2011). In 1942, the Disney film *Saludos Amigos* was released, being the first and only Disney film with representation of Latin-American main characters (Goldman, 2013). More specifically, in *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films* Booker (2010) critiques Disney and Pixar for representing characters according to stereotypes of race and gender. As stated in the introduction, Hall (1997) argues there is a connection between racial prejudice and media discourse, mainly that racial prejudice increases if media discourse is negative. If this would occur in Disney films, it would raise the question whether children are being conditioned to have prejudices.

Disney films have a reputation of focusing on Caucasian main characters, the exceptions to this are *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Moana* (2016) (Cheu, 2013). Cheu (2013) has collaborated with many authors leading to his book, *Diversity in Disney films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*. Disney has tried to include more ethnicities in their films, but criticism on this subject prevails. Turner (2013) states that the portrayal of Princess Tiana both addresses and erases the black heroine, through choosing a politically correct way of depicting the character, by selecting a character who happened to be black, but not representing blackness or referencing it explicitly. Thus, Disney wanted to create their first black princess, but at the same time she also had to be a mainstream princess to not alienate the main audience, Anglo-Americans (Turner, 2013). Representation is a complex subject, and even though Disney is



taking strides on diversity and inclusiveness, the representation of non-Caucasian characters is not yet without criticism.

Moreover, in “Teaching Children How to Discriminate: What We Learn from the Big Bad Wolf”, Lippi-Green (1997) describes the accent used by characters and its effect. The conclusion of the research is that the representation of people with foreign accents is more negative than that of GA or RP speakers of English (Lippi-Green, 1997). Tavin and Anderson (2003) discuss the same concept, observing that the protagonist in *Aladdin*, which takes place in the Middle-East, speaks Standard English, while the enemies have an Arab accent. Language and accent choice therefore influence how a character is portrayed in a film.

## 1.2 LATINX REPRESENTATION

As described in the introduction, Mexicans in the United States of America are a topic of discussion in the media. Media shapes the opinion of people towards Mexicans, specifically creating the discourse that Mexicans are equal to illegal immigrants (Mehan, 1997). The representation of Latin-Americans, often referred to as ‘Mexicans’ in media in the United States of America, follows negative phrasing as well as subjects (Mehan, 1997). In “The Discourse of the Illegal Immigration Debate”, Mehan (1997) concludes that Mexicans are presented as a problem as well as taking advantage of resources meant for Americans. Other studies show the same results, stating that Mexican immigrants are typically related to illegality and crime (Subervi, Torres, & Montalvo, 2005). Moreover, Mehan (1997) discusses the evolvement of Mexican immigration as a topic in the media and notes that while immigration was considered to be a problem of a number of states at first, it soon progressed to a national topic framed in terms of violence and costs for the United States of America. In recent years, immigration has become a nationwide discussion, with President Donald Trump describing Mexicans as ‘criminals and rapists’ during his presidential campaign.

Mexicans are not only represented in traditional media, but also in popular expressions of culture, such as film. In *Latino Images in Film*, Berg (2002) describes the ease with which Latinx images are related to the 'bad guy'. Non-Latinx individuals argue that the representation of Latinx is improving, however Berg (2002) disagrees with this statement by stating that the representation of Latinx individuals is still done stereotypically. Fernández (2016), who wrote a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Latina/o Popular Culture* called "Canta y no Llores: Life and Latinidad in Children's Animation", agrees with Berg (2002) on the statement that Latinx representation has grown, but is still limited to images like Dora the Explorer, which are lacking depth.

Another factor taken into consideration is the discourse around Indigenous heritage and racism in Latin America. Fortes De Leff (2002) states that social class and power tends to be based on skin colour and heritage in Mexico, i.e. white, mixed (mestizo) or Indigenous. Within the Mexican community it is deemed normal that these differences based on outer appearance exist (Fortes De Leff, 2002). It is therefore also that Indigenous people feel limited solidarity and identification with the rest of the Mexican population, because they have been excluded throughout history (Sieder, 2002). In Mexican cinema, the 'whitening' of Indigenous characters happens often via the use of mestizo actors (De la Garza, 2010). When Indigenous characters are portrayed by Indigenous actors it is often because the story takes place during the period of colonisation (De la Garza, 2010). An inclusive representation of Mexico should include people from all heritages, however this is often not the case.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 IMAGOLGY AND REPRESENTATION

This thesis draws extensively on the field of imagology in its analysis of the films. Beller and Leerssen (2007) state that “literary – and, more particularly, comparatist – imagology studies the origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples”, applying this definition to the analysis of representation in literature or film (p. 7). Specifically, imagology concerns itself with representation of groups or nations, creating the concept of ‘National Character’ (Chew, 2009). Representation, as described by Coupland (2001), is defined as the “totality of semiotic means by which items and categories, individuals and social groups, along with their attributes and values, are identified, thematised, focused, shaped and made intelligible” (p. 3). Moreover, the thesis is premised on the argument of Stuart Hall (1997) that there is a clear connection between racial prejudice and media discourse, specifically that racial prejudice increases when media discourse is negative regarding a certain group of people. The description of language, traditions, and customs are aspects of a national culture which are often analysed in relation to representation (Beller & Leerssen, 2007). These descriptions are therefore used as the foundation for this thesis.

Furthermore, the portrayal of a culture can also give information about the self-image. Leerssen (2007) describes the auto-image, referring to the self-image, and the hetero-image, referring to the image of the other. A group of people create an image of their own culture, the auto-image, which is then used to compare themselves to other groups, creating a hetero-image. In film-making, the self-representation of Latinx film-makers influences the portrayal of their culture in film. In the context of the two films analysed in this thesis, *The Book of Life*, directed and produced by a filmmaker from Mexican heritage, is under influence of the self-representation of Mexican culture.

## 2.2 CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Representation of a group often uses culture as a concept. Culture is a complex concept, therefore the dichotomy of non-essentialist and essentialist view describes how to use culture (Holliday, Hyda & Kullman, 2017). Essentialism, as defined by Grillo (2003), describes that the use of culture in a simplified manner is a marker of identity, which helps differentiate from people with other cultures. Discourse often applies culture in an essentialist manner in non-academic settings. On the other hand, non-essentialism defines culture as a shifting reality which can be used by people to conform with the identities they deem necessary in different circumstances (Holliday et al., 2017). In reality the concept of culture can be found somewhere in between these two definitions (Holliday et al., 2017). Hammond and Axelrod (2006) state that when people from a certain culture come in contact with individuals from different cultures, they assume an essentialist view with attitudes and behaviour of discriminative nature. The representation of national cultures in films influences how people from other cultures are perceived. It is therefore important that the representation of national cultures in films is portrayed authentically to try and avoid essentialisation or discrimination.

### 3. LANGUAGE AND ACCENT

This chapter answers the first sub question “In what way is Mexican culture in *Coco* and *The Book of Life* represented based on language use? by analysing the choices regarding language use in both films. Considering the films that are analysed in this research, the question does not only concern the language of choice, but also the accent of choice. The choice of using a certain language in a film is a large component of representation and recognition by the represented group. It signals the audience at which it is aimed as well as determines the self and the other, which will be discussed more in-depth in the next chapter.

The use of accent and language in both films differs. Both films are in English, but since they take place in Mexico, a Spanish speaking country, Spanish language is present. The linguistic representation in both *Coco* and *The Book of Life* is divided into four categories; Spanish words not translated, Spanish pronunciation of English words, code-switching and language of choice in music.

#### 3.1 SPANISH WORDS

Spanish is present in both films, however the frequency varies. Both films use three categories of words in Spanish that are not translated into English. The first category is words regarding relations between people, i.e. family or friends. When these words are used, the context of the story can still be understood. For example, when a grandma is portrayed in the film and is then referred to in a conversation, the viewer will understand that this word refers to grandma, without being certain of the translation. Viewers with basic Spanish knowledge will know these words, since they are a starting point in language learning. Even if the link is not made between the person and the word, the visuals still provide the essential information to understand the story. The words in question can be found in the tables below, with corresponding translations.

TABLE 1. SPANISH WORDS REGARDING RELATIONS IN *COCO*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
Mijo	Son	[00:04:14]
Abuelita	Grandma	[00:03:40]
Tío	Uncle (not limited to direct uncle)	[00:08:44]
Tía	Aunt (not limited to direct aunt)	[00:15:24]
Señor	Sir	[00:21:07]
Mi familia	My family	[00:28:40]
Híjole	Goodness (exclamation)	[00:30:14]
Amigo	Friend	[00:33:02]
Niño	Child	[00:34:22]
Chicos	Boys	[00:57:10]

TABLE 2. SPANISH WORDS REGARDING RELATIONS IN *THE BOOK OF LIFE*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
Señorita	Miss	[00:07:28]
Mijo	Son	[00:08:35]
Señora	Mrs	[00:10:08]
Amigos	Friends	[00:17:20]
Bandidos	Bandits	[00:37:30]

These tables display that the amount of Spanish words concerning relationships between people is higher in *Coco* than in *The Book of Life*. *The Book of Life* uses English words for family and friends. This is not based on the amount of familial relationships in the films, since both films have a number of these relationships.

The second category of words are greetings or standard interactions between people. The level of Spanish is higher in this category and there is an increase in word variety. These words can also be understood with support of the visuals of the film, without being certain of the translation. The tables below show the words or phrases in this category.

TABLE 3. SPANISH WORDS REGARDING STANDARD INTERACTIONS IN *COCO*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
Hola	Hello	[00:03:12]
Muchas gracias	Thank you very much	[00:04:28]

De nada	You are welcome	[00:04:30]
Vámonos	Let's go	[00:09:43]
Perfecto	Perfect	[00:11:58]
¡Cállate!	Shut up	[00:20:00]
Dios mío	Oh my god	[00:22:27]
¡Oye!	Here	[00:24:00]
Perdón señora	Excuse me lady	[00:30:32]
Con permiso	With permission	[00:32:03]
A ver	Let's see	[00:35:24]
¡Qué Padre!	Wonderful	[00:36:47]
Loco	Crazy	[00:41:15]
Buenas noches	Goodnight	[00:43:17]
No manches	Really?	[00:47:27]
Llévelo	Take it	[00:47:47]
Bienvenidos a todos	Welcome everyone	[00:47:55]
Música	Music	[00:48:04]
Fiesta	Party	[00:48:14]
Grito	Scream	[00:50:11]
Damas y caballeros	Ladies and gentleman	[00:53:24]
Disculpe señores	Excuse me gentleman	[00:57:32]
Salud	Health	[01:02:09]
Ayúdame	Help me	[01:20:40]

TABLE 4. SPANISH WORDS REGARDING STANDARD INTERACTIONS IN *THE BOOK OF LIFE*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
Loco	Crazy	[00:03:16]
Gracias	Thank you	[00:14:54]
Adios	Goodbye	[00:17:24]
Hola	Hello	[00:24:11]
Qué?	What?	[01:19:02]

This category, considering the use of Spanish, shows similar differences between both films as the first category. It is visible that *Coco* has chosen a different approach to the use of Spanish in its films compared to *The Book of Life*. *The Book of Life* uses a very limited array of Spanish words, while *Coco* incorporates a significantly larger amount of Spanish words for a film broadcasted with English as its main language.

The third category of words are words that do not fit a category. These particular Spanish words are used within English sentences. It is not certain if English speakers understand all

these words, but they are not essential to the story. It is possible that they were added to represent the language of Mexico in the film. These words can be found in the tables below.

TABLE 5. SPANISH WORDS WITHOUT CATEGORY IN *COCO*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
Ay-ay-ay muchacho	Ay-ay-ay boy	[00:06:42]
Mira, mira	Look, look	[00:07:15]
Angelito querido cielito	Dear angel sweetheart	[00:08:09]
Ofrenda	Offering (in this case offering altar)	[00:09:42]
Cempasúchil, cempasúchil	Flower, flower	[00:30:29]
Espérame, chamaco	Wait for me kid	[00:34:35]
Muy guapo eh	Very handsome eh	[00:35:35]
Ya lo sabía	I already knew it	[00:37:38]
Gordito	Chubby (endearment)	[00:51:59]

TABLE 6. SPANISH WORDS WITHOUT CATEGORY IN *THE BOOK OF LIFE*

Spanish	English	Timestamp
El Chupacabra	Mythical creature, goat sucker	[00:03:52]
Churros! Churros!	Type of food	[00:04:11]
La muerte	Death (name of character)	[00:04:50]
Xibalba	Name of character	[00:05:02]
Guitarrista	Guitarist	[00:07:32]
Toro, toro	Bull	[00:14:03]
Mariachi brothers	Band brothers	[00:20:53]
Matador	Bullfighter	[00:21:10]
Corrida	Bullfight	[00:24:42]
Venga toro, que venga	Come on bull, let him come	[00:25:05]
Mami vamos	Let's go	[00:32:13]
Tres, cuatro	Three, four	[00:32:31]
La música	The music	[00:37:07]
El super macho	The super macho	[00:50:22]
Fiestas	Parties	[00:56:38]
Santa gordita	Chubby	[01:01:24]
Ataqué	Attack	[01:17:30]

This last category is the only category where *The Book of Life* has more Spanish words than *Coco*. The words in this category are not essential to the story. In regards to *The Book of Life*, this shows that the incorporation of Spanish in the films focused more on the image of



another language, than on including the language in essential moments. The level of the Spanish words in the third category in *The Book of Life* have a lower level of Spanish than *Coco*, therefore including viewers that have basic Spanish knowledge while at the same time not excluding non-Spanish speakers. *Coco* incorporated words of the third category to include Mexicans, by adding phrases that are used in their daily life.

Altogether, the use of Spanish words in both films suggests that the production companies have taken a different approach towards the representation of Mexican culture through language use. In the case of *Coco*, the language choice signifies that the film is aimed at both Spanish and non-Spanish speakers. Spanish speakers will feel addressed by the use of a language they master, therefore widening the audience from English speakers to both Spanish and English speakers. In terms of *The Book of Life*, the use of language signifies that Spanish is not specifically used to include Spanish speakers, but is more focused on portraying an image of characters from a Spanish speaking culture. The use of Spanish in this film is more about creating context around the story, than including Spanish speakers as audience, resulting in a narrower audience for *The Book of Life*.

### 3.2 PRONUNCIATION

Another relevant marker of language is the pronunciation of English words. One of the features of Spanish that might be present in the accent of the characters in the films when speaking English is the vibrant [r] (Lord, 2005). Examples of the vibrant [r] in *Coco* include, but are not limited to, the pronunciation of Ernesto de la Cruz. In *The Book of Life* the pronunciation of the vibrant [r] is not consistent with all characters, but is present in the word Revolution when said by the mayor. Another feature is the silent “h”, unless used in combination with the “ch” (Serrano et al., 2011; Tejedor, Wang, Frankel, King, & Colás, 2008). This feature is present in *Coco* as the silent “h” in words such as “have” [00:12:30], but has not been found in *The Book*

*of Life*. The letter “j”, which is pronounced as the /x/, and sounds like a g, is also present in Spanish (Hualde, 2005). Moreover, the word Mexico also follows the pronunciation of the letter “j” (Hualde, 2005). A number of examples of the features above can be found in *Coco*. The first example is when Mamá Coco says ‘Julio’, which is pronounced with the /x/ sound [00:03:13]. Secondly, Mexico is pronounced with the “j” throughout the film. This differs greatly from *The Book of Life*, with an American pronunciation of Mexico, especially when pronounced by the narrator of the film. In *The Book of Life* some words are pronounced with an American accent, such as “Cinco de Mayo”, with a link made to mayonnaise [00:03:45] “Mayo! I love mayo!”, signalling that the goal is to entertain Anglo-Americans. The key finding in this paragraph is that *Coco* is consistently representing a Spanish accent of English, and therefore including Spanish speakers, while *The Book of Life* is not consistent and even includes explicit links to American culture, e.g. mayonnaise as a joke, thus focusing more on Anglo-Americans.

### 3.3 CODE-SWITCHING

The third method of linguistic representation is done via code-switching, which can occur in an English film that takes place in Mexico. Code-switching happens when individuals alternate between two languages within a sentence or in discourse in general (Barnes, 2012). In addition, code-switching is often displayed by people who are raised bilingual around the border of the United States of America (Martínez, 2010). The fact that this film was made by an American based production company can explain the presence of code-switching. In *Coco* the grandma starts her rant in Spanish, takes a short break and continues in English [00:08:20], which is a prime example of code-switching. Héctor, another main character, also engages in code-switching while putting face paint on by using English and Spanish words interchangeably [00:35:26]. Another example of code-switching is visible at the end of the film where Miguel sings a song which starts in English and switches to Spanish halfway through [01:35:15]. The use of code-switching will be familiar to bilingual speakers, therefore this explicitly

acknowledges and represents their linguistic practices, as Mexican-American playwright consultant Octavio Solis states in the following quote: “The original idea was to have the characters speak only in English with the understanding that they were really speaking in Spanish. But for us, language is binary, and we code-switch from English to Spanish seamlessly.” (Ugwu, 2018). *The Book of Life* does not use any code-switching, which shows their primary audience is focused on English speakers, while *Coco* includes both English speakers as well as Spanish speakers, and more specifically, bilingual speakers of both languages.

### 3.4 MUSIC

The choice of language is also demonstrated by the music selection present in both films. *Coco* and *The Book of Life* choose completely different paths considering the music in their films. In *The Book of Life* most of the songs are already existing pop songs, such as “I Will Wait” from Mumford and Sons, as well as songs from other artists like Elvis and Rod Stewart. There is only one song in Spanish in *The Book of Life*, namely “Cielito lindo” from Ana Gabriel. Camilo Lara, one of the music consultants of *Coco*, describes that the approach of *Coco* focused on incorporating traditional Mexican music as well as creating new songs that communicated the same Mexican values. Traditional songs such as “La Llorona”, “La Petenera” and “La Paloma” were included fully in Spanish in the film (Bacon, Orquiola & Bacon, 2017). The original songs in *Coco* are a mix of English and Spanish, with a special continuous appearance of the song “Remember Me” in different stages of the film. Again, this shows that *Coco* focuses on a more inclusive audience of both English and Spanish speakers, while *The Book of Life* seems to focus mainly on Anglo-Americans.

The above described findings regarding language, accent, music and code-switching, demonstrate that *Coco* aims at an audience of both English and Spanish speakers. *Coco*

represents and legitimises code-switching and accents of bilingual English-Spanish speakers, resulting in a multi-layered film, meaning that different audiences will see the films in different ways. For individuals that do not speak Spanish the story is interesting enough, but the extra layer, through incorporating Spanish language, will not be understood by them and is therefore aimed at Spanish speakers. On the contrary, *The Book of Life* applies Spanish language primarily for English speakers, which is visible in the limited use of Spanish, mainly using words that are not essential to the story, and therefore using Spanish as an element of Mexican culture.

## 4. PRIMARY AUDIENCE

Sub question two: “What is the primary audience for *Coco* and *The Book of Life*?“, is answered based on the subtopics heritage, framing, and release and response, looking into the choices made by the production companies and direction crews.

### 4.1 HERITAGE

In the United States of America, the film industry has been critiqued for not including enough Latin-American characters in films. Specifically, 3.1% of the speaking characters is Latinx, while the population is 18.7% (Smith et al., 2017). There is a market demand for more representation of Latin-Americans, both in popular films as well as animated films (Haner, 2015). Both Disney•Pixar and Reel FX Creative Studios have seen this demand and released their versions of a film about *Dia de los Muertos*. In this section the primary audience is analysed on the basis of who made it, from a production perspective, as well as for whom they made it, i.e. the primary audience.

In the case of *Coco* the following influences of heritage are present. The director of *Coco* is Lee Unkrich, an Anglo-American director born in the United States of America (Imdb, 2017). It is important to note that Lee Unkrich was aware that he was not qualified to represent the Mexican community with his background and asked guidance in this process (Bentancourt, 2018). One of the people guiding him was the co-director Adrian Molina, born in America with Mexican parents and heritage (Bentancourt, 2018). A continuous process of feedback and pre-screening occurred during the creation of *Coco*, which is not usual for Disney•Pixar films (Ugwu, 2017). Moreover, organisations such as the National Hispanic Media Coalition were engaged as advisors in the process (Ugwu, 2017). Thus, *Coco* was produced by both insiders of the culture, the advisors, as well as outsiders, the director.

The heritage of the voice actors in the film, all found on Imdb (2017), also represent the Latinx community. The character of Miguel is voiced by Anthony Gonzalez, born in America with Mexican parents and Mexican, Puerto Rican, German, and Italian heritage. Gael García Bernal recorded the voice of Héctor and was born in Mexico. Benjamin Bratt voices Ernesto de la Cruz and was raised in America. He has a mixed heritage with an Indigenous Peruvian mother, and an Anglo-American father with English, German, and Austrian roots. Mamá Imelda was voiced by Alanna Ubach, an American-born actress with Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage. Renée Victor voiced the grandma of Miguel, and while she is American-born and raised, she is multi-lingual and has experience with all-Spanish voice acting, therefore explaining why her character has a Spanish accent. The father of Miguel is voiced by Jaime Camil, a Mexican-born actor with Egyptian and Brazilian heritage. It is visible in the heritage of the voice actors that there was a conscious choice to include Latinx voice actors who would mainly speak in English, therefore aiming at an audience of both English and Spanish speakers. The Spanish speakers feel represented by voice actors who have an accent like they have, while English speakers do not feel excluded because it is still a language they understand.

The director of *The Book of Life* is Jorge R. Gutiérrez, a Mexican director who also created the Nickelodeon tv series *El Tigre*, which takes place in Mexico (Super-Macho, 2014). The fact that Gutiérrez is a Mexican-born director is also visible in the amount of guidance during the creation of the film, mainly that Gutiérrez wrote the screenplay and used his own experience and knowledge as guidance (Imdb, 2014). His bias is visible in a quote which shows that Gutiérrez is engaging in self-representation as an insider of Mexican culture: “So I said to the crew, ‘No research trips to Mexico. *I am Mexico!* You guys have any questions, you come to me. This is not a documentary, this is my magic version of Mexico. And I’m more than likely going to lie to you and make up crazy stories, but that’s the version of Mexico we’re going to do.’” (Amidi, 2015).

The heritage of the voice actors in *The Book of Life*, taken from Imdb (2014), is as follows. Manolo is voiced by Diego Luna, a Mexican-born actor with Mexican, Scottish, and English heritage. Zoe Saldana voiced Maria and was born in America, with Dominican and Puerto Rican parents. Joaquin is voiced by Channing Tatum, an Anglo-American actor with English, Irish, and Scots-Irish ancestry. Xibalba is voiced by Ron Perlman, an Anglo-American actor with Polish and Hungarian heritage. Mary Beth is voiced by Christina Applegate who was born in America and has mixed European heritage. Candle Maker is voiced by Ice Cube, an African-American musician. The heritage of the voice actors in *The Book of Life* show that the film is aimed at a Anglo-American audience, by including well-known American (voice) actors.

The first point of significance in the findings above is that one of the directors is American and one is Mexican. However, due to the fact that any project associated with the Disney brand incurs particular scrutiny, *Coco* was made with caution in regards to cultural representation. It was a more complex production, with both insider and outsider influence in the creation of the film. *The Book of Life* was produced by a Mexican producer, which is why there was less involvement of consultants. However, the representation of your own culture is influenced by the image that you personally have of that culture and therefore might not represent the whole community. Jorge R. Gutiérrez produced the film as an insider of Mexican culture, while being influenced by his self-image of Mexican culture.

Another finding is that *Coco* has more Latinx voice actors than *The Book of Life*. More specifically, actors such as Channing Tatum and Ice Cube in *The Book of Life* show that the audience of this film is more focused on an Anglo-American audience, since they are mainstream American celebrities. Thus, Jorge. R. Gutierrez produced the film for a non-self audience while being an insider of the culture. *Coco* has focused more on Latinx voice actors than on their celebrity status, resulting in more authentic accents and a more inclusive representation that overtly includes Mexican and Mexican-American audiences. Since the

production of the film included people from both inside and outside the culture, it also aims at a mixed inside and outside audience.

## 4.2 FRAMING

Another factor of influence on the representation of culture is the framing. Both films have a different approach in the framing of the narrative and of Mexican culture.

The story of *Coco* starts with Miguel, a young boy that has been forbidden to play music by his family because his great-great-grandfather left them to pursue music. The film takes place in Mexico, in a village called Santa Cecilia, which is a real town in Mexico. In the beginning Miguel narrates the story of his great-great-grandfather leaving them for music. On *Dia de los Muertos*, Miguel is transported to the Land of the Dead while trying to convince his family to let him play music. Miguel cannot go back because he is not on the *Ofrenda*, an altar containing family portraits to remember deceased family members, and if you are not remembered you cannot visit the Land of the Living. During his journey to find his way back home, he finds his real great-great-grandfather, who is not his idol and perceived grandfather Ernesto de la Cruz but Hector, the former companion of Ernesto de la Cruz, who was poisoned by Ernesto himself. In the end Miguel returns to his family and is finally allowed to play music.

During the production of *Coco*, The Walt Disney Company wanted to trademark the term 'Dia de los Muertos' (Spencer, 2018). The Hispanic community (not only Mexican, since *Dia de los Muertos* is important in other Hispanic cultures as well) responded fiercely against this claim to commercialise a part of their culture (Spencer, 2018). In his research, Spencer (2018) discusses the importance of the participation of Mexican-Americans in the representation of arts and cultural individuality of their culture. Spencer (2018) states that only if you participate and give feedback to the representation of your own culture, can it be improved and become a more accurate representation. After the response of the Hispanic



community, Disney•Pixar adjusted their approach and tried to avoid more controversies when the film was released by involving consultants.

Not only the starting point and location, but also the choice in values represented in the films are important for the framing. In “Coco And Hybrid Cultural Globalization” Gutiérrez Hernández and Suhoverov (2018) describe cultural globalisation as “the emergence of a specific set of values and beliefs that are largely shared around the planet” (Castells, 2009, p. 117, as cited in Gutiérrez Hernández & Suhoverov, 2018). Booker (2010) argues that Disney often chooses to impose American values in their films to cater to its American audience. This concept, when characters, or a story, are adjusted to the majority of the audience, is called Americanisation or Disneyfication (Booker, 2010). The conclusion reached by Gutiérrez Hernández and Suhoverov (2018) is that the approach of *Coco* is done in a different manner than Disney•Pixar has done before, specifically lacking the imposition of American values in the film. Thus, the framing of *Coco* demonstrates that the primary audience is both English speakers as well as Spanish speakers, and even has a worldwide approach since the story is universal.

For the second film, *The Book of Life*, the story takes place in a museum. Based on the image of yellow school buses and the word ‘Museum’ in English on the building, this museum is located in the United States of America. The first finding concerns the tour guide, which is a woman with light skin and red hair, not representing a Mexican person. She narrates the story to a group of children who represent a diverse but mainly light-skinned American detention class. The narration of a person who is not a representative of the culture depicted, is also seen in films about Africa, where the *white guide* concept comes from. An example of the *white guide* concept is when a narrator, with non-African heritage, tells stories about Africa to non-African audiences, meaning that the *white guide* is a narrator who describes a certain culture from an outsider perspective (Calhoun, 2007). The *white guide* concept is also present in *The*

*Book of Life*, however, at the end of the film the tour guide turns into a Mexican God. The pronunciation and appearance of the guide imply that she is not a Mexican character throughout the film, therefore qualifying as a *white guide*. The presence of this narrator shows that the film aims to describe and explain a culture to people that are not an insider of this culture.

In the story, the tour guide tells a tale of a triangular romance between Maria, a strong-minded woman, Manolo, a descendant of a bull fighter with a passion for music, and Joaquin, a military hero. Two gods, La Muerte and Xibalba place a bet on who marries Maria. Xibalba tricks Manolo into thinking that Maria went to the Land of the Remembered, the world of *Dia de los Muertos*. During his travels, Manolo finds the Book of Life with the Candle Maker and beg him for help to get back to the world of the living. To win his freedom, Manolo has to finish a challenge formed by Xibalba, which he does. In the end, like any fairy-tale, he gets married to Maria.

In “Canta y no Llores: Life and Latinidad in Children’s Animation”, Fernández (2016) dives deeper into the meaning of *The Book of Life* as representation of being Latinx. At first, Fernández (2016) elaborates on the choice of analysing *The Book of Life*, namely that the film is in-depth and that the representation of latinidad in the film is done in an accurate way. Moreover, Fernández (2016) states: “The *Book of Life* is able to transcend its cultural restrictions: it is a film about Mexican culture that can be consumed by a wider non-Latina/o audience as well” (p. 99). A story of life, death, and acceptance is communicated to a young audience through Mexican culture (Fernández, 2016). Fernández (2016) also argues that the image of Latinx characters in the film is quite generic, as well as has critique on including Channing Tatum, an Anglo-American, as one of the main voice actors. This supports the earlier findings in relation to language and heritage, implying that the primary audience is focused on Anglo-Americans, using Mexican culture to tell the story, while not making it an explicit Mexican representation for Mexicans.

### 4.3 RELEASE AND RESPONSE

Not only the framing, but also the choices made for the release, are important indicators of the primary audience chosen by the production companies. The accumulated profit also gives shows the results of these choices. Furthermore, the response through reviews gives insight in the reception of the representation of Mexican culture in both films.

*Coco* was released in Mexico at the Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2017 (Imdb, 2017). The official release date, also in Mexico, was on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2017 (Imdb, 2017). On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2017, the *Dia de los Muertos* parade was held for the second time, initiated by its depiction in the James Bond film *Spectre* (Agren, 2017). The official festivities of *Dia de los Muertos* start on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, meaning *Coco* was released before that date. Other countries followed quickly, starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, with the release in the United States of America on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November (Imdb, 2017). On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2017 Thanksgiving was celebrated in the United States of America, indicating that the film was released just before an important day in the United States of America as well. The information above shows that the choice was made to release the film for the Mexican audience first. This does not mean that the American audience was insignificant, but the Mexican audience had a primary function in the review and acceptance of the film.

The film *The Book of Life*, produced by Reel FX Creative Studios, was first released by Twentieth Century Fox on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2014 on the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival in Brazil (Imdb, 2014). Ten other countries, of which two countries in Latin-America, released slightly after the release in Brazil (Imdb, 2014). On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October the film was released in Mexico (Imdb, 2014). The film was released in the United States of America on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October (Imdb, 2014). *The Book of Life* was released a month before *Dia de los Muertos*.

The place and order of release do not suggest that *The Book of Life* followed the same strategy as *Coco*, with the most significant finding that Mexico was not the first country of release.

The numbers of *Coco* suggest that the film was successful on box office day in terms of profit. The cumulative worldwide gross turnover (box office) of the film is \$807,082,196 (Imdb, 2017). The budget of the film was estimated to be \$175,000,000, resulting in a \$632,082,196 cumulative worldwide gross return, which is equals 78% (Imdb, 2017). Also important is the gross turnover of \$209,726,015 in the United States of America, which is 26% of the worldwide gross turnover (Imdb, 2017).

The budget of *The Book of Life* was estimated to be \$50,000,000 (Imdb, 2014). The cumulative worldwide gross turnover (box office) of the film is \$99,783,556, resulting in a \$49,783,556 cumulative worldwide gross return, which equals 50% (Imdb, 2014). Looking at the gross turnover of \$50,151,543 in the United States of America, this accumulates to 50% of the worldwide gross turnover (Imdb, 2014).

These figures show that *Coco* had a bigger budget, made a larger profit, and had a broader reception worldwide compared to *The Book of Life*. This can be partially explained by the status of Pixar and Disney as animation film studios for children in comparison to Reel FX Creative Studios and Twentieth Century Fox who are not primarily focused on children. Furthermore, the figures show that *The Book of Life* found an American primary audience where *Coco* found a worldwide audience.

The reviews of *Coco* in most mainstream media were written by Anglo-American authors, which raises questions on the diversity of film reviewers. Remezcla (2017), a website focused on Latinx representation in media, gathered reviews by Latin-American critics to amplify the voices of reviewers that are knowledgeable about Mexican culture. The overall opinion is that *Coco* had the potential to be executed wrongly, was scrutinised for it in the

beginning, but proved otherwise in the end. Moreover, in the reviews of Latinx individuals there is praise for the portrayal of Mexican traditions and culture. Often the reviewers refer to the timing of the film, stating that: ““The film came out just a couple months after Trump had dismantled DACA [the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals immigration policy], at a moment in which we’re being attacked and called lazy and our identities are portrayed in a negative light by the president and other people,” said Aguilar. “To have a film that bridges that cultural gap is very important.”” (Puig, 2018).

Since *The Book of Life* was a less successful film from a profit perspective, it is also harder to find reviews on the film. All the reviews found on the internet are done by non-Latinx reviewers, and discuss the representation of Mexican culture from their perspective. Phrases such as: “It also introduces us, both kids and adults alike, to the vibrant Mexican culture, especially about their Day of the Dead” show clearly that this is written from an outsider perspective (Hawson, 2014). However, it might have been deliberate decision of the producers to create the film with this approach. In this regard, Gutierrez stated: “I felt even though *Book of Life* takes place in Mexico, and even though technically all of these characters are Mexican, I’m going to tell a story that has a universal appeal by keeping the emotions really grounded” (Amidi, 2015). This aims to include the American audience more than cater to the Mexican audience, thus it is written from an insider perspective to explain the story to outsiders.

## 5. VISUAL MARKERS

The third sub question: “Which visual markers of Mexican culture, concerning both Indigenous and Hispanic elements, are visible in *Coco* and *The Book of Life*? “ analyses the presence of Indigenous and Hispanic elements in relation to the discussion of Indigenous representation as shortly discussed in the literature review. Three elements, namely Catholicism, bullfighting, and *Dia de los Muertos* will be discussed.

The composition of the population of Mexico helps put the visual markers into context. Since the colonisation there have been three ethnic groups in Mexico, shortly discussed below (De la Garza, 2010). The first group are the ‘criollo/as’, a minority of Mexicans with European heritage. The second group, the majority, are mestizo/as, Mexicans with mixed European and Indigenous heritage. The third group are the Indigenous people, who are a minority.

### 5.1 CATHOLICISM

The first Hispanic element visible in both films is Catholicism. The Spanish brought Roman Catholicism to Mexico during the colonisation. A large number of Mexicans still identify as Catholics, namely 82.7% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). More important, 84% of the Mexicans state that religion is an important factor in their life (Camp, 2000). The belief in God, respect for priests, trust in Catholic institutions and Catholicism in education at home are seen as factors of significant importance in Mexican life (Camp, 2000). The presence of Catholicism in Mexico is therefore a visual marker, with the display of Catholic artefacts in houses such as crosses, as well as Catholic rituals.

In *Coco*, Catholicism is present at least two times. During one of the interactions between Miguel and his grandmother, about him making music, his grandma uses the sign of the cross at [00:18:07]. The meaning of this ritual in Catholicism is to bless yourself, which the grandma does because she destroyed the guitar of Miguel and asks for forgiveness. Another

example of Catholicism is the presence of nuns during a music competition in the film. An image of three nuns playing the accordion is displayed below this paragraph. Their clothing identifies them as nuns.



FIGURE 1. NUNS PLAYING MUSIC IN COCO [00:48:36]

In *The Book of Life* there are more signifiers of Catholicism. Four nuns are recurring characters in the film, as well as a priest (see image below). Another clear presence of Catholicism is that Maria gets sent to Europe to a convent to become less rebellious. Not only does this reference Catholicism, but it also describes the relation between a colonised country and its coloniser, in which Spain is seen as the more developed country, where Maria will become sophisticated.



FIGURE 4. NUNS IN THE BOOK OF LIFE



FIGURE 5. PRIEST IN THE BOOK OF LIFE

## 5.2 BULLFIGHTING

The second Hispanic element analysed is bullfighting. Bullfighting is a Spanish ritual and has been part of Spanish culture originating from Roman times, related to the gladiator practice (Fagan, 2014). Mexico is also well-known for their bullfighting traditions, which have been present since the colonisation by Spain (Standish & Bell, 2004). This second Hispanic element is not visible in *Coco* and never mentioned or referred to. However, in *The Book of Life*, bullfighting is a crucial part of the story because Manolo is a bullfighter but does not want to kill the bull. All family members of Manolo were bullfighters, therefore it is not accepted that he does not want to kill the bull. The clothing of a matador, as well as the arena, are present throughout the film.



FIGURE 6. MANOLO AS MATADOR IN THE BOOK OF LIFE

## 5.3 DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

The third element is the visual markers that are linked to *Dia de los Muertos*. The festival of *Dia de los Muertos* contains elements from both Hispanic and Indigenous origin due to the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico. It is a combination of Indigenous and Roman Catholic rituals, which are used to honour the dead (Marchi, 2009). Catholic missionaries could not eliminate the activities of Indigenous people, such as the making of an altar, and therefore decided to create a fusion of the rituals (Marchi, 2009). The influence of Catholicism resulted in a shift of the festive days, moving it to the All Saints' Eve, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, respectively October 31<sup>st</sup>, November 1<sup>st</sup> and November 2<sup>nd</sup> (Marchi, 2009).



During *Dia de los Muertos* an *Ofrenda* is put into place which represents the four Indigenous elements earth, wind, fire and water. The *Ofrenda* is a special component of *Dia de los Muertos*, which consists of certain elements such as: the image of the deceased, the cross, the image of the souls of purgatory (helps with the exit if they have committed sins, added by the Spaniards), copal and incense (cleans the energy), arc (entrance of the world), chopped paper (symbol of wind), candles (guiding light, element of fire), water (purity of the soul, symbol of water), flowers (guide by smell), skulls (remember that death is always there), food (favourites of the deceased), bread of the dead (symbol of earth), alcohol and personal objects (help to remind the deceased of their life) (Rodriguez, Moreno & Méndez, 2012). Important for *Dia de los Muertos* is that it is a positive event focused on guiding the dead to a new stage, also linked to the completion of the harvest, by providing the *Ofrenda* (Rodriguez, Moreno & Méndez, 2012). During *Dia de los Muertos*, some people wear face paint to look like skeletons, which is linked to Aztec rituals (Medina, 2016; Pereira, 2010). Also present is the concept of *Alebrijes*, also known as spirit guides, who according to the legend, help guide the living and the dead (Diniz, 2018).

Both films centre on and take place during *Dia de los Muertos*. In *Coco* both the *Ofrenda* and the cemetery are recurring images. The first scene of the film, after narrating the background story of the family of Miguel, shows someone lighting a candle at the cemetery, while also displaying the skulls, flowers, and the bread of the dead.



FIGURE 7. CEMETERY COCO

An *Ofrenda* is not solely linked to family, but can also be for someone that is admired. In *Coco* this is displayed by Miguel, who has an *Ofrenda* for his idol Ernesto de la Cruz [00:12:05]. In the image below the candles and the flowers indicate that he remembers Ernesto de la Cruz on *Día de los Muertos*.



FIGURE 8. MIGUEL WITH THE *OFRENDA* OF ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ

The *Ofrenda* in the home of the Rivera family is referenced throughout the film. At the beginning, the grandmother of Miguel explains to him why the *Ofrenda* is important and why you should always put a photo of your family member on the *Ofrenda*. The *Ofrenda* is also important in the storyline when Mamá Imelda cannot cross the bridge back to visit the land of the living because Miguel took her photo off the *Ofrenda*. The rest of the story centres around Miguel going back to the real world to put the photo back on the *Ofrenda* so that Mamá Imelda can see her family. The importance of the *Ofrenda* is emphasised by including it in the storyline to this extent. The *Ofrenda* of the Rivera family is shown below, including the elements mentioned above that are essential to the *Ofrenda*.



FIGURE 9. *OFRENDA* OF THE RIVERA FAMILY

Two other elements of *Dia de los Muertos* are present in *Coco*. The first element is the presence of face paintings, which are never explicitly discussed but are visible throughout the film. The second feature is the presence of *Alebrijes*, also called spirit guides, with the most specific appearance in the transformation of Dante from normal dog to spirit guide with bright colours.



FIGURE 10. MIGUEL WITH FACEPAINT



FIGURE 11. DANTE AS AN ALEBRIJE

Throughout *Coco* the visual representation of *Dia de los Muertos*, by means of the *Ofrenda*, the face paintings and the *Alebrijes*, is not explained explicitly. The grandma of Miguel does talk about the importance of the *Ofrenda* but does not explain the whole concept. Therefore, *Coco* does not primarily address an outsider audience but, in this particular context, aims more to the insider audience.

*Dia de los Muertos* is also an important day in *The Book of Life*. However, the approach is different. In *The Book of Life* the *Ofrenda* is only present in the beginning of the film. The word *Ofrenda* is not used specifically. However, its context is explained by stating that if you remember someone they can come visit you. Below the *Ofrenda* in *The Book of Life* is shown,

which is situated at the cemetery and not in the home of the family like in *Coco*. The same elements are present, such as the cross, the candles, and the flowers.



FIGURE 12. OFRENDA'S ON CEMETERY

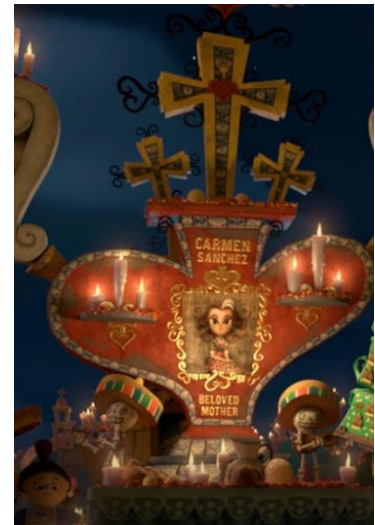


FIGURE 13. OFRENDA OF MANOLO'S MOTHER

In the storyline of *The Book of Life* there are references to *Dia de los Muertos*, however it is only a plot element and not the main theme in the film. Visual markers of *Dia de los Muertos* are present, but the story is more a love triangle than a family story about remembrance. Moreover, most references to *Dia de los Muertos* are explained explicitly, or are part of the questions of the detention class. This therefore supports the argument that *The Book of Life* aims at an Anglo-American audience.

#### 5.4 REVIEWS

Reviews from people with knowledge of the culture can give insight into the visual markers about elements that an outsider would easily miss. Remezcla (2017) gathered a collection of opinions of Latino critics on the film. The critics describe elements that are only seen by the individuals whose culture is represented. The overall message in the reviews outline the presence of layers in the film, specifically the universal approach to a worldwide audience as well as specific elements aimed at Mexicans.

First, in the Remezcla (2017) article, Manuel Bentancourt describes that he was sceptical before the release of the film, certainly after the attempt of Disney•Pixar to trademark the name *Dia de los Muertos* (Remezcla, 2017). However, the following quote shows that the extra layer for Mexicans was clearly visible to him: “Shaded with an attention to detail that remains astounding (the deep-cut Frida Kahlo jokes are A+ as is the playful use of alebrijes)” (Remezcla, 2017). The presence of Frida Kahlo, a Mexican surrealist artist with well-known self-portraits, is referenced to in the film, but jokes related to her presence will not be understood by every audience. The presence of *Alebrijes* to non-Mexican viewers will resonate with having a pet, while Mexicans know it as part of their culture and folklore. Furthermore, Claudia Puig elaborates on this subject by stating the following: “Alebrijes – brightly painted, whimsical Oaxacan sculptures – are transformed into iridescent spirit guides that guard the dead. The story is steeped in Mexican folklore.” (Remezcla, 2017). So while the concept of a pet or a friend is universal, the concept of *Alebrijes* has an extra layer for Mexican viewers. Another reviewer also mentioned the awareness that this film was made both universally as well as specifically for Mexican people by adding layers. Additionally, Carlos Aguilar stated: “Sure, global viewers might pick up on the universality of the story, but will they notice seemingly minor embellishments like the cameos by Mexican icons, the Mexican soccer jersey on one of the characters, the pan dulce on the table, the details in the grandmother’s apron, or the rustic cemetery? Probably not, and that’s okay. We noticed.” (Remezcla, 2017). This signifies the importance of representation of your own culture in a film. Even though the story is universal, specific references to a specific culture, in this case Mexican, help viewers relate on a deeper level without everyone understanding it or needing to understand it.

Vanesse Erazo, another reviewer from the Remezcla (2017) article, evaluates the ethnic diversity of Mexico in *Coco*, which she describes as: “With nods to the tres raizes (three roots) of Latino culture – indigenous, Spanish, and African – Pixar crafted a gorgeously drawn

homage that rings true. While non-Mexicans may miss many of these references, they won't enjoy it any less." (Remezcla, 2017). The references she refers to are: "From the little strips of corn husk lovingly tied around Abuelita's tamales, to the bright embroidered flowers on the blusas bordadas worn by Miguel's mom and sister (all signalling indigenous influences)" (Remezcla, 2017). These specific examples are not well-known elements of Indigenous culture by outsiders, however as a Latinx critic, Erazo notices these references and gives value to them as ringing true.

On the other hand, one blog wrote a critical article on the representation of Indigenous people in *Coco*, mainly that there was next to none. Cervantes-Altamirano (2017) stated: "But I, as an Indigenous person born and raised in Mexico, did not feel represented. In fact, I saw, right in front of my eyes, the ways in which cultural appropriation is normalized, curated and celebrated. I also saw how the Day of the Dead was stripped from its roots to accommodate the sensibilities of mestizos and white Latinxs." The only Indigenous elements found in the film are those of the realm of the dead and the Aztec dancers at the party of Ernesto de la Cruz (Cervantes-Altamirano, 2017). Another argument which signals cultural appropriation relates to Frida Kahlo, who was a mestizo, wearing a Tehuana dress which is part of Indigenous culture (Chassen-López, 2014). The racism and classism of the difference between people from European, mestizo or Indigenous heritage is visible in the portrayal of Mexican celebrities (all mestizo).

In the case of *The Book of Life*, reviews are often done by Anglo-Americans. The only discussion of the film by Latinx reviewers was on Remezcla by Valdés (2014). However, the article does not focus on the representation of Mexican culture itself, but mainly focuses on the factors that make it a good film in general. Unfortunately, there are no reviews that discuss Indigenous elements in the films. However, this shows again that the primary audience for the film was Anglo-Americans, since they were the ones to write the reviews.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that both *Coco* (2017) by Disney•Pixar and *The Book of Life* (2014) by Reel FX Creative Studios aim to represent Mexican culture in a positive manner during times of negative discourse about Mexico in the United States of America, however both films approached this differently and for a different audience. Therefore, this thesis answers the research question: “In what way and for what audience is Mexican culture represented in *Coco* and in *The Book of Life* during times of negative discourse in media in the United States of America about Mexicans?”.

First, both films incorporate the use of the Spanish language as well as accent. *Coco* included more Spanish in the film, while remaining aware that the film is aimed at both English and Spanish speakers. *The Book of Life* approached this differently, using a limited amount of Spanish words, ensuring that the words can be easily understood when following the context of the film, therefore focusing primarily on English speakers. Not only Spanish words, but also Spanish pronunciation differs in the films. *Coco* follows a consistent approach of Spanish pronunciation, therefore including Spanish speakers, while *The Book of Life* is not consistent and even refers to American culture in relation to pronunciation. Another example of the difference between the films is demonstrated by the choice of Spanish language in music. *The Book of Life* incorporated existing songs in English limiting the songs sung in Spanish. On the other hand, *Coco* included traditional songs as well as their own songs which were partly in Spanish. The last example is the implementation of code-switching, a practice often seen at the border of Mexico and the United States of America, only present in *Coco*. The decision to include this practice was conscious, based on advice from playwright consultants from Mexico. These differences signify that both films aim to show a positive side of Mexico, but approach this in a different way regarding the use of Spanish in their films. *Coco* incorporated Spanish

to include Spanish speakers while not excluding English speakers. On the contrary, *The Book of Life* focused primarily on Anglo-Americans, not specifically excluding Spanish speakers.

Second, the primary audience of both films, which can already be deduced from the language choice, is different. In the previous paragraph it is visible that by choosing to incorporate more Spanish, the primary audience of *Coco* is explicitly focused on Spanish speaking viewers, however not excluding Anglo-American viewers. Regarding *The Book of Life*, the choice of voice actors, as well as language choice, signals a primary Anglo-American audience. In terms of heritage of the people involved in the film different approaches are visible. *Coco* made a conscious decision to focus on including Latinx voice actors, who are insiders to the culture, while having an Anglo-American director who is an outsider. Cultural representation in Disney films is often scrutinised, *Coco* therefore consulted with insiders to ensure that the representation of Mexican culture was not problematic. This resulted in a mixed insider and outsider influence on the film. *The Book of Life* took an opposite approach with a Mexican director, an insider who specifically stated that the film represents his version of Mexico, and a group of voice actors with mixed heritage consisting of two Latinx voice actors and at least four non-Latinx voice actors, who are outsiders. The voice actors in *The Book of Life* are well-known American (voice) actors, therefore signalling that the primary audience is Anglo-American. Thus, *The Book of Life* was created by an insider, engaging in self-representation, for an outsider audience, while *Coco* was created by both insiders and outsiders for an insider and outsider audience.

The framing of both films present the same findings on the primary audience as the heritage. *Coco* did not impose American values on the storyline and characters, showing that the primary audience was not limited to the United States of America (Gutiérrez Hernández & Suhoverov, 2018). *The Book of Life* starts in an American museum, with a non-Mexican tour guide, who narrates the story from an outsider perspective, which demonstrates that the story is



told to an outsider audience. Determining factors in the analysis of the primary audience are the choices made regarding the order of releases in the different countries, financial figures, and acceptance by the audience. *Coco* has made a deliberate choice to release the film in Mexico first, while *The Book of Life* did not release in Mexico first. The profit made by both films differs, which is not only based on success, but also on the reputation of the production companies. *Coco* has a larger gross profit, especially worldwide, influenced by the reputation of Disney•Pixar in films for children. Since Disney•Pixar often aims at a worldwide audience, applying to *Coco* as well. *The Book of Life* made profit, which was mainly acquired from the United States of America, further supporting the conclusion that their primary audience is an Anglo-American audience. Moreover, the reviews were done by non-Mexican reviewers, stating that it was an introduction for them into the Mexican culture, another indicator that the primary audience is Anglo-American.

Finally, visual markers of both Hispanic and Indigenous elements are part of the portrayal of the Mexican culture in both films. The first element is Catholicism, which has been brought to Mexico by the Spanish. This element is visible in both films by portraying nuns as well as crosses. The Hispanic element of bullfighting is only visible in *The Book of Life*, suggesting that they focused more on well-known Hispanic elements instead of Indigenous elements. Both films use *Dia de los Muertos* in their portrayal of the Mexican culture. However, in *Coco* it dominates the theme, while in *The Book of Life* it is used more as an element of the storyline. In the reviews of Latinx reviewers, the aspect of layers in *Coco* is mentioned often. *Coco* has been created for a universal audience, with an extra layer for Mexican and Mexican-American viewers. On the subject of Indigenous representation there is room for improvement, with a blogger arguing that there is a lack of Indigenous representation as well as a presence of cultural appropriation. The reviews of *The Book of Life* do not discuss representation of

Mexican culture in-depth, but only mention the storyline, which shows that the primary audience was Anglo-Americans.

Thus, although both films have been released during the same time of political and cultural discussions about Mexicans, they have approached this in a different manner and for a different audience. *Coco* was created by insiders and outsiders, for an insider and outsider audience, which resulted in a universal story including layers for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. On the other hand, *The Book of Life* was created by an insider for an outsider audience, which resulted in a film portraying Mexican culture for an Anglo-Americans.

## 6.1 LIMITATIONS

The first limitation is that this thesis is executed by one person, lacking experience with Mexican culture. All information regarding Mexican culture has therefore been gathered from external sources. The researcher does have knowledge in the field of intercultural communication. Moreover, the researcher does speak Spanish, which could help but also influence the results, specifically in the chapter about language choice. Altogether, this could result in the researcher overlooking or missing important information as well as interpreting information based on her own language knowledge. To avoid bias, reviews from Latinx authors were applied to support the research findings. Moreover, a second reader, without Spanish knowledge, evaluated the thesis to limit the bias of the researcher.

The second limitation is that the research into representation of national cultures is often subjective. The findings always depend on the interpretation as well as prejudices of the researcher. Since the researcher is European, the information she receives on the representation of Mexican people is often related to immigrants in the United States of America. To limit the subjectivity in this thesis, academic sources were used to ensure a less biased approach.

The last limitation is the lack of reviews about *The Book of Life*. The information in the reviews about *Coco* was valuable in the analysis of the audience, acceptance, and visual markers of culture. Since *The Book of Life* did not have as many reviews, it resulted in an unequal amount of analysis of the opinion of reviewers on the film. However, the reviews of *Coco* were still implemented in the thesis to give depth to the analysis of *Coco*.

## 6.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

The first recommendation to follow up this thesis would be to evaluate how Mexicans from different ethnic groups perceived the representation of their culture in *Coco* as well as in *The Book of Life*. Currently, only one blogger mentions the lack of Indigenous elements in *Coco*. The research would help describe the representation of Indigenous people in largely distributed films for children. It would then be vital to do this research in Mexico, where a representative group of viewers give their opinion. This can both be done via survey, giving valuable statistical data on the acceptance of the film, or via interviews, which will give more information on the argumentation of the opinion.

The second recommendation is to look into how the representation of Mexican culture affects children, specifically looking at films like *Coco* and *The Book of Life*, to see if and how they function as a voice of opposition to what children hear on the news. Evaluating the opinion of children about Mexican culture before seeing the films, and repeating this after seeing the films, can give insight into the effects of these films on children. Again, this can be done via surveys as well as interviews.

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Peter Lang.

# PLAGIARISM STATEMENT



Universiteit Utrecht

Faculty of Humanities  
Version September 2014

## PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

### **Fraud and Plagiarism**

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.


The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



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