

What made Frida Kahlo remarkable?

Frida, directed by Julie Taymor

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Frida, directed by Julie Taymor, screenplay by Clancy Sigal, Diane Lake, Gregory Nava and Anna Thomas; based on the book by Hayden Herrera

Julie Taymor, director of *Frida*, the new film about the left-wing Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907-54), told an interviewer from *Reel.com*, “I don’t care if you know a damned thing about Frida Kahlo; in fact, people who don’t know anything have a wonderful time because it’s [about] such an eccentric, unusual woman.” The issue, however, is not whether the viewer knows anything about Kahlo on entering the theater, but whether he or she knows anything of substance on leaving it.

Taymor’s predictably superficial account of the relationship of Kahlo and fellow Mexican artist Diego Rivera, whose lives were bound up with some of the great issues of the twentieth century—the Mexican and Russian Revolutions, Trotskyism and Stalinism, socialism and art—will not advance anyone’s understanding very far.

Taymor’s movie was adapted from the biography written in 1983 by Hayden Herrera, which aided the efforts to reinvent Kahlo as a feminist icon. Not surprisingly, Taymor (*Titus*, 1999) has not contributed toward reversing this trend. The movie is aptly (and glowingly) described by one reviewer as a “romance about glamorous communists, cheating muralists and lesbian affairs.”

Frida focuses on the relationship between Kahlo (Salma Hayek) and Rivera (Alfred Molina). It opens in 1922 when the 15-year-old schoolgirl first observes Rivera, already famous, painting a mural at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City. At the time Rivera is with his second wife Lupe Marin (Valeria Golina).

At the age of 18 Frida is the victim of a horrific trolley car accident, which leaves her crippled and in debilitating pain for the rest of her life. “The arm of the seat went through me like a sword into a bull,” she explains. Three years after the accident she again meets Rivera, 20 years her senior, who is working on a fresco for the Ministry of Education building. Frida approaches him for an opinion about her art. “I want the criticism of a serious man. I’m neither an art lover nor an amateur. I’m simply a girl who must work for her living,” she tells him.

That first encounter is one of the film’s strongest and most truthful moments. The couple are married in 1929 in Coyoacan in southern Mexico City, with an innocent Frida being only partially aware of Diego’s philandering habits. “I have suffered two big accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar ran over me. The other was Diego,” she comments.

The film chronicles Rivera’s sojourn to the US in 1930-31. He and Frida travel to San Francisco, Detroit and New York, where he paints a series of murals in public and private buildings and engages in many extramarital affairs. (“It meant nothing, it had all the emotion of a handshake,” he says.) In retaliation, Frida sleeps with both men and women. During the trip she becomes pregnant against Rivera’s wishes; he is concerned about her ability to carry a child. After suffering a devastating miscarriage and the loss of her mother, Frida leaves for Mexico, but returns to New York when Diego finds himself engaged in a struggle with Nelson Rockefeller (Edward Norton) over his refusal to remove a portrait of Vladimir Lenin from a mural in the Rockefeller Center.

Frida and Diego return to Mexico in 1933 and move into a new house near Coyoacan. Frida separates from Rivera upon discovering his affair with her sister Christina. A reconciliation takes place at the time Diego is seeking to obtain asylum for Leon Trotsky (played by Geoffrey Rush) in Mexico. In January 1937, Trotsky and his wife Natalia move into the home of Frida’s parents, which has to be fortified with armed guards, machine gun nests and bricked up windows.

Joined by surrealist poet and critic André Breton, the Riveras and the Trotskys visit the ruins in Teotihuacan, debate politics and culture. Vague references to the political struggle between Trotsky and Stalin make their way into the dialogue. Trotsky and Frida have a tryst before the first attempt on Trotsky’s life in May 1940. Not much is made of Trotsky’s assassination by Stalinist agents in August 1940, except that Frida is briefly considered a suspect. By this time, Diego has deserted her and she is in terrible health.

Diego and Frida remarry in December 1940. Frida is hospitalized for nine months in 1950 and has her right leg amputated in 1953. With every physical trauma, she tells her doctors: “Just patch me up, so I can paint.” Frida dies on July 13, 1954, a week after her forty-seventh birthday.

Beyond providing this skeletal biography of Frida Kahlo, essentially devoid of historical, political and artistic analysis, director Taymor spices up the work with some of her skill in graphics and puppetry.

Frida begins and ends with the artist’s trademark colors surrealistically grafted onto scenes of her courtyard, where monkeys and peacocks magically wander among the flowering cactuses. A masterful use of puppets occurs in the unsettling dream sequence when chattering Day of the Dead figures minister to Kahlo in the hospital after her near-fatal accident. In a jarring

manner, paintings come into being in “real time.” Kahlo’s famous self-portrait with fetus springs forth graphically from the misery and pain of her miscarriage. Human beings flatten into painting surfaces and paintings become three-dimensional. In New York City, Frida’s emotional state concerning Diego’s womanizing is given visual expression in the King Kong mechanical cut-out sequence, with Kong-Diego terrorizing the city and meeting his demise atop the Empire State building.

Alfred Molina’s performance as Rivera, one of the most watchable aspects of the film, cannot compensate for the great lapses in politics and history. Rivera was a supporter of the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution and for a period of time the Trotskyist Fourth International. Although many historical figures are trotted out in the movie, in a kind of visual name-dropping, they are little more than well-dressed pieces of furniture. Besides Breton, who is not obviously recognizable, other flash-by luminaries include—according to the production notes—muralist Jean Charlot, painter Pablo O’Higgins, composer Silvestre Revueltas and photographer Edward Weston. One would not know it.

Although one does not have to reference the production notes to identify Italian photographer Tina Modotti (whose lover was the notorious GPU assassin Vittorio Vidali, alias Carlos Contreras) and Mexican painter David Siqueiros, their connections to Stalinist gangsterism is never mentioned. The film ignores or is ignorant of Siqueiros’ central role in the unsuccessful attempt on Trotsky’s life in May 1940.

In fact, the world-historical struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism, largely missing in the film, was at the center of the both Kahlo’s and Rivera’s life, and figured prominently and directly in the evolution of the latter’s work in particular.

In 1922, the year Rivera first encountered Frida as a schoolgirl, he co-founded the Union of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors and Graphic Artists. When Kahlo and Rivera met in 1928 they were both members of the Mexican Communist Party. In 1929, Rivera came into conflict with the Communist Party (CP) leadership because Stalin’s theory of “Socialist Realism” imposed unacceptable restrictions on both the style and subject matter of art. Rivera was expelled from the CP after voicing political disagreements and refusing to alter a mural in line with demands from the party leadership. Kahlo ceased active membership the following year.

Rivera’s resolute stance against Rockefeller in New York in 1933 sprung from his belief that the fresco with the portrait of Lenin was “the only correct painting to be made in the building [as] an exact and concrete expression of the situation of society under capitalism at the present time, and an indication of the road that man must follow in order to liquidate hunger, oppression, disorder and war.” By contrast Kahlo’s paintings were a direct expression of the struggles that dominated her remarkable personal life. According to Rivera, Kahlo was “the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings.” This has a bit more punch and insight than director Taymor’s slant on the “wonderful duality of Frida ... [t]he fact that she was bisexual, that fact that she was an independent woman who was besotted with her husband.”

Both artists aligned themselves with the Trotskyist movement and had, for a time, a close relationship with Trotsky. In 1938, Rivera collaborated with Trotsky and Breton in preparing the *Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, outlining the connection between truthful art and the aspiration for “a complete and radical reconstruction of society.”

It seems safe to suggest that neither Rivera nor Kahlo—remarkable artists and not first and foremost political thinkers—ever understood the essence of Trotsky’s struggle with the Stalinist bureaucracy, including the theory of permanent revolution, and remained to one extent or another under the influence of Mexican nationalism. It was this, and not whatever may or may not have happened between Trotsky and Kahlo, presented in an undignified fashion by Taymor, that primarily accounts for both of them ending up, chastened and demoralized, in the camp of Stalinism.

The film’s preoccupation with Rivera’s infidelities and Kahlo’s “bisexuality” is an adaptation to the current intellectual environment. At their best neither artist was focused on flouting or conforming to the institution of marriage, but rather on the political demolition of bourgeois institutions. In a previous time, filmmakers would have concentrated on the art and politics associated with the relationship, driven by the greatest historical impulses.

Kahlo described Rivera as “an architect in his paintings, in his thinking process, and in his passionate desire to build a functional, solid and harmonious society.... He fights at every moment to overcome mankind’s fear and stupidity.” In turn, Rivera observed towards the end of her life: “It is not tragedy that rules Frida’s work.... The darkness of her pain is just a velvet background for the marvelous light of her physical strength, her delicate sensibility, her bright intelligence, and her invincible strength as she struggles to live and show her fellow humans how to resist hostile forces and come out triumphant.”

Given *Frida*’s unserious portrayal of Trotsky, he deserves the last word on one of the film’s central characters: “Do you wish to see with your own eyes the hidden springs of the social revolution? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Come at little closer and you will see clearly enough, gashes and spots made by vandals: Catholics and other reactionaries, including, of course, Stalinists. These cuts and gashes give even greater life to the frescoes. You have before you, not simply a ‘painting,’ an object of passive aesthetic contemplation, but a living part of the class struggle. And it is at the same time a masterpiece!”



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