

Mexico's Romance with Death - an essay published in the Spanish edition of the New York Times December 9

By Ilan Stavans

Translated by Marcela Davison Avilés

"Our relationship with death is intimate," wrote Octavio Paz, the most celebrated Mexican poet of the 20th century, in his book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. "More intimate, perhaps, than that of any other people."

In Mexico, death is everywhere: in the bodies of the victims of powerful drug cartels, in the shameless way the police "disappear" students who protest, in the strategies of corrupt politicians to discredit journalists investigating their reputations. Death is also present with the immigrant who risks his life to cross a wall and pursue a dream for a better life. One sees death in the care with which families give their elders who have no health insurance and in the daily struggle of farmworkers working in dangerous conditions. We Mexicans live with a certain acceptance of death, to the point where we celebrate it.

In contrast, Americans have a fear of death, They usually don't speak of it. They disguise death with make-up, they hide it or, they create its transformation through horrific spectacles, like Halloween, where death plays a monster.

In other cultures, the relationship with death is different: in the Arab world death's meaning depends upon the sins of the deceased. In China, the dying leave us in order to make room for the living.

Pixar's most recent animated film, *Coco*, is a lavish portrait of Mexico's intense romance with life beyond death. From my point of view, *Coco* is the most sophisticated cinematic work presenting - up to now - Mexico's popular culture. Hollywood has made so many mistakes (I'm thinking of *Under the Volcano* and *Traffic*) that we Mexicans have stopped counting. *Coco*, on the other hand, is refreshing and authentic. It does not taint our intimacy with death, on the contrary, it transforms it into an amazing voyage.

The major part of *Coco*'s story takes place during Día de Muertos, a festival during which many Mexicans spend a day in the cemetery placing offerings on the graves of family members who are no longer with them. I've participated in these celebrations on numerous occasions both in Mexico and in border cities in the United States.

My first thought always keys on the idiosyncratic nature of the spirits. While in the anglo/protestant culture ghosts are threatening figures, appearing to deliver unpleasant messages (like Hamlet's father), in Mexico, the spirits are kind and even enchanting, and they are always ready to offer advice. There are no frights, no haunted houses, there are no startling scenes. In Mexico we welcome our departed with music, dancing and conversation.

This is not to say that death is entirely inoffensive in Mexico. In Aztec mythology, Michlantehuhtli and Mictecacihuatl are the two gods of death. Together they govern Mictlán, the Aztec underworld. When someone dies, she navigates nine regions which form Mictlán, with the help of Xolotl, a guide reminiscent of Virgil, who is also the representation of the god Quetzalcoatl, and whose job it is to protect the sun in the underworld. For those who have died recently, it is an odyssey taking four years. One is presented with all manner of threats: in Mictlán there's a place where the wind rakes the air with razor sharp knives, and another place where a river of blood is surrounded by jaguars. The path through Mictlán is a purifying sojourn

through memory's horizon, one taken in search of the lineage of remembrance; that is, a dialogue with those who died and who protected us in life.

Miguel Rivera, Coco's 12 year old protagonist, embarks on this journey with a street dog named - perfectly - Dante. Both travel the underworld where they encounter unique difficulties. Throughout the story obstacles and bad omens confront them - in Mexico the word "coco" means a devilish spirit - but as Coco is a film for children these spirits have a sense of humor. And this is not altogether far from the Mexican manner of facing death: here, humor plays an indispensable role. In Mexico, to laugh in the face of death is a courageous thing.

It's been said that the most distinctive characteristic of Mexico's compromise with death is sacrifice. One sacrifices for any type of thing - the wellbeing of family, country, God. For many Mexicans, the honorable life is one of sacrifice, including, martyrdom.

Miguel's great apprenticeship in Coco has to do with sacrifice. The lesson of sacrifice teaches him not to have an antiseptic attitude toward death: he should not hide from her or feel ashamed of her. This is the reason we Mexicans create altars in our homes, with photographs of those dear to us who have died, so they may join us to partake in offerings of fruit, bread, sweets and candles. Death, then, is an earthly woman.

Skeletons are the Mexican iconography most representative of death. Their roots may be tracked to pre-columbian culture. Skulls and skeletons are seen in temples, sculpture, architecture and they have also been encountered on coins. A few centuries later, Jose Guadalupe Posada, the celebrated illustrator of the 19th century, set about to popularize them. During the Mexican Revolution of 1910, Posada artfully satirized dictators, politicians, impresarios and the bourgeoisie as skeletons, while at the same time showing the oppressed - also as skeletons - with dignity.

It's hard to find a figure similar to the skeletons of Posada in the popular culture of the United States. Would it be Uncle Sam? Close, but not quite. This figure, used in posters, is more like propaganda.

Later artists - with different ideological attitudes - illuminated Posada's contributions. For example, Diego Rivera, included little skeletons in numerous murals (such as *Dream of an Afternoon in the Alameda Central*, in which Posada appears). Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros also used them and of course, skeletons are the leitmotif in the work of Frida Kahlo. Subsequent generations - including Gabriel Orozco, perhaps the most visible contemporary Mexican artist - continue to use this archetype.

Today, skeletons are omnipresent: they are seen as piñatas, on lotería games, in chess games and in costumes. There is also a brand of tequila that uses bottles in the form of a skull (and in the shape of a machine gun). It's impossible to enter a supermarket, restaurant, school or any public place in Mexico without seeing skeletons. I'm not surprised that Coco is the most successful box office film in the history of Mexico. This is more proof of the way Mexicans stay close to death, how we make this tangible. This is also a revelation of the manner in which we defeat death: death is always at our side, and we say to her - not yet - we are not ready, we are still with the living.

Whether through veiled references or obvious homage, Coco's creators created a tribute to Posada, Rivera, Kahlo and a series of legendary artists, like Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, two icons of Mexico's Golden Age of Film, who today are considered heroes. (They also did not let the opportunity escape them to include another creature from our popular culture - the

“chupacabra.”) And the film successfully omitted any reference to the true “Bad hombres” of Mexico - like former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and current president Enrique Peña Nieto, who have sabotaged our future with corruption and incompetence.

It was a pleasure to watch Pixar’s film in a Manhattan theatre full of children and adults, the majority of which were of Hispanic origin. The story clearly captivated the audience. The idea that death is threatening, or that it should be a forbidden topic, occurred to few. One seven year old girl - whose great-grandmother was recently diagnosed with cancer - said that Coco helped her understand where she would go after she died. Her older sister, on the other hand, was frightened. The Spanglish dialogue felt natural. It included words of náhuatl origen - such as “chamaco” - or words used widely in Mexico - like “chancla,” which are not spoken in other Latin American countries - and flowed authentically. And one of the things I most enjoyed was the marked accent of the actors in the English version. They rolled their r’s without hesitation. Instead of hiding their Hispanic origins, they emphasized their heritage, and even poked fun at it.

This is particularly good during a time when Donald Trump maligns Mexicans for political gain and when the binational relationship between Mexico and the United States is at a point which is historically tense. Perhaps this is a sign that those who have passed are taking care of us. Death, Octavio Paz surmised, is “a mirror that reflects the vain gestures of life.” But death also invites us to think in a manner which is more spiritual and with a touch of grace. Needless to say, there is much to be overcome in this world of ours that is macabre; death need not be in that category.