

# *iris*

REVUE DE THÉORIE DE L'IMAGE ET DU SON  
A JOURNAL OF THEORY ON IMAGE AND SOUND

LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA  
LE CINÉMA LATINO-AMÉRICAIN



IRIS No. 13, Summer 1991

**Identity and Representation: *Frida: Naturaleza viva***

*Frida: Naturaleza viva* (Paul Leduc, 1984) is a formally innovative film about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. It takes a political approach to the issues of representation and cultural identity specific to the New Latin American Cinema. This film contests the contemporary readings that have confined Kahlo's exotic femininity to the solitude of otherness by making new connections between history and myth. The film was produced independently by Manuel Barbachano Ponce, a veteran producer of Mexican cinema whose name is linked to Luis Buñuel (*Los olvidados*, 1958; *The Exterminating Angel*, 1962) and Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (*María de mi corazón*, 1982; *Doña Herlinda and Her Son*, 1984). Shot by Angel Goded in 16mm and then blown up to 35mm, the film is characterized by a highly decorative mise-en-scène and a camera that glides through elaborate sets, a preference for sparse dialogue, and a skillful use of period music.

The film profited from a renewed national and international in-



terest in Frida Kahlo. Its release followed the publication of biographies written by Haydén Herrera in the United States and Raquel Tibol in Mexico, major exhibitions in New York, Washington, and London, and several documentary films such as *Frida and Tina* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen).<sup>50</sup> The early documentary film *Frida Kahlo*, directed by Marcela Fernández Violante in 1971, is also worth mentioning. Without a doubt, the rediscovery of Frida Kahlo is bound to the feminist concerns in her paintings.

But the contemporary recognition of Frida Kahlo's art has been a mixed blessing. For instance, as Joan Borsa points out, fashion spreads have featured models "mimicking, fetishizing and eroticizing the Frida look of pain, the Kahlo look of integrity, and the Frida Kahlo look of Mexican peasant."<sup>51</sup> Art historians Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser have written that "the emphasis given in her work to the body, to personal emotion and motherhood" and to images that "represent an archetypal image of woman as victim" has disregarded the articulation of Frida Kahlo's art within the subjective and collective distinctiveness of Mexican culture.<sup>52</sup>

I would like to argue that *Frida: Naturaleza viva* attempts to reverse this tendency. The film encourages culturally inscribed convergences between the personal and collective subjectivities that construct Mexico's fragmentary entry into modernity. Therefore, I will discuss two segments at the beginning of the film, one structured around images of the tramway accident and the other evoking the theme of courtship. Both consider key events in Frida Kahlo's biography and illustrate how the film detaches private memories to then reinsert them into public memory.

The title of Paul Leduc's film—*Frida: Naturaleza viva*—plays on the Spanish term for still life, which is *naturaleza muerta* and literally translates as "dead nature." The director has credited Ofelia Medina, who bears a remarkable likeness to the artist, for activating the film's production. In an interview with Denis West, he admitted, "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."<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between Frida Kahlo's biography, the historical narratives of her life including her self-portraits, and her representation on film—that is, between Paul Leduc's construction of a historical persona and Ofelia Medina's performance. Moreover, this distinction also implies the need to take gendered authorship into account. Frida Kahlo's art is the result of a distinctive outlook on the feminine, but the filmic reconstruction

of her life remains ambivalently attached to the artist's mythical status.

Frida Kahlo's life is the stuff of legend. She was born in 1907 but claimed 1910, the year that marked the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, as the date of her birth. She was married twice to artist Diego Rivera. Her life was marked by polio, abortions, and miscarriages. A tramway accident, in which her uterus was pierced and her spine broken, led eventually to the amputation of a leg. She was bisexual and an exotic beauty, a communist and a rebel. She was the subject and object of her own art. Since 1958, her house in Coyoacan has been the Frida Kahlo Museum, a perfect setting for a movie.

Set within and against the legend of Frida Kahlo, and structured around the recurring image of Frida lying on her deathbed, the film circumvents the traditional linearity of the artist biofilm yet reconstructs well-known anecdotes. By rejecting conventional realism, the filmmaker has in a sense found a filmic equivalent to the modernism of Frida Kahlo's art. The camera movement and mise-en-scène give body to Frida's memories, and the imaged recollections present her as the controlling agency of representation and self-representation. Frida's memories are divided into eight filmic segments, each one evolving around a thematic axis. Each segment functions as a biographical indicator and promotes parallels between preceding ones and sometimes prefigures others. The organization of sequences within each segment sets up parallels that ultimately play themselves out in the body of the film.

The tramway and courtship segments at the beginning of the film offer an interconnecting perspective of Frida's private and public history. The private stream is made up of scenes that show Frida as a young girl—at a window, at a night vigil for the dead, being brought home after the accident and being photographed by her father—and as an adult courted by Diego (Diego Gurrola)—in the bathroom, her studio, and a public building where he paints a mural. The public stream is guided by two predominantly musical sequences that contrast an onlooking and a participant Frida. From a purely iconographic perspective, these sequences echo traditional images of Mexico. By locating Frida within the rituals of the Night of the Dead and the pro-Zapatista rallies of the revolution, the film secures a cultural and political bonding with social traditions and national history.

The play with mirrors, the choreography set up by tracking shots, and the use of songs promote a variety of associative connections. The tramway segment, like the other seven segments, begins in Fri-



da's bedroom. A long tracking shot unveils a multitude of objects (including photographs) and Frida lying on her deathbed, her face reflected in a small mirror. While these recurring shots serve to punctuate Frida's recall, their still-life quality has a pictorial function. The arrangement of these shots recalls the artist's paintings and shifts meaning away from the decorative into the emblematic. The open knife stuck into a half-sliced papaya, for instance, is simultaneously a citation and a metaphorical engagement with Frida Kahlo's recurrent imagery of the body.

The dislocated composition of Frida's stream of consciousness accentuates suspension and deferral. The narrative of the accident is halted by Diego's first appearance in the film; the narrative of the romance is temporarily delayed by "The Two Fridas," one of the best-known self-portraits of Frida Kahlo, painted in 1939, and the introduction of her father Guillermo [Claudio Brook]. The entry of the painting into the film is provoked by Frida. The alternate panning over the two seated figures is structured by a shot-countershot accompanied by the screeching sounds of a wheelchair.

This classic device asserts Frida's look. As she pauses on the medallion holding a childhood photograph of Diego Rivera, the sequence is interrupted by a black screen imitating the shutter of a camera that initiates the romance narrative of the courtship segment. Thus the viewer's glance moves away from the medallion to the stopwatch held by the father in the next shot. Furthermore, the shot-countershot connects the viewer's glance to the sister Cristina [Cecilia Toussaint], who observes the father taking a photograph of the young Frida.

By linking Frida's sister and husband, the editing anticipates the betrayal theme of "The Two Fridas." Haydén Herrera has related this painting to Frida Kahlo's separation from Diego Rivera, providing the following interpretation of the two figures sitting side by side on a bench, their hands joined: "The Frida Diego no longer loves wears a white Victorian dress; the other wears a Tehuana skirt and blouse, and her face is perhaps just a shade darker than that of her more Spanish companion. . . . Both Fridas have their hearts exposed. . . . The unloved Frida's lace bodice is torn to reveal her breast and her broken heart. The other Frida's heart is whole. Each Frida has one hand placed near her sexual organs. The unloved woman holds surgical pincers, the Tehuana Frida a miniature portrait of Diego Rivera as a child. . . ."54

The integration of the painting in the film, particularly through the editing strategy of this segment's opening, also submits to nostalgia. The medallion of Diego Rivera as a child in the painting

prompts an image of Frida's own childhood. In the sequence where Guillermo is taking a photograph of Frida, the young woman's self-possessed gaze mimics the mature self-portraits of Frida Kahlo. Frida glances at the camera when her German-speaking father gently coaxes her to hold her pose. Whereas Guillermo asks her to be attentive to the shutter, in Kahlo's self-portraiture, her rigid posture and intense gaze assert her own power, demanding the viewer to stop and take notice of her fragmented subjectivity.

Rather than interpreting Frida Kahlo's life exclusively in terms of the placement of the paintings within her biography, the film spreads her work across a variety of psychological and historical registers. At the same time, as Joan and Denis West suggest, "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."<sup>55</sup> The iconographic engagement between Frida Kahlo's art and her cinematographic biography is an excursion into multiple subjectivities or, as Jean Franco sees it, into "the split [that] made it impossible for Frida to recognize herself as a unitary subject."<sup>56</sup>

By making Frida an activating agent of memory, the film emphasizes the fragmented mix-and-match strategies of memory. The consistent use of mirrors is a visual and narrative motif that regulates the unfolding of Frida Kahlo's cinematic biography. In the recurring shots of Frida's deathbed, as already mentioned, a small hand-mirror reflects her image, binding the viewer's look with Frida's cinematic gaze and with the inner Frida Kahlo, the portrait painter. This voyeuristic pattern is taken up in a multiplicity of ways. While it echoes the technique of self-portraiture, it also provides a cinematically codified bridge between the attempt to represent Frida and the power of self-representation.

As its title suggests, *Frida: Naturaleza viva* struggles to animate the inertness of a "still life" and to distance itself from the hieratic immobility of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits. As Paul Leduc points out, "Frida was closed up in her body, in her house, in her studio. In the midst of all these noises of her time [the politics, the demonstrations, in which she also took part], there was her expressive silence. Of images."<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, the film neglects to show Frida painting because Paul Leduc's mise-en-scène is so deeply attached to Frida Kahlo's art. With the exception of the shot in which she handpaints a plaster corset, Frida is presented as a spectator of her own work. It is arguable that by making Frida a consumer, rather than a producer, the film remains attached to archetypes of female passivity. Although constantly in the foreground, Frida's remarkable activity is sus-



pendent in time, and commodified particularly by the intertitle epilogue which begins the film. This ambivalent treatment of the artist as a cultural icon remains problematic in spite of Paul Leduc's deconstructionist approach to Frida Kahlo's biography.<sup>58</sup>

This ambivalence is equally obvious in other aspects of the film. As much as *Frida: Naturaleza viva* journeys through the emotional and physical memories of Frida, its representation of the artist's public life is anchored in the iconography of the Mexican Revolution. The changing perspectives of Frida's politics are signaled by the recurrent presence of Emiliano Zapata, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin and allusions to the Spanish war, the bombing of Hiroshima, and the U.S. intervention in Guatemala. Photographs and drawings of historical figures are prominently placed in the film, and newsreels and newspaper headings are interjected in Frida's public stream of memory. They serve as historical markers and foreground the syncretic nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s that dominated Frida's lifetime. This syncretic sense of nationhood, grounded in the achievements and disappointments of the Mexican Revolution, and the cultural struggles for self-definition led to important remappings of the country's *mestizo* origins that are capable of disputing populist idealizations of history or cosmopolitan fantasies of modernity. Thus, historical imagery in *Frida: naturaleza viva* underlines, yet contests, what Gerald Martin aptly describes as "the sense of isolation and abandonment of Europeanized minds in Mestizo bodies, the sense of living nowhere and of living outside of history."<sup>59</sup>

From an aesthetic point of view the film foregrounds its affiliation with the images that have codified national identity, most particularly in the postrevolutionary period. Hence the representational richness of the film, its use of citation that endorses *mexicanidad*. *Frida: Naturaleza viva* blends luxury and asceticism. It combines subtropical and monochromatic colors, epigrammatic dialogue, and entire songs. The fixation with whimsical details and iconographic fancy is central to the film's self-conscious imagery because it serves to locate nationality and identity.

The calculated sense of the baroque in the *mise-en-scène* formalizes the multiple sources that make up the Latin American imagination. Once again the filmmaker has chosen to draw attention to the pictorial characteristics of Frida Kahlo's work. As Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen have pointed out, "The style and iconography [of Frida Kahlo's paintings] is that of popular baroque, in which intensity of expression is given precedence over beauty and dignity, and like most popular forms there is an archaic, almost medieval aspect

to the representation, a love of minute detail, a disparity between foreground and background setting, a disregard for proportion and perspective."<sup>60</sup>

The endorsement of popular religious iconography, particularly its *mestizo* roots, suits the film because it captures the exoticism of the period. The composition of the tramway and courtship segments blends popular and official art. Dried flowers and photographs of Zapatista soldiers that adorn the caskets as well as the wooden instruments that accompany the somber ballad of the Night of the Dead scene belong to the indigenous and populist elements of Mexican revolutionary mythology. The high-angle shot of the Zapatista rally recalls the grouplike compositions in Diego Rivera's murals, especially those in which Frida Kahlo appears alongside other political figures.

In the same way, the blend of popular musical forms of Mexico (*corridos*, ballads, and folklore) and Europe (opera and *zarzuela*)—including period songs—accommodates the syncretic character of Latin American cultures. In the courtship segment, Frida's and Diego's romance is framed by music. One sequence uses a romantic duet, orchestrated to the Saint-Saens opera *Samson and Delila* playing in the background while the next incorporates a popular love ballad. These sequences suggest associations between Frida's private and Diego's public art, between the refined European and popular Mexican music, emphasizing Frida's shifting sense of identity. Further into the film, songs stress the rural and urban, racial and class-bound roots of Mexican music.

The boldness and the ultrafemininity of Frida Kahlo's dress blend with the hedonism of the *mise-en-scène*. Costume frames Ofelia Medina's characterization of Frida (her filmic identity) and dialectically joins the "two Fridas"—the actress and the historical figure. It gives form to private and public elements of subjectivity because it refers to Ofelia Medina's performance as Frida and to Frida Kahlo's paintings. Its value within the film fuses two distinct representational systems. Costume and dress are simultaneously spectacle and citation. The combination of Indian and Spanish motifs in the colors and textures of dress and jewelry reflects a self-conscious affirmation of a *mestizo* identity. The anecdote that Frida Kahlo borrowed clothes from her maids to wear at her wedding in 1929 suggests a dual articulation of class and ethnicity. To the extent that the film frames Frida's social engagement with the Zapatista peasant movement, the Tehuana dress acquires a programmatic value. It refers to the class struggles that permeated the period. This costume also in-



sinuates a specifically Mexican rearrangement of regional indigenous and European cosmopolitan elements characteristic of Mexican cultural practices in the 1930s and 1940s.

But as Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen suggest, "The ornament [of Frida Kahlo's dress] borders on fetishism, as does all masquerade, but the imaginary look is that of self-regard, therefore a feminine, non-male and narcissistic look."<sup>61</sup> Frida Kahlo, like other Latin American artists and intellectuals of the period, resisted the European-centered surrealism with its hijacking of the unexpected and the primitive. She transformed herself from an *objet trouvé* into a *sujet trouvé* that exults in and bluffs the exotic. Frida Kahlo's art, its emphasis on syncretic subjectivity, embodies a distinctly Latin American way to affirm cultural identity. In this context *Frida: Naturaleza viva* acknowledges the role of deconstructive and multifaceted strategies in aesthetic production and self-representation.

To the extent that Paul Leduc has sought to free Frida Kahlo from the solitude of her inward-looking art, the political project of *Frida: Naturaleza viva* hinges on its potential to reinsert art into history. The back and forth movement between historical iconography and cinematic mise-en-scène is designed, in my view, to contribute to the rewriting of women's history in Mexico and Latin America. It grapples to free Frida Kahlo from the solitude of her inward-looking art and from the figurative body of her paintings. With its refusal to conform to linearity and its distinctive emphasis on the poetics of realism, it relocates Frida at the center of the Mexican.

In spite of the obvious modernist tendencies of the New Cinema of Latin America, very little has been written about its relevance for women's filmmaking. Through the films examined in this chapter, I have sought to identify how modernist strategies contribute to re-imagine the place of women in society. As Janet Wolff argues, the "destabilizing strategies [of modernism] have the ability to disrupt and interrogate the prevailing modes of viewing and reading, and hence to expose the ideological character of representation, and put into question what has hitherto been taken for granted."<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, these films call attention to female agency in the re-imagining of gendered subjectivities by focusing on the romantic ideals that regulate gender relations (*A Man, When He Is a Man*) and the liberating power of female introspection (*Mujer transparente*), sexuality (*Camila*), and creative expression (*Frida: naturaleza viva*). These films have introduced a much-needed feminist perspective into the New Cinema of Latin America and contested the exclusion of gender issues from the struggles for social change.