

# CINEASTE

America's  
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in the U.S. has shortchanged urban, minority students. The questionable actions of ETS, however factual, remain merely a plot gimmick, a way of testing the students' resolve.

Alice Cross

## Frida

Produced by Manuel Barbachano Ponce; directed by Paul Leduc; screenplay by Jose Joaquin Blanco and Paul Leduc; cinematography by Angel Goded and Jose Luis Esparza; edited by Rafael Castanedo; sound by Ernesto Estrada and Penelope Stimpson; set design by Alejandro Luna; starring Ofelia Medina, Juan Jose Gurrola, Salvador Sanchez, Max Kertlow. Color, 108 minutes. A New Yorker Films release.

Who was Frida Kahlo? The intelligent, spirited, and sexy Mexican beauty whose scandalous bisexual love life included the conquest of Trotsky. The flamboyantly dressed, on-again-off-again wife of the legendary Diego Rivera, the extravagant giant of the Mexican muralist movement. A leftist and revolutionary committed to *Mexicanidad* ('Mexicanness') and the Mexican Revolution. The heroic survivor of polio, miscarriages and abortions, a crippling and nearly fatal traffic accident, and dozens of surgical operations, who spent much of her life in pain confined to wheelchair or bed. And Latin America's greatest woman artist who, when she died in 1954 at age forty-seven, left a legacy of some two hundred extraordinary paintings including scores of haunting self portraits.

In his feature docudrama *Frida*, Mexican independent filmmaker Paul Leduc re-creates the troubled life of this underrated artist, whose easel painting in her own lifetime was overshadowed by the grandiose art of the Mexican muralists. Leduc structures *Frida* in accordance with the imagined free flow of the painter's consciousness as she lies on her death bed: a series of vignettes, many of them linked thematically and chronologically, reviews significant moments of her life as a child and as a prominent figure in the vital art scene in Mexico during and after the mural renaissance.

*Frida* is a welcome contribution to the current international efforts in many fields to recover and reevaluate women's contributions to history and culture. To refocus attention in a sympathetic manner on the provocative figure of Frida Kahlo is laudable and timely. Although her existence

has never been entirely ignored, only recently has she begun to receive sustained critical consideration. Frida Kahlo represents an exceptionally challenging figure to evaluate not only because of the sensational aspects of her life and her highly personal lifestyle, but also because of the continuum she forged between her life and her art. Wearing orthopedic corsets that she painted and Mexican ethnic costumes, Frida transformed her body into a work of art, and she made herself and the events of her life the central subject of her paintings.

Leduc successfully avoids a weakness that mars many reexaminations of female historical figures: namely, that the discussion is often diverted into defending the subject against those who insist on judging a woman solely by her lifestyle. Leduc's handling of Frida's biography does not allow her notoriety and the details of how she lived to predominate in the film. This is accomplished by presenting all biographical material solely from the artist's perspective, thus focusing on her perceptions and precluding any outside view that would draw attention to what others regarded as eccentricities. Seen exclusively from her own psyche, Frida's lifestyle needs neither excuses nor defense—it simply was what it was, and it is not the main focus of Leduc's interpretation.

The director creates his portrait of an artist primarily through images. Our impressions of Frida Kahlo are formed as if we were examining a series of her self portraits hung side-by-side in a gallery. Dialogue is minimized, and thematically suggestive

period music fills many of the silences. Although betrayal—in politics and by husband, sister, and her own body—is a powerful theme that runs throughout these vignettes, the film emphasizes the relationship between the woman and her art.

Art, the filmmaker correctly proposes, was Frida's means of coping with life and of trying to make sense of what happened to her. Her body, the mirrors consulted in order to paint her image, and the canvas of her works all form a single instrument with which the artist probes her existence: she applies paint to her body, turns her mirror into a canvas by painting on it with lipstick, and treats her paintings as mirrors in which she studies her likeness. Mirrors are, appropriately, the key motif in this film. Leduc uses them to multiply the angles by which we observe his subject within a single scene, thus reminding us of the multiple facets of her character and suggesting the difficulty and perhaps the illusion of ever arriving at a satisfactory understanding of such a complex personality.

*Frida* does not take up all aspects of the artist's life. There is no examination of her associations with certain prominent Mexican and international figures such as film superstar Maria Félix, French surrealist André Breton, and Nelson Rockefeller. The protagonist's financial situation and her experiences as an international traveller are not covered. Nor does the film analyze Frida's leftist politics, such as her attitude toward Stalin. *Frida*, then, does not represent a definitive or conclusive biography; rather, it in-

Ofelia Medina as Frida Kahlo in Paul Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva*



# Frida

AN INTERVIEW  
WITH PAUL LEDUC  
by Dennis West



**W**hile Mexico's commercial film industry languishes in a prolonged artistic-financial crisis, a small number of independent filmmakers has succeeded in making socially relevant films. Mexico's leading independent is Paul Leduc (born 1942). His work is remarkable for its commitment to innovative narrative and esthetic approaches to significant historical, political, and socioeconomic themes.

Leduc is best known internationally for his features *Reed: Insurgent Mexico* (1970) and *Ethnocide: Notes on the Mezquital* (1976). In *Reed*, Leduc combines a strong script, fresh acting performances, and imaginative sepia-tone cinematography to bring to life historical figures such as Pancho Villa and American journalist John Reed, whose participation in the Mexican Revolution the film traces. The documentary *Ethnocide* is a powerful exposé of the socioeconomic factors causing the demise of Mexico's Otomi Indian culture.

Leduc's feature-length *Frida* is a portrait of Mexico's most famous woman painter, Frida Kahlo. This project began as a low-cost, independent coproduction financed by the film crew, actors, and famed Mexican producer Manuel Barbachano Ponce. According to the director, the film was a popular and commercial success when it premiered in Mexico City in 1986. It shared the top prize in the fiction film category at the Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana in 1985. *Cineaste* spoke with Leduc about *Frida* in September 1986 at the Toronto International Film Festival. The interview was conducted, translated from the Spanish, and edited by Dennis West.

**Cineaste:** Would you comment on your collaboration with actress Ofelia Medina, who bears an astonishing resemblance to Frida Kahlo?

**Paul Leduc:** In a way, the original idea of doing a film about Frida was Ofelia's. All Ofelia had to do was look in a mirror in order to see the close resemblance. Nobody would set out to do a film on Frida—who painted so many self-portraits and was so present in her own work—without counting on the services of an actress who resembled the painter. Although Ofelia and I had talked about making a film on Frida, I had originally resisted the idea because I felt that it would be hard to write the script without falling into melodrama.

Ofelia and I were going to start making a film on Tina Modotti on September 1, 1982, which turned out to be exactly the day Mexico's current economic crisis began. [The talented and beautiful Italian-born American photographer Tina Modotti was a prominent figure in the Mexican art world of the 1920s—D.W.] So the Tina Modotti project fell apart. The script had called for a silent film in black and white that drew its inspiration from the world of photography and the world of the Mexican muralists. When this project had to be abandoned, it was easy to do the film on Frida Kahlo because of all the work we had already done in preparation for the Modotti silent film.

**Cineaste:** Why is *Frida* subtitled *Naturaleza viva* (Nature Alive or Living Still Life)? Is this a word play on "naturaleza muerta" (literally "dead nature"), the usual painting term in Spanish for "still life"?

**Leduc:** The subtitle is the name of one of Frida's still lifes, which she painted late in her life; the picture appears towards the end of the film. Frida's personality is torn apart by contradictions at every level: the human, the political, the biological, and her everyday life. I thought this sum total of contradictions was suggested by the title *Naturaleza viva*. That is to say nature, even in its contradictions, in its being torn apart, nevertheless struggles and stays alive.

I also used this subtitle so that the film would not be titled merely *Frida*, which would have announced an attempt at doing a biography of Frida Kahlo. And although we have respected the painter's life history, our goal was not to do a biography, but rather a portrait of a woman—a portrait that might encourage spectators who know little about Frida Kahlo to learn more about her.

**Cineaste:** Why did you decide to do a film on this historical figure at this time?

**Leduc:** Frida Kahlo is very contemporary, very relevant for today's audiences and especially for today's woman because of the problems her life poses: her relation to her body, her relationship with her spouse, her political ties, her relation to her work, her ways of staying alive amidst a series of contradictions and problems.

Why did I specifically choose Frida and not another woman? Frida was a somewhat underrated figure in Mexican culture; she was slighted by a generation profoundly influenced by the overwhelming figures of her husband Diego Rivera and the other Mexican muralists, Siqueiros and Orozco. Frida didn't do great murals but rather easel painting. She didn't speak of the great social movement swirling around her but rather of herself. She wasn't the noise of the Revolution but rather its silence—a being closed within her own body, in her own studio, in her painting, in her own world. For these reasons there hadn't been much written about her when we made the film.

**Cineaste:** Have you attempted to be rigorously truthful regarding history or do you see yourself more as an interpreter of history?

**Leduc:** Everything in the film is based on historical documentation, but this material is not presented in biographical or documentary fashion. The material is interpreted. History is respected, but I also invent a little bit in certain concrete scenes. An example of this invention is the letter Trotsky writes to Frida. In reality this letter doesn't exist; it was invented based on Trotsky's writings—on politics, esthetics, and his letters mentioning the affair with Frida to his wife. It's to be supposed that Trotsky wrote letters to Frida, and in general terms everything in our letter in the film could have been true. So, we feel that even this 'invented' love letter has a basis in historical documentation.

**Cineaste:** Camera movement is a key stylistic feature of *Frida*. Why is it so important to you?

**Leduc:** For lots of reasons. First of all, I like the travelling camera. And it's a technical solution in response to our difficult conditions of production. It's easier and cheaper to film a sequence shot than to do twenty takes. Hollywood has the money to do twenty takes; they can spend two or three weeks filming a scene that will last a very short period of time on screen. We on the other hand have to squeeze all we can out of each day's shooting, which should represent two to five minutes of the finished film.

Furthermore, in *Frida* the travelling camera provided a convenient way of following around a character in a wheelchair. And the travelling camera allows spectators to become quasi voyeurs—to stick their noses into Frida's life, which is in a way one of the objectives of the film. ■

roduces this figure by imaginatively opening windows on her life and art. As a consequence, this docudrama works best as a thought-provoking introduction for filmgoers who know little or nothing about the painter.

Independently produced on a low budget, *Frida* technically and artistically surpasses the vast majority of films made within Mexico's commercial industry. The splendid art direction benefits from Frida's predilection for bright 'Mexican' colors and from the extensive use of well-preserved historical sites such as the Frida Kahlo residence and the house where Trotsky lived during his Mexican sojourn. Cinematographer Angel Goded's constantly travelling camera is an effective visual metaphor for Leduc's exploration of Frida's life. Though filmed in 16mm, the clear and sharp cinematography and the technically superb blowup give the appearance of 35mm cinematography. Lead actress Ofelia Medina, an uncanny Frida Kahlo look-alike, convincingly projects the intelligence, sensitivity, and suffering of her character. Unfortunately, Juan José Gurrola's mannered performance suggests only a watered-down imitation of the historical Diego Rivera.

Mexican cinema is today in the throes of a profound economic and artistic crisis that makes the financing and production of serious features difficult. It is to Leduc's credit that, despite this crisis, he has created an outstanding film that will greatly enhance both Mexican and international interest in a painter whose relevance continues to grow.

Joan M. West and Dennis West

#### Editorial (contd.)

termed that a film cannot be denied a certificate because it presents a point of view."

More important than the thousands of dollars saved in the marketing of documentaries about the condition of our country is that the USIA is finally divested of the power to proclaim on propaganda. What will be done by the next administration remains to be seen, but undoubtedly the best move would be to remove this procedure altogether from the political tides of government agencies and to allow an organization such as the American Film Institute or the Smithsonian or Library of Congress film division to make this decision. Because the USIA is in the business of creating propaganda to promote and exalt the government, it is unable to conceive of that which is not propaganda. ■

#### Lost and Found (contd.)

Festival and which then fail to open at the cinemas or do so for short runs only. Yes, television consumption is partially to blame for the demise of cinema in Greece as in other nations. The rise of video rentals, based to a large degree on a unique home video movie producing industry (Greece puts out roughly 80-100 feature length video movies per month for the video market) has also cut into moviegoing. As many Greeks will tell you, however, most Greek films these days are not connecting with a Greek audience.

*Living Dangerously* broadens and strengthens Perakis's critique of contemporary Greek life previously explored in two earlier works. In each, furthermore, the role of media in relation to contemporary life is examined. His first Greek hit was *Arpa Colla* (1982), which deals with a frustrated TV commercial director who wants to break into filmmaking. The title has a double meaning, including a slang expression for doing things by "any which way" as well as the name for a 'new' (fictitious) Greek cola drink which the protagonist must advertise. As the director-protagonist works his way through the various cinematic genres available to a filmmaker in Greece, from partisan war film to Greek-American gangster films and on to Costa-Gavras-style political dramas, he comes in contact with various slices of contemporary Greek society seen in wildly satirical juxtapositions.

His second Greek film, *Loafing and Camouflage* (*Loufa ke Parallagi*, 1984) considered the topics of the military and media and cast the film during the dictatorship of Colonel Papadopoulos (1967-74). One of the most popular Greek films ever, this movie playfully glances at how easily a technological, media conscious totalitarian state can perpetuate itself and generate its own desirable images. It should be noted that Perakis never oversteps the boundaries of comedy. The film does not call for the punishment of those involved: after all, the colonels are in prison and have been so for the past thirteen years. More important, Perakis gets at a more generalized truth about the distance between what is happening and what we say is happening (via newspapers/television/film), as well as the gap between those who control the media and those who consume.

Finally, it seems evident that Perakis has been successful in developing his own satiric stance in part because of his film experience in Germany and thus a 'long shot' view he has been able to gain on Greek



Nicos Perakis

culture since his return. As a production designer he worked for such directors as Reinhard Hauff and Alexander Kluge as well as completing the compelling design for Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum*. By 1978, he had directed four of his own films in Germany.

*Living Dangerously* deserves an American audience. Compared to last year's *Broadcast News*, Perakis's satire cuts the romance in favor of treating us to a more clear-sighted and sustained look at multiple levels of contact and distortion between the public and the media concerning an increasingly complex politicized world. Spoofing both socialists and center party stances, the film argues for clear-headedness rather than the brands of rigid ideology that have plagued modern Greece for so long. — Andrew Horton ■

#### Homevideo Reviews (contd.)

##### Joe Bob Briggs Dead In Concert

VHS, color, 65 minutes; distributed by United Home Video, 4111 South Darlington, Suite 600, Tulsa, OK 74135.

This 1985 videocassette records one of the earliest stand-up comedy appearances of America's foremost drive-in movie expert and newest cult hero, Joe Bob Briggs (see article and interview in this issue). After swearing in his audience with the "Drive-In Oath," Joe Bob does some material from his "Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In" columns, including "Baptists," "Two Sisters from Memphis," and "Looking for a Wife," as well as an excerpt from his recently published autobiography, *A Guide to Western Civilization, or My Story* (ironically, considering all the criticisms of Joe Bob as a redneck, the latter is a comic tale exposing the foolishness of racist attitudes). He also does a little singing and some shticks involving the audience. It's an uneven tape, but will be a must for hardcore Joe Bob fans. — Gary Crowder ■