

**“Remember Me”: Being, Becoming, and
the Power of Representation in Coco (2017) Movie**

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*"The memory of the righteous is a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot."*
Proverbs 10:7 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

The current study examines the construction of cultural identity in Coco (2017) with the help of Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory in which identity is seen as being and becoming. The method used was qualitative, using thematic and visual analysis of the symbolism, color, lighting, framing, composition and representation of characters in the scenes that are considered the most important, which were carried out through systematic observations by five observers. The study concludes: **1)** family traditions, rituals and ancestral remembrances are cultural systems that maintain and transmit cultural identity across generations **2)** Elements of the film visually show the process of emotional reconciliation, belonging and negotiating identity through an analysis of warm lighting, close up shots, framing and composition and **3)** Symbolic objects, such as the ofrenda, are means of bridging elements of individual aspiration with elements of collective cultural memory, This study contributes to cultural identity research in animated films by demonstrating how visual storytelling can preserve and communicate cultural heritage, collective memory, and family values to global audiences. The findings highlight the potential of animated media as an educational and cultural tool for strengthening cultural awareness among younger generations in an increasingly globalized world. Future studies may apply alternative theoretical approaches, such as Semiotics and Postcolonialism, to provide broader interpretations.

Keywords: *Identity, Cultural Identity, Cinematography, Stuart Hall, Collective Memory*

INTRODUCTION

Literature and film are important cultural art of expression helping the society to find identity, values and human experience. It is the stories, characters, and symbols in literary works that generate the opportunities of the audience to ponder on social realities, social traditions and cultural meanings that live in societies. However, in contemporary society, globalization and fast development of technologies have taken an even greater toll on the way younger generations feel about culture and tradition. UNESCO (2022) states that numerous traditional cultural practices across the globe are

slowly fading away as the younger generation is increasingly exposed to the global media and online entertainment, which can make them less connected to the local heritage and the memory of their cultural roots. In this regard, literature and film take a central place in culture as the means to safeguard traditions and make the audience remember about the importance of collective memory and identity. Literature is a source of entertainment but also an account of how societies record their past and define their current form, in addition to transferring cultural knowledge between generations.

The visual narration, dialogue and symbols in films are reflections of the culture and social values which define how people perceive themselves and how they fit into a society. Such images normally depict the correspondence of individuals with the cultural setting and the influence of traditions and beliefs, and the overall memory of individual identity. In turn, the literature texts and film analysis can assist the researchers to examine the very phenomenon of cultural identity formation, how it manifests itself and how it is negotiated in the stories. That is the reason the analysis of literature and film may be adopted as an important field of research as it proves how narratives are the reflection of larger social and cultural changes, and it can make us understand how the creation of traditions and collective memory and identity is reflected in modern media. We can examine the contribution of narratives in helping other societies to formulate knowledge about culture tradition and social identity through critical analysis.

The object of the study in this journal article is the movie *Coco*. This film follows a long tradition of animated family stories but transforms it into a narrative that explores themes of cultural heritage, family memory, identity, and tradition. Produced by Pixar Animation Studios and distributed by Walt Disney Pictures, the genre of the film is an animated musical fantasy that can be enjoyed by audiences of all ages with a PG rating. The film combines elements of adventure, fantasy, and music while presenting a story deeply rooted in Mexican culture, particularly the celebration of Día de los Muertos. Since its release in 2017, the film has received widespread recognition and critical acclaim, including winning the Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature. The movie has attracted global audiences not only because of its visual storytelling and music but also because of its meaningful portrayal of cultural identity and family values.

The film is a deep dive into the Mexican cultural traditions most prominently the Día de los Muertos instead of being the entertainment of the whole family. The Disney produced musical fantasy reaches a PG rating, but it does not only serve to attract audiences all over the world, it also earned an Academy Award; it gave viewers a visual treat that appeals to the very process of cultural critique.

The analysis relies on the Cultural Identity Theory developed by Stuart Hall (1990). Hall argues that cultural identity should not be understood as something fixed or permanent. Instead, identity is continuously shaped by history, culture, and representation. According to Hall, cultural identity is “a matter of becoming as well as of being,” meaning that identity is constantly constructed through cultural experiences and social interactions. Cultural identity is closely connected to collective memory and shared traditions passed down through generations. Through cultural representation in media, literature, and visual narratives, societies construct and negotiate their understanding of identity and belonging. According to Hall (1990), cultural identity should be understood as a positioning rather than a fixed essence, meaning that identity is shaped through historical experience and cultural representation.

Stuart Hall’s (1990) theory of cultural identity provides a useful lens for understanding Pixar’s *Coco* (Unkrich & Molina, 2017), particularly through his distinction between identity as “being” and “becoming.” “Being” refers to the sense of a shared cultural past, a common history and ancestry that gives people a feeling of continuity and belonging. In *Coco*, this connection to the past is reflected in the Rivera family’s traditions, especially the ofrenda and their long-standing ban on music. For Miguel, these traditions initially seem fixed: to belong to the family means accepting the story that has been passed down to him. Yet Hall also argues that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being.” It is shaped not only by where people come from but also by how they interpret their history and position themselves in the present. Hall’s later discussion of identity similarly emphasizes that identities are never completely fixed but remain open to change and transformation (Hall, 1996). Miguel’s journey into the Land of the Dead illustrates this process. Rather than simply rejecting his family or surrendering his love of music, he learns more about the past and gradually finds a way to bring these two parts of himself together. His identity therefore develops through negotiation with tradition rather than through either blind obedience or complete rejection.

Previous studies have examined cultural representation in *Coco*. For instance, Nurlaili (2022), in the article *The Representation of Mexican Culture in Coco Film*, analyzes how the film represents Mexican traditions using Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural representation. The study focuses on identifying cultural symbols such as alebrijes, papel picado, and the Día de los Muertos celebration, and concludes that these elements strengthen the authenticity of Mexican cultural heritage in the film. Similarly, Speakman (2025), in *Tourism and Cultural Representation: The Resonance of Coco Among a British Audience*, investigates how international audiences interpret the

film through qualitative interviews. The findings reveal that the themes of family relationships and remembrance of ancestors encourage cultural curiosity and appreciation among global viewers.

However, previous studies on *Coco* mainly focus on cultural representation and audience reception. While earlier research discusses Mexican traditions and cultural symbols in the film, limited attention has been given to how cinematic elements such as colour symbolism, lighting, and visual composition contribute to the construction of cultural identity. In addition, few studies analyze Miguel's conflict between personal ambition and family tradition through Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, particularly in relation to memory, family heritage, and Día de los Muertos traditions. Therefore, this study aims to examine how visual storytelling and cultural memory construct identity in *Coco*. This study argues that *Coco* (2017) constructs cultural identity through family traditions, collective memory, cultural rituals, and visual storytelling, reflecting Stuart Hall's concept of identity as both being and becoming.

This research is significant because it contributes to the study of cultural identity in animated films by highlighting how cinematic techniques such as colour symbolism, lighting, and visual composition shape the representation of cultural heritage and collective memory. By applying Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, this study expands the discussion of how identity is constructed through visual representation, since, as Hall (1990) argues, cultural identity is always formed through representation, memory, and shared cultural experiences. In doing so, the research provides a deeper understanding of how animated films like *Coco* communicate cultural traditions and identity to international audiences.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses only on one animated film, *Coco* (2017), which may limit the applicability of the findings to other films or cultural contexts. Second, the study relies strongly on Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory, focusing on identity construction through representation, memory, and cultural experience. Other theoretical perspectives, such as postcolonialism or Audience Reception Theory, may offer different interpretations of the film. Finally, as a qualitative content analysis, the findings are based on the researchers' interpretation of visual and narrative elements, which may involve a degree of subjectivity despite the use of multiple observers.

Binary Opposition

<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Individual Dream</i>
Tradition is central to the Rivera family's identity and conduct. Music is forbidden due to	Miguel represents personal ambition and self-expression, but his identity is shaped

Mama Imelda's painful past, leaving shoemaking as the only accepted occupation. Practices like Día de los Muertos and the Ofrenda emphasize honoring ancestors and preserving traditions, symbolizing stability and identity. According to Hall (1990), cultural identity is constructed through historical experiences, traditions, and collective memory rather than being something fixed or innate.

through his cultural heritage and family history. According to Stuart Hall, identity is not fixed but continuously formed through culture, memory, and experience. Miguel's journey shows this process, as he reconciles his personal dream with his family tradition, creating a balance between individual and cultural identity.

METHOD

In this work, qualitative research is applied and only one tool, namely the Cultural Identity Theory suggested by Stuart Hall, is used in this work, which is the concept of identity as a process of being and becoming. This is opted because it brings in the very heart of the matter that *Coco* (2017) is addressing: The negotiation and production of cultural identity as a result of historical events, family history, and communal culture. The movie has been chosen as the focal text since it transforms the classical animated family movie into a story, which represents Mexican culture, specifically the Día de los Muertos celebration and, therefore, is highly applicable in the discussion of the formation of the collective memory and identity. The research procedure that was used to systematically collect data for this study was watching the movie along with the presence of 5 observers and showing the movie 3 times to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous data collection procedure. The thematic analysis and visual analysis of the cinema elements (color symbolism, lighting and the visual composition) reveal the visual aspects of such cultural representation, in this case the struggle of Miguel's personal desires and the family impositions. They found common motifs that involved the family proscribed music and the ofrenda as symbolic of inherited community identity and finally, the journey of Miguel to the land of the dead as a way of cultural reconciliation of his own dream and a family heritage.

DISCUSSION

A young boy Miguel Rivera dreams of becoming a famous musician but he has a strict family like Abuelita, who is holding to the tradition of Mexican culture very strongly. The first fight occurs when Miguel tells Abuelita that he loves music and she is mad, she says that music is not welcome in her family. Here, Abuelita is seen



holding a glass bottle in a threatening and commanding pose, symbolizing her power and dominance, while Miguel is positioned slightly lower and more centered, visually indicating a sense of vulnerability and emotional tension. Miguel's face is in a pleading position. It is in this moment that Stuart Hall's idea that *"Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power"* (Hall, 1990, p.225) rings true. Miguel's sense of self is "music lover" while his family identity is "family shoemaker"

There's a really special moment when Miguel learns about the importance of the Ofrenda with the line, "We put their pictures on the Ofrenda so their spirits can cross over." (0:10:03) This is a wide shot of Miguel with Abuelita in the frame, and with the entire Ofrenda, giving focus to both the characters but also to the sacred family space that is the focus of remembrance. The wide shot gives the viewer a look at how the candle is arranged, the family photos, and the marigold flowers, which all visually convey the significance of heritage and ancestral connection. Candlelight creates a warm and respectful atmosphere, which represents love, spirituality, and continuity from generation to generation. In this scene Stuart Hall's remark *"cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225) is supported. Identity is not just a legacy of the past; it is also continually formed in response to traditions and memories. The Ofrenda helps Miguel to realize how intertwined identity is with family history and collective memory. The ritual is a reminder that commemorating ancestors is not just about remembering the past, but about continuing a cultural tradition and sustaining intergenerational values, belonging and emotional connections.



The fight intensifies when Miguel's family confronts him again, due to his love of music. "You will listen to your family. No more music" (0:17:43) The framing is done in a medium shot where Miguel is in the middle, and the adults are closer to the camera and therefore larger, making Miguel seem smaller and weaker. The use of visual elements highlights the authority and tradition of the older members of the family, while the fight between Miguel and the authority figure and tradition symbolizes the struggle for power. The light is warm, but not bright enough, and the overall atmosphere is tense, indicating that the home environment is familiar but emotionally charged for Miguel. A



member of the family raises a slipper to symbolise disciplining and intimidation without hand-to-hand violence. The downward look combined with Miguel's scared face clearly show his conflict and hesitation. In this scene Stuart Hall's quote *"Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, identities are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Miguel is torn between his duty as a family man based on his upbringing with expectations handed down to him, and his desire to pursue music as an individual making a statement for himself. In the course of his struggle, his identity is negotiated, not passively accepted, because of conflict, resistance and social pressure. The overall tone of the scene is to convey the idea that family traditions have the power to preserve a sense of community and to limit individual freedom.

This is the moment when Miguel realizes that he has a passion for music, and he is able to be himself. This is a wide shot of Miguel in a grand space, which emphasizes his presence, confidence and own dream. The large empty space makes Miguel appear physically small, but emotionally strong as if his passion provides him with strength when separated from others. The dominant spots are powerful directional lights aimed up at Miguel, which gives the scene a dramatic and inspirational atmosphere and directs the audience to focus on Miguel as the focal point of the stage. The dark background is juxtaposed with the bright light, representing Miguel's escape from repression and discovery. The scene is an illustration of Stuart Hall's comment that *"Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories and, like everything which is historical, are constantly undergoing transformation"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Miguel comes to be defined by the rejection of music from his family, but he changes through his own experiences and choices. The guitar reflects identity, talent, and ambition, and the glowing marigold petals embody guidance, destiny and a sense of family heritage. Overall, this moment portrays visually freedom, self-assurance and the ongoing process of evolution of one's true self.



After his choice to pick up the guitar and play music, Miguel is surrounded by his ancestors as they begin to suspect that he has a deeper connection to their family history. It also symbolizes the struggle between Miguel's individual decisions and those imposed by others. "I have a feeling it has something to do with you" (0:24:14) Here, Miguel is seen in a medium wide shot,



surrounded by the spirits and made to feel the pressure from them. In the middle of the image is Miguel, the man to be judged, the center of the attention and of the hopes of his family. The glowing light around ancestors makes them magical, spiritual and stresses the importance of the elders. It is a scene that mimics Stuart Hall's quote: *"Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). In between, Miguel's family history and traditions are shaping his life, and his family is the challenge he finds himself facing as he tries to draw his meaning from his own love for music. The burning ancestors are emblematic of memory, past history and collective identity while Miguel is the individual desire and self-determination. Visually, the scene overall conveys the tension between doing what is expected and going for who you are.

A sad moment happens when Héctor's friend, who is lost, starts to feel the "final death" in his glowing red body, while he is lying in a weak position inside a basket. The words "You, play me something" (0:44:06) represent his last plea for comfort, memory and emotional support as he leaves us forever. The shot is a medium close up, which highlights his small body and his scared face, making the audience feel his vulnerability and loneliness. The character is very lit with a lot of red lights and it is dark, which represents the tragedy of the character and the end of his/her existence, as their memory is lost. This image also captures Stuart Hall's idea that *"Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). A forgotten spirit cannot be seen by anyone in his family. If nobody in the family can see him, he loses his life. In this respect, the identity of Coco relies on collective memory and social recognition. Remembrance comes to a close and so does identity. The scene also seems to imply that personal identity is present in stories, rituals, and family bonds, which align with Hall's view that identity is always produced and not set. The absence of the character, therefore, is a strong symbol of the loss of identity of the culture in its transmission from generation to generation.



When Ernesto de la Cruz tells Miguel, "You're going to have to do whatever it takes to take your dream away" (1:08:46) This line seems to be motivational, making Ernesto a symbol of ambition and success. It also exposes an unhealthy mindset of putting personal ends before all else, even if it means betrayal and selfishness. The medium close-up shot focuses on the character of Ernesto, highlighting his self-confidence, charisma, and authority as Miguel's idol. His elegant clothing and confident posture further highlight his fame and authority, while the soft blue-green lighting creates an atmosphere of glamour and mystery, hinting that his true identity may be

misleading. This scene illustrates Stuart Hall's theory of identity formation through representation, and not fixed a priority. *"Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). That starts with the images that society constructs about a person, the narratives and meanings that it generates. Building himself up as a hero and a success, Ernesto is a mask for his greed and dishonesty. His glory is contingent on the opinion of others, not on his nature. As Miguel slowly comes to understand, however, that his true identity should not be his public identity, but rather truth, family, and moral values. So this scene is meant to demonstrate false identities created in the media and deception that occurs when success is not achieved through integrity.



"Don't ever forget how much your family loves you" (1:24:15) This line reminds Miguel that even in the face of conflict and misunderstanding, family is a place of love, protection and guidance. The medium shot emphasizes the intimacy and emotional connection between Imelda and Héctor, as they look at Miguel. Imelda appears in the foreground, and Héctor stands next to her; there is a visual connection between Miguel's ancestors. The candle symbolizes hope, remembrance and reconciliation, the warm candlelight comforts the faces, and the candle serves as a reminder of the



comfort of light, warmth and hope. Hall states that *"Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories and, like everything which is historical, are constantly undergoing transformation"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). In this moment Miguel realizes that his identity is not only in his own dreams, but also through his family's love and heritage. Imelda and Héctor are together, demonstrating

that family conflict can be resolved when truth is restored. So, the focus of the scene is on the power of memory, emotional connections, and intergenerational relationships to deepen the sense of identity.

Defeated by Ernesto de la Cruz, the truth about Héctor is uncovered and Miguel comes back to the world of the living to preserve his family's memory. In a very moving scene, Miguel sings to Mama Coco the song "Remember Me" (1:31:43) to try to bring back her memories of her father, Héctor. The medium close-up shot has a focus on Miguel and Mama Coco, depicting intimacy, tenderness, and a generation connection. Miguel is positioned near to her, and the guitar is visible,

representing a symbol of family history and reclaimed truth. The warm golden light evokes nostalgic and healing effects, embodying love, reconciliation and the restoration of lost memories. The smile that Mama Coco has on her face is a strong visual indication that memory and family connections will remain strong, despite the passage of time.

Memory, history and cultural continuity play a major role in the construction of identity, rather than it being fixed, which serves as a strong reflection of Stuart Hall's theory of identity. According to Hall, *"Cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being"* (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Miguel restores



Mama Coco's past and Héctor's lost place in the family by singing the song. Music turns into a way for representation, a way to hold onto memory across generations. As such, this scene is a reminder that a sense of identity can be retrieved when forgotten histories are recalled, and family relationships are restored through love and narrative.

Overall, the findings reveal that Miguel's cultural identity is constructed through the interaction between family tradition, collective memory, personal ambition, and cultural rituals such as Día de los Muertos. Furthermore, cinematic elements including colour symbolism, lighting, framing, and visual composition play a significant role in representing Mexican cultural identity and illustrating Miguel's ongoing negotiation between individual dreams and family heritage.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the present research illustrates how Coco is interconnected to the notion of cultural Identity as expounded in Stuart Hall's theory of cultural Identity, in its various aspects: the family tradition, collective memory and the visual narration. The film demonstrates that cultural identity is not static, but is actually a process that is continuously created by the history of geology and various cultural experiences in society. Miguel's journey is an exploration of the negotiation between individual ambition and inherited family values, in the subject of music, memory and the Día de los Muertos tradition. The key findings of this study reveal that Miguel's cultural identity is shaped by family tradition, collective memory, music, ancestral relationships, and cultural rituals such as Día de los Muertos. In addition, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on cultural representation and audience reception, this research specifically highlights how cinematic techniques such as lighting, colour symbolism, framing, and visual composition contribute to the construction of cultural identity throughout the film.

The result also reveals that the aspects of color connotations, lights, framing, and visual composition of the film inherent in their cinematic nature significantly contribute to the perception of cultural heritage and the importance of intergenerational relationships. Symbols such as candles, o'frenda marigold flowers and family relationships are reinforced through a visual story throughout the film. This study is of particular importance because it helps discuss the issues around the concept of culture and cultural identity within animated films as a way to articulate traditions, memory and cultural values to audiences at the world level. Moreover, the research builds on existing studies that mainly studied the relationship between Coco and identity construction using Stuart Hall's theory in films, but it gave limited attention to the relationship between techniques in the films and the construction of the identity of coco in the film. The researchers are suggested to use alternative theoretical points of view such as semiotics, postcolonialism or audience reception theory, to give wider interpretation to Coco from various perspectives. Other films could be used for comparisons in future studies to films that represent cultural traditions and family identity in other cultural contexts that Coco does not depict.

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