



## Mexican prototypes and the migration conflict in waltDisney's *Coco*.

Prototipos mexicanos y el conflicto migratorio en el filme *Coco*, de Walt Disney.

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### ABSTRACT

In the present paper, we propose to analyze a filmic text that, supposedly, was created for a children's audience, it is the recent Walt Disney's work *Coco* (2017), by directors Lee Ulrich and Adrian Molina. We will be guided by sociosemiotic notions and the critical analysis of discourse in order to study certain semantic marks related to the migratory phenomenon that is recorded along the border between Mexico and the United States. These semantic marks, due to their constant presence in other texts and situations, are assumed to be prototypical. According to the above, far from "paying tribute" to Mexican culture, *Coco* stigmatizes certain practices of that culture. The "media machine" with which Disney supports this product allows the "naturalization" of such prototypical vision.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic sign. Semantic nucleus. Identity. Border. Illegal.

### RESUMEN

En el presente trabajo, analizaremos un texto fílmico que, supuestamente, está dirigido a un público infantil, se trata de la reciente obra *Coco* (2017), de los directores Lee Ulrich y Adrián



Molina. Nuestro objetivo principal es el de examinar determinadas estructuras nocionales o marcas semánticas en el filme, cuya ideología subyacente se refiere al fenómeno migratorio que se registra a largo de la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos. Esas marcas semánticas, por su constante presencia en otros textos y situaciones, se asumen como prototípicas. En consecuencia, el filme en cuestión, lejos de hacer un “homenaje” a la cultura mexicana, estigmatiza determinadas prácticas de ese ambiente humano. El fuerte aparato publicitario en el que la compañía cinematográfica Walt Disney soporta este producto permite la “naturalización” de dicha visión prototípica. Utilizaremos algunas propuestas teóricas de la sociosemiótica y del análisis crítico del discurso.

**Palabras Clave:** Signo hegemónico. Núcleo semántico. Identidad. Frontera. Ilegal.

## Introduction

It is common to think that artistic works aimed at a child audience lack political, religious, racial ideologies, etc., or that they pursue "neutral" objectives, which affect areas of fun, prestigious values, educational or, in any case, that these works are covered by a veil of innocence.

Some examples that radically disdate the above could be several of the cartoons that appeared in the United States since World War II. These products, explicitly and from an extreme nationalist position, ridicule and/or defeat both Japanese and German enemies. We will cite three productions, which we believe representative, just to give an idea: from Paramount Pictures, *Japoteurs* (1942) (pun in English that transforms "saboteurs", or "saboteurs" in Spanish, to stigmatize the Japanese as mortal enemies) in which Superman destroys a huge and powerful Japanese plane, designed to bomb the American nation; by Warner Brothers, *Tokyo jokio* (1943) ("jokio" is an alteration of "joke" in Spanish) is a racist satire that passes off the Japanese as beings without reason; finally, Walt Disney's *The spirit of '43* (1943), here, Donald invites American society to pay its taxes properly in order to increase the production of armaments and, consequently, to achieve victory in the war, in this way, the continuity of freedom in that country would be guaranteed. The previous



cases were significant in terms of the construction of the project that would lay the foundations for the conformation of the image of that people as a liberating nation, model of modernity and guardian of world peace.

The general reputation of the American Walt Disney Company could not be reconciled with that of, for example, being a true ideological state apparatus. The marketing that revolves around each of its products, in addition to the comic and sentimental tones that appear within them, are fundamental factors that do not allow to find, easily, any ideological manipulation within these products. Armand Mattelart (1979), an obligatory reference (together with Ariel Dorfman, 2013) in terms of analysis with a critical vision, shows us certain textual strategies used by various television programs, comics and films that, under an "educational" and / or "childish" mask (such as *Sesame Street*), have served to promote worldviews in favor, mainly, of the interests of the American political-economic power.

Paradoxically, Disney's myths about the innocence of its adult characters with the body of a child enter, officially and fully, in the classrooms, which cease to belong exclusively to the austere school and widen according to the self-advertising of their promoters until they take on the dimensions of the "world". (Mattelart, 1979, p. 93).

Elsewhere, Ariel Dorfman and Mattelart himself point to a couple of common resources used by the named Disney company, namely cultural stigmas and highly generalizing human prototypes or models, very clear elements in our object of study.

There is no doubt that Aztecaland is Mexico: all the prototypes of the Mexican postcard "being" are sheltered here. Donkeys, siestas, volcanoes, cacti, huge hats, ponchos, serenades, machismo, Indians of old civilizations. It does not matter that the name is different, because we recognize and fix the country according to that grotesque typicality. The change of name, petrifying the archetypal embryo, taking advantage of all the superficial prejudices and stereotypes about the country, allows *it to be disneylanded* without hindrance. (Dorfman, 2013, p. 69)



As far as our work is concerned, it is, in principle, that marked use of Mexican prototypes<sup>1</sup> in the film *Coco*, the same ones that are within a couple of textual structures that we call "semantic nuclei". The presence of these prototypes opens the door to other, deeper levels of analysis. In turn, within those semantic nuclei, notions (connotations) appear articulated to a hegemonic sign, the border, a significant element that refers us to the phenomenon of Mexican migration to the neighboring country to the north. Consequently, the notion of "ideological boundary" will be a fundamental theoretical tool in terms of demonstrating the above argumentation.

The general structure of our work is as follows. The first section will address the basic theoretical assumptions from which we will start. The second and third segments will present the total connotations of the two worlds in which the diegesis of our cinematographic text takes place, which, correspondingly, are: the "World of the Living" or "World of sameness" and the "World of the Dead" or "World of Otherness". The fourth will be destined to analyze one of the hegemonic determining signs of the film, the aforementioned border, a space in which both discursive and non-discursive practices are recorded that refer us, at the same time, to the migratory conflict and to stigmatize a series of "prototypical"<sup>2</sup> customs attributed to Mexican culture and, in addition, to the imposition of an individualistic ideological model typical of the American way of life<sup>3</sup>. It is no coincidence, then, that the current governmental regime of the neighboring country places as one of its topics of discussion relations with Mexico on a level of national security. This situation corresponds, to a large extent, to the socio-historical circumstances in which the film emerges, which, as we can see, a large part of them appears modeled (adapted) and transcribed by the same text.

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<sup>1</sup> We understand prototypes as models built from certain physical and/or personality characteristics of one or a group of individuals that supposedly represents a specific human collectivity.

<sup>2</sup> We use this term and its derivatives as a conceptual tool, but we do not believe that there can be a cultural model (human and / or material) that can represent all the complexity of a community.

<sup>3</sup> This statement, paradoxically, seems to be a prototypical stance. In the conclusions, we will be clarifying this and other similar cases.



## Theoretical assumptions

There are several theoretical proposals of socio-emiotic cut. We will follow some headed by Edmond Cros (1986), which are called sociocritic, and which we will complement with the notions of "semantic nuclei" and "hegemonic signs". As a complement, we will use the position of critical discourse analysis.

### a) Basic elements of socio-emiotics

Under the above framework, we present two general guidelines that characterize most cultural products, in which we include single-code texts (such as a story) or multi-code (such as a film):

- 1) every text, as a testimonial element, tends to reproduce, in various forms, traces of dominant and/or counter-hegemonic ideologies common at the time of its production;
- 2) the emission of discursive and/or non-discursive practices by any individual, belonging to a given culture, will hardly be considered as politically "disinterested" or "neutral".

The above premises allow us to speak rather of a textual intention and not of an intention of the author. To explain this, we follow Cros when he refers to discourse as a social instrument: "to the extent that discourse establishes relationships between social institutions, economic and social processes, forms of behavior, systems of norms, techniques, types of classifications, modes of characterization, we perceive it as social practice" or discursive practice, which "always implies a sociality (sic.) of the act of speech and a deep relationship with history" (1986, p. 59). Therefore, socio-geotics is interested in the relationships that certain textual structures maintain with certain social structures, due to the importance of the socio-historical circumstances that deprive the text at the time of emergence. For our part, we extend the above discursive characteristics to non-discursive practices.



## **b) The position of critical discourse analysis**

Critical discourse analysis is a discipline that is responsible for studying "the relations of domination, discrimination, power and control, as manifested through language" (Wodak, 2003, p. 19). This position implies, among other things, that discursive practices commonly contain traces of various ideologies (dominant or not). Consequently, and because of what has been said about the social character of the discourse, we are not always fully aware of reproducing these ideological references and, in addition, these same ones, on several occasions, are assumed as unquestionable truths, in such a way that they seem to be "natural" or "normal" facts. It is this, fundamentally, the problem that tries to reveal the critical analysis of the discourse: the naturalization of these ideological positions:

According to this point of view, dominant structures stabilize conventions and make them natural, that is, the effects of power and ideology on the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms: they are considered as something "given". (2003, p. 20)

## **c) Semantic nuclei and hegemonic signs**

We understand the text as a network of signs intimately related to each other. These signs can belong to various codes: musical, linguistic, sound, visual, gestural, proxemic, etc. Film texts are composed of several of these codes, which makes them multi-code texts. In any type of text, the semantic load can be different in each of the signs that compose it. Those with the greatest burden will be recognized as hegemonic signs.

A certain textual "region" (a scene, a paragraph, a chapter, in short) gathers signs of different semantic load. When such a syngnic association refers us to fundamental connotations that will appear, at different times, throughout the text, we are facing a semantic core.

Thanks to the overall coherence provided by the strong symbolic framework, a semantic core will be able to contain traces of the total meaning of the text. Hence the importance of its analysis.



## d) Ideological boundary

A border can be understood as a space or an environment in which a certain identity problem is registered in various forms; "it should be stressed that it is a concept that alludes to a *space*, whether geographical, physical, ideal, imaginary or virtual" (Crespo, 2014, p. 16; italics are textual). Based on the previous framework, the distance between the spatial and the ideological has no place, which is why we say that the term implies conflicts of identity order, that is, confrontations (not necessarily violent) between sameness and otherness. Let's explain.

The border can be from individual to individual, from family to family, from neighborhood to neighborhood, from profession to profession, from state to state, from country to country, etc. Thus, on one side of a territorial border, for example, is the space of the sameness that brings together an ideal "we"<sup>4</sup>, on the opposite side, the counterpart will appear: the otherness that is installed as the difference, the strange, the alien, the problematic, the threat. Each space will re-create a set of cultural practices (discursive and/or non-discursive with a certain ideological charge) that are thought of as unique, as distinctive: "In such a case, such practices are considered objective and universal [in each of the spaces]. The practices of the clan itself may seem absolute and rational; different practices, on the other hand, may seem barbaric and irrational" (Churchland, 2012, p. 149). Therefore, crossing the fragile line between one side and the other is not a smooth situation, but a transgression that can cause serious conflicts between human groups.

In addition, the differentiating elements that the identity construct gives to an individual are of a collective order and allow an ideological position before the elements of the Universe (what we call reality: the objective and the subjective). In this way, cultural practices, whatever the side from which they are observed, tend to be generic and, therefore, susceptible to be understood as prototypical.

Finally, it is not vain to indicate the semantic difference between the Spanish concepts "frontera" and English "border". As we have implied, the first indicates a boundary (physical and

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<sup>4</sup> As for that collective illusion of sameness, we recommend Anderson (1997).



ideological) between at least two spaces; the second has a meaning that refers to the end, the edge of something without necessarily continuing the otherness on the other side. Later, this will have an important relevance.

### The world of sameness

Miguel Rivera, the child protagonist of the film, lives in a Mexican town, called Santa Cecilia, with his family of eleven; both, people and family, show us characteristics (signs) that we could associate as part of a traditional world, which contains certain features attributed, generically, to Mexican culture:<sup>5</sup> cobbled streets decorated with colored papel picado, tiled houses with dirt floors, informal harvest in the streets (mainly "cempasúchil"; orange flower whose Nahuatl name means "flower of the dead" in Spanish, that is why it is used to decorate the altars), crumbled objects (tiles, sheets, boards, bricks, in short) in patios and streets, non-professional family work (shoe composure, street musicians), several blood members of different generations who share the same house in solidarity, romanticism, melomania, traditional food, etc.

Due to a negative experience that Miguel's great-great-grandmother, named Mama Imelda, had, music is forbidden in her home: that woman's husband was a famous musician and actor, Ernesto de la Cruz, who abandoned everything to seek success. Paradoxically, Miguel wants to be a musician. (Note that the name of the town coincides with that of the patron saint of music.) The feast of the Day of the Dead envelops all the diégesis<sup>6</sup> of the cinematographic text. In the end, after a strange trip to the World of the Dead, the boy achieves his dream.

The film begins with a brief introduction (paratext)<sup>7</sup>, in which Miguel's voiceover tells us part of his life, which, according to him, is shrouded in a spell. In this brief space, the narrative reveals the double break mentioned: the marriage of Ernesto de la Cruz and the one carried out by the wife when, for generations, she forbids music in the house. Consequently, women are engaged in the business

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<sup>5</sup> See note one.

<sup>6</sup> Diégesis refers to the sequence of actions or the story in a narrative text.

<sup>7</sup> We call paratextual those elements that do not belong to the main textual plot. In a film, some of them are: the opening and ending credits, the cover design, the name of the film company, certain introductory information, etc.



of shoe repair, a tradition that is still practiced in the present of actions. This work, a single source of income, unites all members of the family. The matriarchal line, from the double break, characterizes this human group.

The beginning of the diegesis (Chapter 1) marks the Day of the Dead, as if it were a normal day: in the morning, all the relatives congregate in the shoe store to work. Miguel goes out into the street with his shoe shiner drawer in search of customers. The boy passes through some streets of the village until he reaches the main square. The background images are highly significant: the painting of the houses is visibly deteriorated; the tiles have irregularities; an old pick-up truck; an unoccupied man, standing in a corner and recharged on the wall with his arms crossed; some musical groups of norteño and mariachi types; market stalls; Anyway. However, there is one scene that seems too relevant to us. Miguel is very close to the main square and plays, as if they were percussions, several alebrijes,<sup>8</sup> made of wood, from one of the stalls. Behind him, the façade of a house whose tiles are, as we already mentioned, notoriously damaged; a set of old boards and tubes appear at one end; the constant of deteriorated paint; at the end of the stall, there is a trash can that shows, very clearly, dirt on its surface; from that boat, comes a stray xoloitzcuintle dog (traditional Mexican dog), named Dante, who will be the boy's companion.

Before continuing, we would like to point out the importance of the name that the dog has in the film, since it refers us to the work of Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Comedia*, written in parts in the first decades of the fourteenth century. Dante, as the main character of the literary text, crosses different regions of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. In each of those parts, Dante will be accompanied by a different person who plays the role of guide. In Hell, Virgil, the Roman poet, will be the first; in Purgatory, Sordello, also a Roman troubadour, will be the second; finally, in Paradise, Beatrice, Dante's beloved figure, will take him through this last section.

Now, Dante, Miguel's dog friend fulfills, in some way, also the role of guide in the World of the Dead. In this sense, we are talking about a phenomenon of intertextuality. As we know, all

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<sup>8</sup> Artistic figures of fantastic and colorful animals (usually made of wood) that are made in the state of Oaxaca (southwest of Mexico).



intertextuality entails a deconstruction that, in the film, happens, broadly speaking, on two levels. The most general lies in a transcoding, that is, a change of code: the novel, encrypted in a linguistic code, passes part of its significant matter to the receiving text (the film), encrypted in several codes, namely visual, sound, musical, linguistic, etc. The most specific level concentrates, precisely, on the canine character who bears the name of the main character in the novel, but, now, is a guide. The above deconstruction is explained by an aspect within the Aztec mythical tradition: the xoloitzcuintle is the one who leads souls to the Mictlán or underworld.<sup>9</sup>

After the previous digression, let's move on to our object of study. The constant notions of *disorder*, *neglect* and *informality* refer us to a central connotation, namely *poverty*. Let's not forget the characteristics of the family: its informal work, its rustic house and the high number of members (Miguel's mother, in addition, is expecting a child in addition to the two she already has). All the people of the village share the same semantic marks, it is, therefore, explicit a homogenization. In addition to the above, there is the constant notion of *family*, from which several discursive traces that connote *unity*, *tradition*, *guidance*, *respecte*. Let's look at some allusive phrases. The grandmother tells Michael (Chapter 2), in front of the family altar: "Everything is [to place the altar] so that the family may be reunited [...] Being part of this family is always supporting this family." On the other hand, his father informs him of the news (Chapter 3), also in front of the altar, that the grandmother has decided that she must stop shining shoes and, thus, continue with the family tradition, consequently, she will be able to work in the shoe store after school. The father says, "You have your family to guide you. You are a Rivera and a Rivera is it...?", the boy replies annoyedly: "A shoemaker to the bone".<sup>10</sup>

We consider, therefore, that, if Miguel were to devote himself to music, he would be committing a serious transgression that would violate family values, that is, those concentrated in the corresponding connotations that we have just presented. In fact, he is already committing an

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<sup>9</sup> The Christian tradition named this microcosm as Hell, however, the original indigenous vision is that of a creative space where gods of death and resurrection dwell.

<sup>10</sup> We clarify that we present transcripts of voices and dialogues that we have compared with the original English version. When we deem it necessary, we will make the distinction of a variant that was used in Spanish.



infraction by secretly playing his guitar. If we summarize, the "respect" for family rules, on the one hand, and the "transgression" of those same norms, on the other, would be the connotations that would configure a dichotomous pair of hegemonic signs whose semantic charge is highly representative in this first part of the film text. Finally, the scenes addressed form the first semantic core of our analysis.

### **The World of Otherness**

On the afternoon of the same Day of the Dead, Miguel wants to participate in a musicians' contest in the main square (Chapter 3). A little earlier, he accidentally breaks the glass that protects the photograph of the altar in which his great-great-grandmother, his great-grandmother Coco (as a child) and his great-great-grandfather appear. This man is wearing a mariachi suit, but, having abandoned his family, the grandmother tore off the part of his face. Miguel picks up the photograph and discovers that there is a hidden section behind the frame in which, apparently, the fragmented identity of the great-great-grandfather is revealed: the faceless man wields with his left hand the emblematic guitar of Ernesto de la Cruz. Thanks to the strong insistence on family tradition, Miguel believes himself heir to the musical legacy of his ancestor. The boy goes to his hiding place where he keeps a bewort guitar similar to the one that distinguishes de la Cruz, records, images and videos of the artist, among other things. He takes the guitar and enthusiastically communicates his discovery to the rest of the family. The grandmother, enraged, destroys the instrument. Miguel leaves his house, evidently angry, after having reneged against the tradition of his own and the family altar. He arrives at the square and tries to participate in the contest (Chapter 4), but must have a guitar. He heads, after unsuccessfully borrowing one from different participating musicians, to the statue of his great-great-grandfather and asks, "What am I supposed to do?" The boy's face is illuminated by the reflection of the fireworks in the background and appears, at the feet of Ernesto de la Cruz, the phrase that made the character famous: "Seize your moment!" ("Seize your moment!" in Spanish). Miguel, determined, visits the mausoleum dedicated to his great-great-grandfather. Inside, as part of an altar, is the symbolic guitar of the star. Miguel takes it and, at that moment, it transforms into a kind of specter that no one can



see, except Dante and the dead (also invisible to the living); the latter have come to feed on the offerings placed on them by their respective relatives. In this way, the child has the facility to visit the World of the Dead.

This new microcosm presents structures, social and physical, different from that of the World of the Living. Likewise, all its inhabitants are animated skeletons, however, they retain features and clothing that have been placed as prototypical of certain Mexican social groups: men with a worn palm hat, huaraches or cowboy boots, scarf around the neck, denim pants or mariachi attire; the women, of braids, dressed as the famous catrina of José Guadalupe Posada<sup>11</sup>. As in the World of the Living, a northern tone of voice is distinguished in men and women.

The way to access this environment is through several bridges, placed on different levels and lined with cempasúchil petals. The bridges of the lower levels lead to pyramidal constructions of pre-Columbian style that, in turn, connect with overcrowding of wooden barracks, dirty, without electricity and between dark and somewhat unhealthy waters. The above environment is the basis of the highest levels, which rise in elongated columns. These last levels offer a mixture of modern and traditional aspects within a sophisticated atmosphere: cable cars full of people (some of them travel outside, tying to a bar of the wagon), mansions and colonial buildings, colorful spotlights, famous Mexican characters (Frida Kahlo, Cantinflas, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante, El Santo, María Félix, Ernesto de la Cruz between, others), parties, squares, bars, etc. The buildings are located so close to each other and the number of them are notoriously excessive that the World of the Dead turns out to be a motley territory; congestion of people, vehicles, colors, advertisements, lights; with flying alebrijes; etc. It is a world that the dead have adorned with identity-bearing elements, brought from the side of life; a world, moreover, of marked social contrasts.

Back with Miguel (Chapter 4), in the cemetery of his town, decorated with candles and offerings (similarly as in some indigenous peoples within the state of Michoacán, Mexico), he finds the members of his family who have already died, except for his great-great-grandmother, who has

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<sup>11</sup> Figure of a female skeleton dressed in elegant clothes common among the privileged classes of the late nineteenth century. Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) was a famous Mexican cartoonist, illustrator and engraver.



not been able to "cross" (to Earth), because "she is stuck on the other side" (in the World of the Dead), as reported by a pair of twin uncles. The whole group goes back to the World of the Dead by one of the bridges, in order to help Mom Imelda.

It is important to highlight some signs that are recorded in the space destined to the passage from one world to another, at the end of the bridge (Chapter 5). The façade features a Mayan-style carved stone architecture, reminiscent of the Quadrangle of the Nuns, in Uxmal, and the pyramid dedicated to the god Chaac, in Mayapan (both in the state of Yucatan, Mexico). Above that structure, an arrangement of Mexican pink lights welcomes in Spanish. Tickets bear the "Re-entry" sign. Formed in a row, the skeleton-people who are back in space carry some of the food they took from their respective offering on Earth. On a loudspeaker, in turn, the World of the Dead is welcomed and warned: "Keep your offerings on hand for "Re-entry" [Reingreso]. If they have a problem with their travel, there are agents from the Family Reunions Department ready to attend to them." A police officer politely asks each, "Anything to declare?" and seals a piece of paper. At the end of the line, two men, somewhat suspicious, look at both sides. The first of them, furtively, hands a bottle to the second. This scene passes fleetingly.

As for the exit, the procedure is somewhat similar. On the sign of the entrances, it reads: "Departures" ("Salidas" in Spanish). An officer has a screen through which he can scan, as with X-rays, the skeleton of the person who wishes to visit the World of the Living. If a relative, on Earth, put the photo of that person on the altar, the bereaved will have permission to leave, otherwise, a buzz alerts the fault and the subject will have to return. At that time, an event is logged that illustrates the above.

Hector, a ragged musician without recognition during his lifetime, tries to get out of the World of the Dead. His relatives did not remember him in the offering, the scanner does not record him, so he cannot leave that space. The man flees in the direction of the bridge. As soon as he begins to step on the petals of cempasúchil, Hector joins as if he were in the water, in fact, when the level of the petals reaches his chest, he swims desperately above the orange surface. Immediately, a couple of officers stop him. One of them exclaims, "I'm sorry, compadre!"



If we review carefully, the dichotomous pair found in the previous section, *respect/transgression*, is presented again in the current one under the form *legality/illegality*. Based on this, in terms of the dividing crossing, we are in a position to understand that sector as an ideological border and a coercive, vigilant customs. Because of its importance within the diégesis, as we will see, we can consider that site also as a hegemonic sign and, to the entire scene, as a second semantic nucleus.

It is not fruitless to mention that the first dichotomy of hegemonic signs (*respect/transgression*) transmits part of its semantic load to this second textual world, which is why we detect in it some identity elements present in the town of Miguel, this regardless of the transformation of the same dichotomy (*legality/illegality*) that fulfills other semi-ossic or significance functions.

## The border

In various media outlets, *Coco's* reputation can be reduced to the following idea: "A tribute to Mexican culture."<sup>12</sup>

Let us return to the premises that we exposed in the second section of this work: texts can be understood as testimonial elements that concentrate dominant and/or non-dominant ideologies common at the time of their production, on the one hand, and, on the other, discursive and/or non-discursive practices issued by an individual can hardly be considered as "innocent" or, in any case, "neutral". We must not lose sight of the fact that, for both budgets, the socio-historical circumstances that surround them are highly decisive, in such a way that they force us to assume a critical position.

A socio-historical circumstance that covers the emergence of our film text is the heated discussion on relations between Mexico and the United States, made, in recent years, by, mainly, the government of Donald Trump, which has strongly stigmatized the first nation with denigrating and

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<sup>12</sup> We recommend the columns of Coria (2017), Meseguer (2017), Salinas (2018), Ramón (2017), Mena (2016), among many others.



generalizing tones. For this reason, the border, as a hegemonic sign, will allow us to access ideological structures inserted in the film.

## a) Prototypes and stigmas

At the border, legality is implicit in passing to the World of the Dead only food from the offerings and reporting them. In this case, individuals who, suspiciously, exchange a bottle would be about to break the rules. It is not a coincidence, then, that we are shown that detail, even for brief moments. Now, Miguel's family, which is internal to that eschatological world, also incurs a serious fault, because it is introducing a living being to an exclusive space for the dead. For this reason, the officer refers the entire group to the Family Reunions Department (Chapter 5). It should be noted that, in that office, hang two paintings that exhibit, at the same time, the Mexican territory and the south of the United States. In some way, these images function as a spatial anchorage, that is, a geographical reference that indicates the place where the actions are carried out.

In the same office, the boy has an argument with Mom Imelda, because she will be in charge of performing a kind of spell to send the boy back to his village and, in that way, he can recover the portrait of the woman. The ultimate goal is for the great-great-grandmother to have the faculty to visit the altar and enjoy the offering. There is, however, a restriction: Miguel must forget his desire to be a musician. The boy gets upset and runs away from the office in search of his great-great-grandfather so that he can fulfill his wish (Chapter 6). From that moment, a security corps is organized to look for him along with the rest of the relatives and a huge flying alebrije. Consequently, the *illegal* semantic brand models the child character in that world. We must not let it pass that Miguel has committed a new transgression by not accepting the mandate of Aunt Imelda which, in addition, violates the family tradition.

As for Hector, we think that his transgressive behavior is more than evident. After his apprehension, his illegality is reaffirmed. He appears in the office of a policeman who gives him an account of his crimes committed at the border. Hector asks if what he did is illegal. The officer replies,



"Very illegal" (Chapter 6). Hector convinces him to help him "cross the bridge" that night. The officer extends him a provisional permit.

The original dichotomy, *respect/legality*, is a notional condenser that, as we have already mentioned, will distribute several of the roles and actions of the characters in the rest of the text, but the connotations illegality and transgression will be, also as we have pointed out, preponderant in the border and in the World of the Dead, that is why, in the same way, we consider the latter as hegemonic signs.

For there to be a transgression, a prohibition must be located as antecedent, implicitly or explicitly. Family disunity, offending the family, listening to music, dedicating oneself to another trade other than that of shoemaker, not following traditions or obeying the elderly are central impediments that the Rivera must observe. Miguel, like his great-great-grandfather, incurs five of those six infractions (not obeying the elders does not apply to this character).

We must clarify, however, that de la Cruz is not Michael's great-great-grandfather. That character, in life, poisoned Hector, his best friend; thus, he made his songs and his guitar. Its fame and its capital are, therefore, illicit. Betrayal, disloyalty and lying, moreover, as transgressions, model many of their actions.

As we have seen, the dichotomy we have followed here emerges at the border point. Based on this, this opposition has as correlates certain syntagmas that refer us to the phenomenon of migration between Mexico and the United States.

The song *Recuérdame*, composed by Héctor and later the basis of Ernesto de la Cruz's spurious success, reproduces some semantic markers that reinforce our previous statement. Let's review a couple of stanzas.

*Remind me, today I have to go, my love.*

*Remind me*

*Don't cry please.*

*I carry you in my heart and you will have me close,*

*Alone I will sing to you,*



*Dreaming of returning.  
Remember me, even if I have to emigrate.  
Remind me.  
If my guitar hears you crying,  
She with her sad singing will accompany you.*

The rest of the lyrics affect the fact of the poet's departure, which leaves loneliness, sadness, memory and hope, within a romantic environment, to the loved one. (In a way, the song refers to his abandonment of the Cross to his family.) Note that the term "emigrate" in the second stanza (the original in English says "to travel far"; "viajar lejos" in Spanish) refers to the problem that arises at the border.

The syntagmas to which we allude above, which we have already transcribed above, refer to notions that make up the migratory phenomenon mentioned: "crossing the bridge", "the other side", "illegal", "Something to declare?", plus the one that comes from the song, "migrate". At five, because they are so common in various social environments (Mexican and American) and because of their easy articulation to this border phenomenon, we could consider them as fixed syntagmas.<sup>13</sup>

The World of the Dead, then, is the space of oblivion and remembrance. The deceased, whose family did not put their photo on the altar, are at risk of dying for good. Those people occupy the dirty barracks that support that microcosm. It is the distant space of migration, of legality and illegality, of a modernity with Mexican features, of the revelation of secrets. In this microcosm, an enveloping power structure dominates, implicitly: a regime vigilant of the laws that could not be associated, for all the above, with a political system of Mexican characteristics. Consequently, the confrontation of these opposing identities underscores the border conflict, the Mexican prototypes and their "vices." The presence of the maps in the office of the Department of Family Reunions clarifies these last statements.

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<sup>13</sup> A fixed syntagma can be a phrase or a colloquial sentence whose widespread use and for wide periods of time, makes it not suffer variations in a significant way. In this way, it summons a certain semantic space; the simplest example of a fixed syntagma is a saying.



Let's see the importance of one of the indicated meanings of the term *border*. The border as an edge, from the side of the World of the Dead, is the end of modern life, with all its contrasts, it is the end of the place of dreams. After that point, the homogeneous world of tradition and disorder begins.

The strategy of using the Day of the Dead<sup>14</sup> as an enveloping atmosphere is part of the key to commercial success and the naturalization of the ideologies inserted in the film. The use of this resource allows Mexican thought to be conceived as magical, traditional, atavistic and opposed to the rational-scientific and modern.

That is one of the foundations of the "class" ideology of the bourgeoisie which tends to separate the proletarians from political and economic power, in the name of a minor rationality of a different nature.

Academic and scientific history is totally permeated by this idea. Thus, he will describe the elites and ruling political classes as aestes, refined and cultured, reasonable, scientific, while the people as rude, ignorant, superstitious, "magical". (Rozat, 2010, p. 75)

In America, that history dates back to the fifteenth century. Bernal Díaz del Castillo offers several examples in this regard. We will take only a few to illustrate the above. After the battle against the Tlaxcalans, the payment of tribute to the victors begins:

[...] it was that then they sent to call all the fortune tellers and potatoes, and others who cast lots, who called tacalnaguas, who are like sorcerers, and said to look for their riddles and spells and luck what people we were, [...] that I have already said other times that they are bad things [the "teules" or gods], like demons; [...] because, it seemed, the friendly Indians we brought from Cempoal made them a believer that we were Teules and that we ate the hearts of Indians, and that the bombards struck lightning as they fell from the sky, and that the hound, which was tiger or lion, and that the horses were to throw the Indians when we wanted to kill them; and they were told many nannies. (1983, pp. 169 and 170)

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<sup>14</sup> Initially, the film would bear the title *Day of the Dead*. For this reason, the company tried to register the name of that Mexican holiday as a trademark.



The enormous distance between the technological perspective of the Spaniards and that of the indigenous people, dominated by supernatural judgments, facilitates and justifies the imposition of a new state of affairs on the latter.

Michael's life, as he himself says, is shrouded in a spell. The search for the materialization of his dream is the urgency for a change of route: fame, prestige, wealth, all elements of Modernity. His family, in contrast, is content to continue the tradition of a life sustained by an honest trade and nothing more. Only the participation of magical and, paradoxically, anti-modern signs (alebrijes, spells, spirits, guide dog, etc.) will allow Miguel's dream to be a reality.

## **b) Dream and reality**

Within the structure of any artistic product, it is not atypical to encounter ideological traces that, in other contexts, would be highly contradictory. The evident "conciliation" between modern and anti-modern elements in Miguel's life project is based on a conceptual model characteristic of American life.

The boy cements his future in a common phrase or a fixed syntagma, inherited from his false great-great-grandfather: "Seize your moment!" In this way, the freedom that each individual possesses, implicit in the syntagma, is the artifice that allows the naturalization of a conflict between two completely different states of affairs, namely, the modern and the antimodern or traditional. Consequently, the same syntagma articulates the dream with reality.

For Miguel, unlike the vast majority, access to the World of the Dead is the opportunity to pursue and achieve his dreams, very much in spite of its illegality; the border will be, in addition to the above, the access that facilitates the change of identity: a traditional one (its reality on Earth) for another freed from atavisms (the fictional one on the "other side"). Thus, the *quasi-magical* revelation that the boy experienced, at the foot of the statue of Ernesto de la Cruz, contains the germ of a liberal, individualistic and, at the same time, fantastic vision: "in the United States the predominant ideology



is that we should not be determined by anything; we must be able to be anything we desire" (Baron-Cohen, 2010, p. 196).

Thanks to the ambiguity that starts from the border, Miguel is both an illegal individual and a hero in the World of the Dead, since, as a hero and based on the method of Vladimir Propp (1999), he manages to fulfill his goal. That is, he becomes a hero. Without forgetting the participation of a magical object, the guitar of Ernesto de la Cruz, which is the "key" to enter the World of the Dead, and a couple of allies: the dog Dante and his real great-great-grandfather, Hector.

The hegemonic sign of the border shows its two main highly contrasting facets, however, at the end of the journey, the American model is the watchful eye (panopticon) that imposes the way of seeing things.

The importance of this hegemonic sign and the semantic nuclei found is to distribute part of their respective semantic load throughout the text. Given the above, it is no coincidence that the border between the two worlds is a notional condenser in which fixed syntagmas and common social practices appear in the line that divides the two countries in real life. In addition, that spatial point is the boundary that strongly distinguishes one world from another, which accentuates the differences between them, for example, poverty and tradition vs. wealth and modernity.

## Conclusions

While it is true that we start from minimal and dichotomous elements for our analysis, which can be seen as a reductionist position in the extreme, we do not confine ourselves to those structures. We found a wide variety of possibilities and outlined a relationship of the film text with its socio-historical emergency circumstances.

Our brief tour has dismantled, to some extent, the commercial conception that the film pays homage to Mexican culture; on the contrary, the structure of the film reproduces, accentuates and ridicules discursive and non-discursive practices "common" in some social environments that are assumed to be prototypical; in addition to the imposition of an American ideological model as a prestigious value of life.



When we refer to the existence of some "common" discursive and non-discursive social practices within some Mexican social environments, we could be falling into a paradoxical situation, because we would make these practices a prototype, an undifferentiated construct. We must distinguish between social groups and social practices. Social groups are highly heterogeneous, changing and complex, but many of their practices can remain in force for a long time and with few variations. These validity and uniformity are what allow us to characterize them as common. On the other hand, the adjective "some" that qualifies social environments is not specific, since these practices can manifest themselves within different human environments over generations.

However, the aforementioned imposition of models is not exclusive to *Coco*. Walt Disney released, in 2008, the film entitled *A Chihuahua from Beverly Hills* in which the denigrating tone is even greater than in the current one (see Morales, 2015). One of the textual intentions of that film is reduced to conceptions of work order. The Mexican characters are models who develop in a work environment that is "natural" to them: in gardening, because of their contact with the earth. The Mexican space is conflictive, poor, disorderly, etc. In contrast, Beverly Hills, as a metonymic enclave of the United States, is an example of luxury, opulence, fashion, cleanliness, order, etc. Another similar case is the animated series, to illustrate, of the Warner Brothers company, in which the mouse Speedy Gonzales (sic.) appears. (1953, originally) as a supposed exponent of the Mexican prototype.

Many of Donald Trump's strong statements against Mexicans and the country ("drug traffickers", "the most dangerous country in the world", "mass migrants", "illegals", "rapists", "poor", etc.)<sup>15</sup> they do not contrast, in short, with the prototypes and stigmas that appear in *Coco*, on the contrary, it transcribes them. Let us see that these statements are part of the closest socio-historical circumstances in which the cinematographic text emerges. Indeed, much of Trump's electoral success was, precisely and fundamentally, his anti-Mexican stance. The vindicating intention of the cinematographic text, then, has been far from having an effect. We do not try to adopt a nationalist

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<sup>15</sup> On June 16, 2015, in the speech for the launch of his candidacy, Trump declares: "When Mexico sends us people, they do not send us the best. They send us people with a lot of problems, who bring us drugs, crime, rapists..." (BBC World, 2016).



or "revanchist" attitude that victimizes, idealizes and justifies an entire nation. After all, within Mexican culture, there are denigrating and prototypical expressions that also refer to a generic construct of certain American social and racial groups. Our analysis, in any case, seeks to locate deep textual structures that demonstrate dominant ideologies, which, already made up, try to appear as unquestionable and normal within a product aimed at a child audience.

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