

The Two Fridas:
Cinematic Representations of the Life of Frida Kahlo

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Latin American Cinema: From the Birth of Third World Movements to the Rise of Global
Transnationalism

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Introduction

In her painting *The Two Fridas* (1939), Frida Kahlo includes two versions of herself: one wears a luxurious European-style white dress with a lighter complexion while the other darker Frida wears a traditional Tehuana dress. Kahlo represents the more authentically Mexican Frida as the dominant figure, with a whole heart; the other Frida although more extravagantly dressed is covered in blood and has a broken heart. Julie Taymor's 2002 American production of *Frida* creates a 'sanitized' yet visually stunning portrait of Kahlo's life. The Hollywood film resorts to a conventional narrative with a high budget and star-studded cast. This Frida is largely depoliticized and hypersexualized in order to appeal to global audiences. Much like Frida dressed in white, Taymor's representation of Kahlo is glamorous but inherently broken and washed out, and incomplete. In contrast, Paul Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* made in Mexico creates an earnest exploration of Frida's life, activism, art work, disabilities and relationships. Like Frida wearing a Tehuana dress, *Naturaleza Viva* represents a more honest reflection of Frida's life and is ultimately the stronger portrait. Both films are related as they depict many of the same moments in her life, just as the two Fridas hold hands despite their differences.

Julie Taymor's *Frida* (2002)

The film opens with Frida being carried out of the Casa Azul, her Blue House, in her bed and loaded onto a truck. The story then flashes back to her adolescence as she watches

Diego Rivera painting a mural in her school's lecture hall. The viewer follows Frida through daily life with her boyfriend up until the moment of their accident on the tramway. The movie cuts to a stop motion scene, depicting skeleton doctors treating her severe injuries.

Subsequently, during a long convalescence, she begins painting. Once she is finally able to walk, she presents her work to the much older and well-established Diego Rivera who encourages her to continue. They become friends and colleagues and eventually begin to date. Frida demonstrates repeatedly that she is a formidable match for Diego and the two decide to marry, with the understanding that Diego will not be faithful. The couple immediately faces turmoil with the overarching presence of Diego's second wife and his infidelity. Frida is often shown having outbursts due to her husband's behavior. Diego receives a commission at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the two travel to *gringolandia*. Both engage in extramarital affairs during their time in New York. Frida becomes pregnant but suffers a traumatizing miscarriage in Detroit, memorialized in her painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). She returns home with word of her mother's illness and shortly thereafter death. She travels back to New York to support Diego during his Rockefeller commission as it falls apart, the two are once again fighting. The couple returns to Mexico, Diego tormented by the loss of his commission. The couple moves into separate studios connected by a bridge. Frida gives her sister Cristina a job in Diego's studio later discovering they are having an affair. The pair separate. A distraught Frida cuts her hair and turns to drinking. Sometime later Diego asks Frida to let Trotsky take political refuge in the blue house, she agrees. Frida has a short lived relationship with Trotsky. His wife discovers his infidelity and they move out. Diego becomes

enraged at discovering the affair. Frida goes to Paris for an exhibition at the behest of the French Surrealist André Breton. She realizes she wants to reconcile their relationship but he requests a divorce. She later discovers that her toes must be removed due to gangrene. During a visit to the Casa Azul Diego asks for Frida's hand in marriage once again. Her health and mental stability gradually deteriorate in the final years of her life. In the last scene, Frida arrives in bed to her first solo show in Mexico. The movie closes with her death as her sleeping body transforms into one of her paintings.

Paul Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* (1983)

Leduc's narrative moves back and forth between various scenes of Frida's life as she recalls them from her deathbed. Alternating from childhood to adulthood back to her teen years. These episodes show her experiencing chronic pain, sweet moments with Diego, childhood memories and, the aftermath of her accident. Interestingly, Leduc's film includes minimal dialogue; instead *Naturaleza viva* stresses music, singing, and crowd sounds. In contrast to Taymor's film, Frida is more regularly shown with her cast, wheelchair, and cane. Rarely does the viewer see her standing or walking unassisted; Leduc thus clearly emphasizes her very real disability. In addition, Leduc emphasizes Frida's political activism and she is frequently shown at political events, fundraisers or guerilla demonstrations. The scenes are placed within a historical context and display her support for individuals like Emiliano Zapata and Sandino. The film often juxtaposes moments of her life. Showing a childhood memory of her and her sister Cristina alongside the scene of Frida discovering Diego and Cristina's affair.

At this point, the film begins to advance somewhat chronologically. The film focuses on Trotsky's time in Mexico along with Frida's relationship with him. It follows the details of their affair, and the assassination attempts on Trotsky's life. Later scenes of her playing with children are interwoven with scenes of her pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. The film begins with a scene of her agonizing in bed as she gazes into various mirrors, the story keeps returning to this moment as it slowly progresses from her taking a pill, to her calling out in a desperate prayer. Her leg was later amputated. The film closes with Diego standing over her coffin removing the Communist flag that was placed there in the first scene. The film itself is much quieter and idealistic. The Mexican film focuses much less on the turmoil of Frida and Diego's relationship and Frida herself is much more composed and stoic.

Frida Kahlo's Biography

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón was born in 1907 in Coyoacán, Mexico to Guillermo Kahlo and Matilde Calderón y González. Her father, a German-born Jew emigrated to Mexico and married his second wife, who was of indigenous and Spanish descent.¹ At the age of six, Frida contracted polio, which left her with one leg shorter and thinner than the other.² Polio was the first of a myriad of health problems that marked Frida for the rest of her life. At the age of eighteen, Kahlo was in a serious accident. Frida and her boyfriend Alejandro Gómez Arias were riding home from school in a bus that collided with a streetcar, leaving Kahlo confined to

¹ Hayden Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 4-9.

² Ibid., 10-20.

her bed for three months.³ The accident resulted in a lifelong struggle with chronic pain. Shortly thereafter she became an official member of the Mexican Communist party. She met Deigo Rivera, who by that point was a renowned muralist and twenty years older. Kahlo requested Rivera review her paintings to see if she was talented enough to pursue a career in art.⁴ When the two began their torrid love affair in the late 1920s, Rivera had already been married twice before. The couple was married on August 21st 1929. On the day of their wedding, Frida borrowed her maid's outfit marking the beginning of her iconic indigenous attire that represented a revolutionary Mexican identity.⁵ The marriage was covered extensively by the national media in Mexico. In 1931, Kahlo and Rivera visited New York for the opening of Diego's Museum of Modern Art Exhibition. Frida was appalled by the disparity of wealth but found comfort in the art she saw at the Metropolitan Museum. She took particular inspiration from El Greco *View of Toledo* and various original Goya paintings.⁶ Kahlo and Rivera did not have a traditional marriage and they lived in separate homes as a means of coping with his infidelity (including one with her sister Cristina). Kahlo wanted children but her various health problems made pregnancy difficult; she experienced several miscarriages, including the aforementioned one in Detroit, which she depicted in her self-portraits.⁷ During a period of separation the couple took in Leon Trotsky and his wife, who sought political asylum in Mexico. It is believed that Kahlo and Trotsky had a brief affair. In 1939, the year that Frida painted "The Two Fridas," she and Rivera

³ Ibid., 62-63.

⁴ Ibid., 86-87.

⁵ Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, "Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in 'Gringolandia,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1998): p. 8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358399>, 8.

⁶ Celia Stahr, "How Did Frida Kahlo Really Feel About New York? She Despised Its 'Scumbag Millionaires' But Loved Its 'Magnificent' Art," *artnet News* (artnet News, March 18, 2020), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/how-did-frida-kahlo-feel-about-new-york-1797942>

⁷ "Frida Kahlo," *Biography.com* (A&E Networks Television, August 26, 2019), <https://www.biography.com/artist/frida-kahlo>.

divorced. But the following year they remarried.⁸ Kahlo was diagnosed with gangrene in 1950 and had her leg amputated three years later. She experienced severe depression and attempted several times to kill herself. Nevertheless, this did not stop her political activism or her painting. Her final public appearance was at a protest against the U.S involvement in the overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in July 1954.⁹ A month later, she died in her Blue House.

Frida Kahlo Scholarship

In the 1980s, after nearly three decades of relative obscurity, Frida Kahlo became the object of obsession for many art historians. A television biography of the artist notes that: “Frida Kahlo achieved celebrity even in her brief lifetime that extended far beyond Mexico’s borders, although nothing like the cult status that would eventually make... her indelible image recognizable everywhere.”¹⁰ Kahlo’s autobiographical paintings became the subject of several exhibits, films, and biographies. Namely Leduc’s Spanish-language art film, *Frida*, *Naturaleza Viva*, and even more consequentially, Hayden Herrera’s biography.¹¹ Herrera’s book became “...the dominant English-language representation of the Mexican artist.”¹² Kahlo’s life story and artwork particularly resonated with feminist scholars like Sue Elkind who

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Guy Trebay, “Frida Kahlo Is Having a Moment,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 8, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/style/frida-kahlo-is-having-a-moment.html?auth=login-google&login=google>.

¹¹ Sue N. Elkind, “Frida Kahlo: Why Now? Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York, Harper and Row, 1983. !FRIDA!, Exhibit at The Mexican Museum, Fort Mason, San Francisco, May 6-August 2, 1987. *Frida Kahlo: The Collection of Dolores Olmedo Patino*. Catalogue of Exhibition at Plaza De La Raza, Los Angeles, January 17-March 29, 1987. *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*. (30 Min) Film by Laura Melvey and Peter Wollen. *The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo*. (50 Min.) Film by David Crommie. *Frida, Naturealeza Viva*. (108 Min.) Film by Paul Leduc .,” *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 8, no. 2 (1988): pp. 81-96, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jung.1.1988.8.2.81>, 81.

¹² Seth Fein, “Reviews of Books,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (n.d.): pp. 1261-1263, 1261.

observed that “Frida’s art reflects a burgeoning shift in attitude toward women and toward the experience of being female.”¹³ Kahlo’s name even became the alias of a Gorilla Girl, as they took on the fight against sexism and racism in the art world.¹⁴ According to film scholar Seth Fein, “In this period, Kahlo superseded Diego Rivera, twice her husband, as *the* personification of twentieth-century Mexican culture.”¹⁵ This boost in popularity was in part due to the sanitation of her image, if she was to be accepted universally she would have to be palatable. Thus film scholar Paul Schroeder-Rodriguez asserts that “...her public memory has been thoroughly depoliticized so as to better serve the interests of the international art market.”¹⁶ The celebrity resulted in an exploitation of her image for profit. As a pop culture icon her face can be found on countless t-shirts, notebooks, makeup sets and so on.

Hollywood's visually stunning biopic based on Hayden Herrera’s book brought Kahlo’s life story to a new generation. “Herrera and HarperCollins gain publicity through their book’s association with the film, and... Miramax gain a sign of scholarly credibility critical to their marketing of film as history.”¹⁷ Salma Hayek as Frida sent both pop culture icons into superstardom in the twenty-first century. The film made an impression on global audiences. With a modest budget of 12 million dollars the film earned 56 million. In addition, was nominated for 47 awards, winning 17 including 2 Oscars.¹⁸ And in 2002 the rerelease of

¹³ Elkind, 82.

¹⁴ Tate. “Who Are the Guerrilla Girls? – Who Are They?” Tate Kids. Accessed December 17, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/who-is/who-are-guerrilla-girls>.

¹⁵ Fein, 1261.

¹⁶ Paul A. Schroeder Rodriguez, “After New Latin American Cinema,” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): pp. 87-112, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2012.0014>, 97.

¹⁷ Fein, 1261.

¹⁸ Ellen Cheshire, “Through the Eyes of Painter: The Art of the On-Screen Artist,” in *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures* (Columbia University Press., n.d.), 70.

Herrera's biography cover replaced Kahlo's self portraits with a photo of Hayek as Frida. "In the process, screen and book jacket together exploit and transform Kahlo into *Frida*."¹⁹

The Hollywoodization of Frida Kahlo in Julie Taymor's Version

In the late 1990s, Salma Hayek was relatively unknown outside of Mexico. Nevertheless, inspired by the life and art of Frida Kahlo, she hoped to be able to tell her story on the big screen. Hayek initially believed Miramax Pictures would be the perfect fit for Kahlo's story: "...a haven [Miramax] for artists who were complex and defiant. It was everything that Frida was to me and everything I aspired to be."²⁰ Unfortunately, Hayek was mistaken, Harvey Weinstein's influence on the film resulted in a somewhat conventional Hollywood film that crassly sought to exploit Kahlo's legacy as well as Hayek herself. Many of the issues critics had with the depiction of the artist in *Frida* can be directly traced to Harvey Weinstein's forceful presence on set. Kahlo's bisexuality is frequently eroticized and the representation of her disability is shockingly inconsistent.

Weinstein agreed to buy the rights to the work Hayek had developed and signed her as an actress and producer of the film.²¹ In the subsequent month of pre-production, Weinstein repeatedly sexually and verbally harassed Hayek. When Hayek valiantly resisted, he offered the project to other actresses, namely Madonna and Jennifer Lopez, both of whom had long been interested in the subject.²² Ultimately, Hayek took legal action claiming "bad faith."

¹⁹ Fein, 1261.

²⁰ Salma Hayek, "Harvey Weinstein Is My Monster Too," *New York Times* December 13, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/13/opinion/contributors/salma-hayek-harvey-weinstein.html>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joan M West and Dennis West, "Frida," *Cineaste*, 2003, 39.

Weinstein was not planning on making the movie or selling the rights back to Hayek “.. but to clear himself legally, as I understood it, he gave me a list of impossible tasks with a tight deadline.”²³ He demanded a rewrite, an A-list cast, and director as well as 10 million dollars to finance the film. Despite these hurdles, Hayek miraculously succeeded and Weinstein was forced to make the film. Once shooting began he berated Hayek for her lack of sex appeal as Frida, criticizing her unibrow and insisting that Hayek get rid of the limp (which Kahlo had most of her life). Critics Joan West and Dennis West note that while Frida is occasionally realistically depicted in a wheelchair, limping, or relying on a cane while “...at other times, she can reel off a fast-paced, complex tango number, or blithely ascend pre-Hispanic pyramids.”²⁴ Initially Taymor was able to satisfy the producer’s demand for more female skin with the tango scene between Ashley Judd as Tina Modotti and Frida. The tango objectifies both women and “marginalizes their independent political conventions and activities”²⁵ He finally resorted to threatening shutting down the production unless Hayek performed did a sex scene with another woman. Hayek was coerced into doing the scene. “He offered me one option to continue. He would let me finish the film if I agreed to do a sex scene with another woman. And he demanded full-frontal nudity.”²⁶ Frida’s bisexuality is geared towards-the male gaze rather than an honest exploration of her sexuality. “Leduc’s *Frida* less exploitatively contemplates Kahlo’s plural sexuality.”²⁷ Weinstein’s heavy hand left its mark on-the film and dismayed critics and

²³ Salma Hayek, “Harvey Weinstein Is My Monster Too,” The New York Times (The New York Times, December 13, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/13/opinion/contributors/salma-hayek-harvey-weinstein.html>.

²⁴ Joan M West and Dennis West, 41.

²⁵ Fein, 1262.

²⁶ Hayek.

²⁷ Fein, 1262.

fans alike.

Moreover, to appeal to an American audience *Frida* presents a highly sanitized version of Kahlo's life. No representation of Frida's life can be complete without a genuine examination of her political beliefs. She fiercely advocated against CIA involvement in South America, American Cold War politics, Fascism in Spain, and many more causes.²⁸ *Frida* is only superficially political, so as not to offend the audience.²⁹ For Schroeder Rodriguez, Taymor's *Frida* succeeds in depoliticizing "Kahlo by portraying her as a primarily ethnic subject with little or no commitment to class-based struggles."³⁰ While the film does not deny that Kahlo was an ardent Communist, it never cites the causes she championed. "This screen Frida is glimpsed in the streets protesting against unspecified acts of imperialism..."³¹ In comparison, Paul Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva*, opens with a Communist flag being draped over Kahlo's casket and regularly shows her at political demonstrations. And these political acts are always shown within their historical context: opposition to American intervention in Nicaragua, antifascism, commitment to revolutionary change in Mexico and support for agrarian leader Emilio Zapata.³² Taymor's *Frida* strictly follows Rivera's politics rather than asserting her own individualism. In Leduc's narrative all political action is shown as distinctly separate from her "male mentors". Taymor's version suggests that Diego values Frida for her feminine energy rather than her political intelligence.³³ Not surprisingly, Taymor/Weinstein's representation of Frida Kahlo results in an exceedingly gendered portrayal.

²⁸ Joan M West and Dennis West, 40.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rodríguez, 97.

³¹ Joan M West and Dennis West, 40.

³² Fein, 1262.

³³ Ibid.

The film chronicles the various shifts in Diego and Frida's relationship arguably more so than it focuses on Kahlo's development as an individual or artist. Joan West and Dennis West observe that: "Taymor prefers to emphasize the constructive/destructive relationship between the two creative geniuses. . . curiously dependent on one another."³⁴ For the purposes of Hollywoodization that taps into a stereotype of Latina women, Kahlo is often seen having hysterical outbursts in comparison with the more composed and stoic Leduc Frida. Seth Fein rightly concludes that "Taymor's version allows for no ambiguity and little to sustained engagement with the artist's life or work."³⁵ A good point of comparison is the scene where Frida discovers Diego's infidelity with her sister Cristina, which is depicted in both films. In Taymor's version, Kahlo reacts erratically and violently as opposed to Leduc's Kahlo who remains composed but devastated. Her reaction moves from "contained rage to poignant introspection, permitting a viewer to examine his or her responses ... [of this] complex personal and professional partnership."³⁶

Clearly, Taymor's *Frida* has been unequivocally simplified for an American audience, smoothed around the edges in order to be palatable. Thus, this version consciously eschews the more difficult aspects of her life such as her multiple suicide attempts and drug addiction.³⁷ The film does touch upon her alcoholism, but more so as a plot device during painful episodes with Diego. She is made to be more sexual and submissive to male influence as well as less political. Her struggles with mental and physical health are attenuated. This version of Frida

³⁴ Joan M West and Dennis West, 40.

³⁵ Fein, 1262.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Joan M West and Dennis West, 40.

Kahlo may appeal to a global audience but it deprives Kahlo of her essence.

Julie Taymor's Visual Landscape in *Frida* (2002)

Julie Taymor's career took off in 1997 after she directed the stage adaptation for *The Lion King* on Broadway. Even before beginning her career in film, Taymor had already developed a strong visual language, as an effective means of telling stories. Her films like *Across the Universe* (2007), centered on the Beatles' songbook, revealed her imaginative and almost surreal touch, *Frida* is no different. The film leaves much to be desired in terms of Kahlo's representation, because of Weinstein's forceful presence, the film is nevertheless filled with many visual gems.

Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto said, "We wanted to see Frida's world through her eyes, while still staying true to realistic settings and lighting designs. We took a lot of visual cues from her own letters and diaries; she wrote a lot about color and the "mystery of darkness"³⁸ The entire cast and crew as well as the surrounding community worked hard to create a set that felt true to Kahlo's life and work. Locals even contributed to production by donating costumes.³⁹ Salma Hayek made major contributions to the film's authenticity: "I had negotiated with the Mexican government to get locations that had never been given to anyone in the past — including Frida Kahlo's houses and the murals of Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera, among others."⁴⁰

³⁸ Cheshire, "Through the Eyes of Painter: The Art of the On-Screen Artist," in *Bio-Pics: A Life in Pictures* (Columbia University Press., n.d.), 68.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hayek.

Taymor knew the film needed something special to distinguish it from other artists' biopics. She determined that "using photography and visual effects to make them unfold before your eyes would be a great addition to what might otherwise be a normal biopic."⁴¹ *Frida* uses montage and animation to create a compelling narrative that still feels legitimate when compared to the source material. When Frida and Diego went to New York, the film exchanges a bland scene of the two walking down Fifth Avenue with a spectacular montage. "...live-action footage of the actors, cut-outs of the city skyline, postcards and period footage of the Detroit factory that Rivera actually toured."⁴²

Following the scenes of Frida's traumatic bus accident, she hallucinates that her diagnosis is being given to her by skeletons. This sequence is animated by the Quay Brothers "Taymor says, 'I simply gave them a scenario; I said it was a nightmare featuring skeletons in the Mexican-Day-of-the-Dead style, and I stressed to make it abstract, comic but slightly frightening.'"⁴³

In the film, Kahlo's paintings come to life as "the live-action image then dissolving to correspond with the paintings."⁴⁴ Taymor often makes references to Kahlo's painting without showing the painting itself. This provides narrative context for Kahlo's deeply emotional work. The film features *The Broken Column*, *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*, *The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, *What the Water Gave Me* and, many more. One of the most poignant scenes of the film comes after Diego proposes the two get divorced, which led to the creation of *The*

⁴¹ Cheshire, 68-69.

⁴² Cheshire, 69.

⁴³ Cheshire, 70.

⁴⁴ Cheshire, 69.

Two Fridas. The painting itself shows one Frida in wearing a white dress holding hands with a Frida wearing a Tehuana dress. Frida's complexion in the European-style dress is noticeably lighter than that of the indigenous Frida. The attire of the two Fridas serves as a reminder of her dual heritage and demonstrates that her Ameriindian roots are more privileged.⁴⁵ The two are seated on a green bench against a stormy sky reminiscent of El Greco's *View of Toledo*, which evokes her inner turmoil.⁴⁶ Both Fridas have exposed hearts, a trope she often uses to represent pain in love.⁴⁷ The heart of the Tehuana Frida has a whole heart which is connected by a vein to the bisected heart of the other Frida. The whole-hearted Frida is holding a tiny portrait of Diego, a vein extends from it and wraps around Frida's arm and connects to her heart. The broken-hearted Frida severs the vein with a scissor she is holding in her other hand. Blood drips down onto her skirt, drops of blood on the ruffle of the skirt resemble embroidered flowers.

The scene opens in a dark bar with a masked and hooded figure appearing behind Frida. She sits with the figure who is revealed to be a woman singing *La Llorona*. Interestingly, the figure is Mexican singer Chavela Vargas who was rumored to have had an affair with Frida Kahlo.⁴⁸ The song continues as Frida walks in the night. She opens the door to her apartment to find a crestfallen Frida seated on a bench wearing a white dress, her skirt covered in blood stains. This Frida has a face covered in white powder, she is sitting against a painted sky. The camera cuts to Frida's hand crushing a small oval portrait of Diego as a boy,

⁴⁵ Hayden Herrera and Frida Kahlo, *Frida Kahlo: the Paintings* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2002), 135.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "The Relationship between Singer Chavela Vargas and Artist Frida Kahlo," Hobart and William Smith Colleges, February 7, 2018, <https://www2.hws.edu/the-relationship-between-singer-chavela-vargas-and-artist-frida-kahlo/>.

causing the glass to break and blood to drip onto her skirt. These drops of blood transform into flower drawings. Then Frida, dressed in her iconic Tehuana dress, is seated beside Frida in a white dress. Both Fridas gaze into the camera. The scene cuts back to a close up of Chavela and Frida at the bar as Chavela singing intensifies and a single tear streams down Frida's face. Finally the viewer sees the actual painting of *The Two Fridas* as Kahlo observes it in her studio.

In both the scene and the painting Frida feels rejected by Diego, and she is heartbroken. Kahlo finds comfort in herself as she faces life without Diego. Her biographer describes her as "holding her own hand. . . she is her only companion."⁴⁹ She also chooses to sever the connection with Diego by cutting the vein. The editing of the scene shows Frida's inner turmoil and the need to find comfort within herself during this tumultuous period of her life.

Paul Leduc's Representation of *Frida* in 1983

In an interview, Paul Leduc stated that he was initially resistant to making a film about Kahlo because "it would be hard to write a script without falling into melodrama."⁵⁰ Leduc nevertheless succeeds in producing a captivating look at Kahlo's life without falling for the same clichés that tainted Taymor's film. The slow pace of Leduc's lower-budgeted, arthouse

⁴⁹ Hayden Herrera and Frida Kahlo, 136.

⁵⁰ Dennis West and Paul Leduc, "Frida An Interview With Paul Leduc" 16, no. 4 (1988): pp. 55-55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41687606>.

film allows for deep analysis of the characters and artwork.⁵¹ The film moves non-linearly through Kahlo's memories as she recalls them on her deathbed, mimicking the meanderings of human memory. The film's subtitle is *Naturaleza Viva*, which is the title of one of Kahlo's last still lifes. *Naturaleza muerta*, literally translates to mean dead nature and is the traditional term for a still-life painting. Kahlo makes the term her own by choosing to emphasize life. The painting appears near the end of the film and Leduc felt that it encapsulated the many contradictions in Kahlo's life.⁵² The subtitle is used so as to not confuse the film with a traditional biography of her life. The film is based on historical documents but is not a biography. Leduc notes that "our goal was not to do a biography, but rather a portrait of a woman - a portrait that might encourage spectators... to learn more about her."⁵³ Stylistically,

Leduc's film has been described as neo-Baroque as it features "rich color palettes, object filled sets, and the use of mirrors and paintings to call attention to the nature of representation."

⁵⁴ In contrast to the Taymor film, Leduc's version encourages a relationship with the viewer that allows for critical viewing practice. In the early sequences Kahlo is placed between two mirrors and this makes her physical representation both fragmented and doubled. This mirroring effect closely echoes the pictorial practice of Velazquez in his *Las Meninas*.⁵⁵ Leduc's use of the mirrors and the narrative to decentralize Frida, as she was marginalized in her lifetime. As a non-hetero normative, disabled female artist, making small easel painting, often self-portraits, when large murals were the norm in Mexican art. She also supported Trotsky during a period

⁵¹ Fein, 1261.

⁵² Dennis West and Paul Leduc.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Rodríguez, 97.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 98.

that Stalin was the accepted norm.⁵⁶ The film provides rich insight into her place in society as well as her efforts to cope with the painful experiences in her life.

Ultimately, Paul Leduc's *Frida* creates a more internationally accessible and introspective film than Taymor's Hollywood blockbuster. Seth Fein argues that the "film's minimal dialogue transcends linguistic borders while its less linear narrative, long takes, hyper-subjective cinematography, naturalistic approach to sound all aggressively assault Hollywood conventions."⁵⁷ When asked if the camera movement was a "key stylistic feature," Leduc responded that it was easier and more cost effective to shoot a sequence than to do multiple takes. "Hollywood, he added, has the money to do twenty takes..."⁵⁸

In his film manifesto, Leduc contends that Mexican cinema cannot be divorced from the political and social reality of the times.⁵⁹ As a result, his *Frida*, is a fierce political advocate. In fact his film, *Frida, Naturaleza Viva*, created a trend in Latin American cinema of placing "marginalized subjects at the center of their narratives as a means to openly question racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of exclusionist nationalist discourses."⁶⁰ As a Mexican, Leduc understands that Frida was "slighted by her generation" and overwhelmed by a prolific muralist like her husband.⁶¹ His film creates space to explore the genius and suffering that characterized her life while exploring their broader political and social context.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁷ Fein, 1262.

⁵⁸ Dennis West and Paul Leduc.

⁵⁹ Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: a Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 295.

⁶⁰ Rodríguez, 100.

⁶¹ Dennis West and Paul Leduc.

Conclusion

Julie Taymor's *Frida* is a visually stunning biopic that nonetheless fails to deliver a genuine portrayal of Frida Kahlo's extraordinary life. Although generally well-received, winning two Academy Awards, the film lacks in subtlety and nuance. Harvey Weinstein's involvement is largely responsible for the hyper-sexualization of the artist, as well as the uneven representation of her physical disabilities. Moreover, the film minimizes her affiliation with Communism in order not to offend audiences and Kahlo by focusing predominantly on her relationship with Rivera. This version perverts or omits some of the most essential aspects of her life. On the other hand, the film does succeed in showing the world from the artist's perspective as the film draws inspiration from her diary and artworks and brings them to life. Paul Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* is a quiet, slow-paced film that draws the viewer in with its long takes and roving camera. Leduc plays with his uses of time and space as he pursues a non-linear narrative to examine the important moments of Kahlo's life. Leduc's neo baroque portrayal seeks to represent Kahlo as she was during her life, marginalized and brilliant. The film presents her disabilities, politics, sexuality without exploiting either her memory or her legacy. Leduc places his protagonist within a clear historical context and addresses the issues of racism and sexism through Kahlo's de-centralized figure.

These two Fridas attempt to show the exceptional and troublesome life of one of the most prolific figures of art history and an art historical comparison of these two filmic versions has proved revealing. *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* represents a radical and courageous artist who faced so much darkness in her life, while *Frida* tells the 'safe' version of her life,