The cultural appropriation of the Day of the Dead by foreign studio films

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The Day of the Dead festivities in Mexico was named an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2008. It is a centuries old tradition that is currently under an insidious threat. In the past 5 years, there has been a rise in the interest by different forms of media about these festivities, in which their aesthetics are being commercialized to a point where you can go to most smartphone covers pop-up store and find at least one decorative "calavera" (skull) themed cover. This year in Lille, France, the department of tourism chose its theme for its 2019 festivities to be inspired by the symbology behind the Dead of the Dead, with Mexican decors and *alebrijes* statues in its main streets and skulls sculptures decorating the *Ilot Comtesse*. In Disneyland parks, they started to sell cookies with skull décor for 3,19€. And one should not forget the new 2019 Day of the Dead Barbie doll.

The interest by foreign cultures cannot be denied, yet how did this happen? What caused this specific fascination? This writing has the purpose of demonstrating how one key case of cultural appropriation by a Hollywood film led to the actual modification of the celebration in Mexico.

The Day of the Dead: a brief introduction

According to INAH (2007), the origins of the celebration date back before the Spanish conquest. There have been archeological discoveries that state how Mayan, Mexica, Purepecha and Totonaca ethnics already used real skulls for rituals representing death and rebirth. For all of these different Mesoamerican cultures,

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soul itself was a unitary conception separated from the flesh, which explains further the significance of its remembrance. They also believed that their afterlife was defined not by what they did in life, but rather how they died, and their burials were meant to it and to help them in their journey through *Mictlan* (the underworld).

The tradition, as all Mexican culture, has its great share of European influence. After the Spanish control of the land, the date of the celebration itself was moved from summer and aligned with the Christian triduum of All Saints' Eve, All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, a public holiday in a great number of European countries still today. Naturally the practice of praying for the souls of the deceased also belongs to Christian tradition. How much of the current holiday is European or indigenous is to be debated as it was covered by anthropological work of Elsa Malvido, but it's fair to establish that the current iconography and its aesthetics are unmistakably Mexican.

Such cultural mix defines current Mexican culture and its holidays, so it is fair to establish that by the end of the XX century the way of celebrating the Day of the Dead was well defined. Though with some variations in different regions of the country, there are expressions that are shared unanimously throughout. One of them being the creation of altars of remembrance dedicated to a deceased family member or personality. They are usually decorated with objects that relate directly to that person or were actually part of their belongings as well with typical colorful decors, bread of the dead, fruits, sugar skulls and *cempasúchil* (marigold) flowers. It is even a tradition to make competitions to find the most elaborated altar.

It is also accustomed to visit the grave of family members for maintenance and decorating it with flowers and candles as a mean to remember his or her memory. Notice should be made that no dressing up or musical gathering or parade of sorts is part of the festivities at this time. Rather than a public ritual with music and party, the holiday is actually a family ritual that can be considered a more private affair as it relates to actual deceased people and, though it is a visually colorful ceremony, it is still related to a sense of mourning.

The dead come to Hollywood

As stated, big foreign studios have produced films that have launched the Day of the Dead into the zeitgeist. The holiday caught the eye of foreign filmmakers and represented it throughout the decades in medium budget films like *Under the Volcano* (1984), *Assassins* (1995) and *The Crow: City of Angels* (1996) among others. However, the spike in its popularity came in the past five years with *The Book of Life* (2014), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and most importantly *Coco* (2017) and *SPECTRE* (2015).

The former is an Oscar winning animated film from Pixar that was universally well received by both audiences and critics. The consensus in Mexico was that surprisingly it was respectful in the depiction of Latin characters and its environments in what could have easily fallen into clichés and stereotypes about Mexican society (UGWU, 2017). Its only controversy came during its preproduction phase when its then proposed title "Day of the Dead" was trying to be trademarked by the Walt Disney Company and therefore obliging everyone who uses the term to pay for its use. After a brief polemic online (Change.org, 2013), the creators opted for a different title (LEÓN, 2017).

It is surprisingly the latest James Bond film that has had the most direct impact in the form the celebration takes place. The opening sequence of *SPECTRE* (2008) starts with the iconic gun barrel sequence with actor Daniel Craig followed by a subtitle reading "The dead are alive" and then a cut to a giant marionette of skull smoking a cigar and hundreds of people dressed in black with skull printings and masks in a parade of sorts. The traditional altars in the streets are there. The *papel picado* decors are hanging from the balcony and street food vendors can also be found in such scene. After a 3-minute action sequence, where a building is blown up, the protagonist follows his target through the parade where women wearing Oaxaca inspired typical dresses parade towards the main plaza of Mexico City. There in the *Zócalo*, an enormous figure of a skull lies in the center with a tribe band of sorts entertaining the whole square in what seems to be a ritual to wake up the dead surrounded by the most important cathedral in the country and the National Palace.

All in all, the sequence though visually impressive gets some of the visual details of the festivities right, and clearly there was a research from part of the art direction department. It is absurd go into a critique about the faithfulness of each element as the film is fulfilling its purpose as a work of fiction. What is serious about the matter is that such brief representation in an action sequence totaling to 12 minutes of screen time can have such an influence in both the perception of the festivity as well as the way in which the locals decide to celebrate it.

It is been now four years in a row that a parade trying to mimic the one in the film is being organized and promoted as a mean to attract more tourists to Mexico during the centuries old celebration. To Mexican citizens, it is actually flattering and it gives even a sense of pride the fact that an iconography that is so rooted in their culture is so recognizable and attracts the interest of so many foreigners. One parade for the sake of increasing the arrival of new visitors. Yet, what is the price to pay for such exchange?

The spectre of colonialism

According to Edward Said, postcolonialism is defined by the western need to show foreign land as primitive or even exotic (HAMADI, 2014). At the same time, a powerful colonizer ignores and even distorts the culture, history and values of the colonized as a mean to civilize tor even humanize them. Going back to this specific case, the fact remains that something as British as the 007 film was used as a mean to show the world how the Day of the Dead is celebrated, and after more than five decades in cinemas Mr. Bond, who has traveled all the world, has very well mastered this practice.

Various publications and part of the academic circle has been widely critical by how the Mexico City government has been promoting the now officially called International Day of the Dead parade. The first parade was celebrated in 2016, exactly one year after the film *SPECTRE* was shown in the screens internationally. It is no secret that the parade started as a response to the film as Lourdes Berho, director of touristic promotion of Mexico at the time claimed the film to be the main driving force towards the

decision of making the first parade ("Mexico: James Bond inspira,", 2016). In fact, the exact same puppets, marionettes and some of the costumes from the film were donated to the Mexican city and used in the parades. Berho herself claimed that the film "created a sort of expectation" about the celebration and that both "Mexicans and foreigners would be excited in getting together and participate in a parade in a grand scale" ("La película que cambió,", 2016).

If there is a side to be blamed, is it the Mexican cultural authorities for not protecting its heritage? According to local statistics, just in 2019 the number of tourists grew to 750,000 tourists compared from the 200,000 before *SPECTRE* premiered in 2015 (ARMENTA, 2015). So, it is natural to see how the inclusion of a parade to mimic the film is a small price to pay for the revenue left by the increase in tourism. Then is it the fault of the carelessness by the production team of the film? When explaining their concept for the sequence, Noomie Donne, BAFTA nominee makeup designer working for the film, said about the sequence: "It's going to be the most visually exciting opening to a Bond, ever" (MAHER, 2015). Then the realization comes that they were doing only what Hollywood has been doing since its inception: impressing audiences with stunts and visuals, long before the creation of the most famous fictional secret agent. And then there is no one left to be pointed at as the culpable.

Festivities change and evolve through the years, it's their nature. Adding a parade to a festivity where there wasn't one before is not the matter of main concern. It can actually be considered as a visually impressive idea with an endless potential of creativity. What is very questionable is the form in which it was introduced into Mexican culture by a foreign agent. The inspiration behind the monumentality that the parade aspires to have is as well very questionable as it is not too different from the visual candy shown each year by the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York.

This is not the first time that a Hollywood production has directly influenced a culture. And as the media production companies gain more power it's unlikely it will be the last. Then what is to learn from such appropriation? How does it differ from the effects brought to the Americas by the European colonies? Who's there to oversee that such aftermaths of postcolonialism cease to happen?

During the 2003 UNESCO ceremony, when the Day of the Dead was proclaimed to be a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Human Patrimony, it was said that "though the tradition is not formally threatened, its cultural and aesthetic dimensions must be safeguarded from the growing number of expressions not related to indigenous populations that can affect its immaterial content by commercial purposes". Now it is fair to claim that the tradition is formally under threat, and that something must be made to safeguard it. Also, it would be wise for filmmakers to realize the power they have in their hands. It turns out that a simple direction or request made to the art department in order to enhance the visuals, though inconsequential at first glance, can produce such effect that it can modify hundreds of years' worth of traditions.

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