Message of Pain:
Julie Taymor’s *Frida* and the Image of Frida Kahlo

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“My painting carries with it the message of pain.”
- Frida Kahlo
Jack Rummel, in “Frida Kahlo: A Spiritual Biography,” asserts that Kahlo “left the world with one dazzling gift that only she could give, a measure of her flawed and brilliant life painted on tin and canvas, a keyhole into her soul, and perhaps if we look long enough, into ours too.”¹ Like the art of Frida Kahlo, Julie Taymor’s film *Frida* provides a keyhole into the artist’s aching soul in its own imperfect but vibrant and unique way.

Born in 1907 to Matilde Calderón and Guillermo Kahlo (born Wilhelm Kahlo), a German Jew who immigrated to Mexico City, Frida Kahlo has become the most famous Latin American female artist to have ever lived. Her paintings combine realism, surrealism, and her Mexican heritage to form original artwork never before seen on canvas. She was born slightly before the Mexican Revolution of 1910, survived polio as a child, lived through a devastating bus accident, married and re-married Mexican fiery muralist Diego Rivera, became involved in the communist movement, and died at the early age of forty-seven. Although never appreciated in her lifetime, Frida Kahlo is one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.

*Frida* begins by showing Frida Kahlo, flawlessly portrayed by Selma Hayek (at right), arrive in her deathbed to her first and final art exhibition in Mexico.² The film is one long flashback that begins with the crippling bus accident that nearly killed her when she was young and that she ultimately succumbed to years later. In this span of her

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¹ See P294, IAH241E course pack.
lifetime, the viewer sees Kahlo’s relationships with loved ones, including Diego Rivera, Leon Trotsky, and others; the artist’s struggle with her political beliefs; the passion she possessed for her artwork; and the relentless torment of her short life.

The film is based on the novel “Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo” written by Hayden Herrera. The historical accuracy of the film suggests that director Julie Taymor (and the four writers of the screenplay) followed the biography to the letter. All of the characters in the film, including Frida’s parents, her sister, Trotsky, Rivera, as well as the settings of Mexico City, the United States, Paris, and others, are captured perfectly. The Blue House, the home where Frida Kahlo was born, and the home where she and Rivera lived (separate houses for each artist but with a bridge that connects the two) are nearly picture-perfect images of the real houses that can be seen in the documentary, *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*. The documentary also provides insight to a specific scene in the film when Kahlo, to Diego Rivera’s great annoyance, demands that he come down from a scaffolding to see her artwork. The scene in the movie is a very genuine portrayal of the strength of her character.

Kahlo’s most vulnerable and most horrible moment was the bus accident, which is not depicted explicitly in the film but contains enough details and imagery of what actually happened. Seconds after the accident, Kahlo is seen covered in gold dust to highlight the catastrophic and cathartic moment in her life. Perhaps the great accomplishment of *Frida* is the transformation the character undergoes after the accident. As the artist shares in *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*, “I became old in an instant;” and this is essentially what occurs in the film as the character is suddenly entrapped in a full body cast and aches with excruciating pain. “The Frida Kahlo of 1927 and after was
a sadder person than her prankish alter ego before the wreck” states Rummel in his biography on Kahlo. This aspect is literally shown in Taymor’s film by showing the young artist spying and playing pranks on Rivera and then later as a much darker, more serious, and very tragic character.

There are aspects of Kahlo’s life that are alluded to in the film, yet not fully explored. One such aspect is Frida Kahlo’s bisexuality and her sexual relationships with people other than Diego Rivera. The film includes a minor scene when Kahlo dances seductively with woman and another set in Paris where she is seen having sex with a woman. This side of her life comes off in the film as somewhat disconnected and gratuitous, and without showing any emotional backing. According to The Life and Times documentary, Kahlo had many love affairs, with both men and women. One lover even stated that Diego Rivera told the man that he was “going to fall in love with her” when Rivera introduced them. Julie Taymor’s film does not emphasize this aspect of Kahlo’s life, except for the affair with Trotsky, perhaps because it would lessen the empathy and emotional attachment the audience begins to feel for the tragic artist. This may be the same reason for another underemphasized part of the film: Kahlo’s apparent addiction to pain killers. According to Jack Rummel, the probable cause of death was “suicide by an overdose of narcotics.”

Although Kahlo is in obvious pain, it could be interpreted as a weakness one does not wish to see in a “larger-than-life” and sacrificial protagonist.

On the other hand, the film does not shy away from other human characteristics the artist possessed, such as her beliefs related to communism. In the film, like in real

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4 Picture from www.tbray.org/ongoing/When/200x/2005/05/01/May-1.
life, Kahlo was a devoted communist and atheist. Kahlo shared these beliefs with Diego Rivera and they prove to be one of the more difficult aspects of her life to translate to film. At times, Taymor’s film actually over-emphasizes the communist ideology, depicting Diego, Frida, and David Alfaro Siqueiros (another communist artist) in long scenes, sitting around a table and discussing world events and socialist principles.

Moreover, Kahlo’s atheist beliefs, and the battle with her religious mother concerning them, were noticeably absent from the film. As Kahlo is quoted by Rummel, “My mother was a great friend to me, but the religious thing never brought us close to each other…” The mother-daughter relationship is not fully developed in the film; Kahlo’s complicated association with famous communist Leon Trotsky (left), on the other hand, is extensively portrayed. While depicting the attraction between the two characters very well (such as when they go to the Mayan pyramids of Mexico), the film seems to dwell too much on their liaison and only shows a conclusive end to it when Trotsky is killed. In reality, Frida Kahlo grew tired of the “old man” and told him their relationship was over by giving him self-portrait. As is revealed in the documentary The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo, Taymor’s Frida, and Jack Rummel’s “Frida Kahlo: A Spiritual Biography,” and in Taymor’s Frida, Diego Rivera was Frida Kahlo’s one true love in life.

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7 See The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo.
8 Alfred Molina as Diego Rivera (left) and Diego Rivera (right). See news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2752039.stm and commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Diego_Rivera_1932.jpg.
In *Frida*, the title character proclaims to her husband “I had two big accidents in my life Diego, the trolley and you... You are by far the worse”. Alfred Molina and Selma Hayek exhibit perfect chemistry together in this love-hate relationship and mother-son dynamic that Kahlo and Rivera possessed. Frida, “…liked to pamper Diego as a mother would paper a child.”9 There are many scenes throughout the film where the two characters argue or scream at one another with frustration (often concerning love affairs), but ultimately they cannot stay apart from one another, despite a divorce and other attempts at separation. With superb performances by both actors, the viewer observes a painful love between the two characters both struggling through life.

In her artwork, Frida Kahlo revealed her tragic and aching soul. The technique Kahlo uses in her paintings is nothing extraordinary. Her paintings are flat and often take little risk in style. Her subject matter, on the other hand, allows the viewer a deep and personal connection to the artist by the depiction of raw human emotion and sadness. Kahlo painted for no one else but herself, in her words, “I paint my own reality.”10 In Taymor’s *Frida*, the Trotsky character tells her, “Your paintings express what everyone feels. They are alone in pain.” All of her paintings, particularly her many self portraits, show a longing and subtle sadness. Her physical pain from the bus accident transformed into an emotional loneliness that she puts on canvas in such pieces as “The Broken Column” (above left) and “The Two Fridas” (artwork attached at end). This artwork often shows her with a stern face, as if she is living *through* the pain. The Julie Taymor film captures many of

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10 Quote from *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo.*
the artists many inspirations. Many of Frida Kahlo’s most famous pieces are eloquently captured in the film in an original and creative way. Kahlo’s visit to the United States and her longing to return to Mexico in the film is an obvious allusion to her painting, “Self Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States.” This part of the movie, however, is under-emphasized as the artist spent much more time in the United States and her emotional detachment was perhaps exaggerated as Kahlo stated that she found America and American culture “entertaining” and liked the cartoons and “dirty words” of the country.11

Taymor recreates many of Kahlo’s paintings in the film, not as they were on canvas, but as she saw the subject matter. While some paintings, such as Kahlo’s “A Few Small Nips” or “Henry Ford Hospital,” are simply shown as completed pieces, others are recreated and come to life, a technique similar to that used in Carlos Saura’s Goya film.12 Even in the post-production and promotion of the film (see above right), the Kahlo’s paintings are re-imagined.13 In one scene of the film, Kahlo’s “Self Portrait with Cropped Hair” is recreated with Selma Hayek in the same clothing and setting as depicted in the painting. The camera then moves from the actress walking off to the painting, and the animated portrait walks away as well. In another scene, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo have just been married and Kahlo’s painting “Frieda (Frida) and Diego Rivera” morphs into the two actors, Selma Hayek and Alfred Molina, in the exact

11 Quote from The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo.
12 The film’s use of the painting “Henry Ford Hospital,” however, is one of very few blatantly inaccuracies of the film. Kahlo did indeed paint this painting after having to have an abortion, but, as the title of the painting reveals, this event took place in Detroit and not New York, as the film portrays. See The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo.
13 See www.descendingashtray.com/archives/206. This picture (not depicted in the film) is a combination of Kahlo’s “The Two Fridas” and “Self Portrait with Cropped Hair.”
same pose. In the end of the film, after Kahlo has died, “The Dream or The Bed” painting is recreated as a model that catches on fire as the artist is released from the pain of living. This filmmaking requires tremendous accuracy and patience and is executed superbly by Taymor and the film’s visual effects team. This style and vivid imagery allows the film’s viewers to look through this artist’s eyes and into her creative spirit.

Julie Taymor’s 2002 *Frida* was not, the first biographical film adaptation of the famous artist’s life. In 1986 *Frida, naturaleza viva* was produced in Kahlo’s native country of Mexico and is in her native tongue of Spanish. Similarly to the Taymor film, director Paul Leduc begins the film with Frida Kahlo on her deathbed. *Frida, naturaleza viva* (at left) shows the famous artist, this time portrayed by Mexican actress Ofelia Medina, moaning in pain as the memories of her life flash before her.\(^{14}\) As stated in the opening text crawl (translated), Frida Kahlo:

> …reconstructs her life and works, so important to that time of Mexican Muralism, giving full rein to her memory. Thus images flow past in as fragmented and disconnected a way as her own thoughts…while Frida sings her praises to life and liberty, death interrupts that chaotic torrent of images.\(^{15}\)

This unconventional form of narrative proves surprisingly effective in the film and is in many ways more realistic than the Taymor film. Though this approach may be frustrating at times, as moments from Kahlo’s life are depicted—and they are merely moments, not necessarily major events—the viewer is allowed a deeper connection to Kahlo as a person. Not all of the flashbacks contain, for example, much dialogue or action. One such occurrence is when the Kahlo character is seen putting flowers on her

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\(^{15}\) Paul Leduc, *Frida, naturaleza viva.*
father’s grave. Leduc uses this imagery much less obviously and much more fluently than Taymor, yet both prove very effective. At one point, this film focuses on one of Frida’s last paintings of watermelons, which symbolize life and birth (which she was unable to give) and also appear as deep red flesh that vividly symbolizes her physical anguish. Another brilliant technique of Leduc, though less subtle than Taymor, is the use of music in scenes containing little dialogue; because music is more remembered than conversation, the viewer has a deeper connection with Kahlo as if both are experiencing the same memories. With lyrics such as “haven’t you just seen that in the grasp of a woman, all men are dolls” and “my heart is dying for your body, pretty as a palm tree. I’d die for love,” the viewer understands Kahlo’s situation without the actress uttering a single word. Though Frida may surpass Leduc’s film in production and imagery, Frida, naturaleza viva is still brilliant in its own right.

One of Frida’s greatest accomplishments, in contrast to Leduc’s film, is the strong actress who portrays the title character. Selma Hayek, in her Academy Award nominated role, embodies Kahlo with a passion few actresses could achieve. Hayek, who also produced the film, is able to physically embody the artist thanks partly because of the brilliant costumes that replicate traditional Mexican garb (at left) and the Academy Award winning makeup team that adds Kahlo’s infamous “unibrow” to Hayek’s forehead.16 A sharp contrast can be seen between Hayek’s brief performance as the young Frida Kahlo before the devastating bus accident and after as she works through her pain and suffering. This maturing and

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16 Picture of Selma Hayek and Alfred Molina in Frida. See movies.yahoo.com/movie/1808411870/photo/452607.
gaining of wisdom after a sudden dramatic event produces a stronger and more complex character. Though Hayek’s performance appears melodramatic and almost exaggerated at times, it is accurate to Kahlo’s true character, especially in the melodrama of dealing with Diego Rivera’s adultery. Ultimately Hayek’s performance projects the character as someone the audience sympathizes with and roots for: a strong woman who endures through countless hardships.

Though understandable, there is much of Frida Kahlo’s life that is omitted from *Frida*. Much of the interesting story of Frida Kahlo’s father, Guillermo Kahlo, is not in the film because the film is about her life and not his. Guillermo Kahlo was a photographer, whose own art was a great influence on Frida. Much of Kahlo’s childhood is also not depicted in the film, such as when she contracted polio at the age of six and how in her youth her family lived through the Mexican revolution. Many of these earlier childhood events could have been used very effectively to foreshadow future events in Kahlo’s life, including the bus accident and her politics. A more cheerful aspect of Kahlo’s life that is absent from the film is Kahlo’s two years spent teaching at “a place called La Esmeralda, a secondary art school run by the Ministry of Education” (Rummel, p. 287). Like other experiences mentioned above, it is likely missing from the picture because of its self-contained occurrence. The focus of the film is Frida Kahlo, not the period of Mexican history in which she lived. Taymor, unlike Leduc, wishes to create a more linear and cohesive story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. By adding too many elements, the film would have been too rushed, too crammed, and unfocused. Taymor comes close to these problems as is, depicting a long span of time in a relatively short one-hundred and twenty-three minute long film. Taken as a whole, and thanks to

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the film’s many accomplishments, Taymor does not miss her mark and the audience still feels a heartfelt connection to the poignant character.

The sad and painful figure of Frida Kahlo is ultimately portrayed very successfully in Julie Taymor’s *Frida*. Though she lived through countless tragedies and difficult relationships, Kahlo had a zest for life and was stated as having “immense joy in living” despite these hardships.\(^{18}\) She said, “I am not sick. I am broken. But I am happy as long as I can paint.”\(^{19}\) This joy is seen in *Frida* through the character’s love for her father, fiery romance with Diego, passion for communism, and especially the intensity of her artwork. Although the historic accuracy, skillful directing, and superb acting by Hayek, Molina, Rush, and others move *Frida* along eloquently, it is ultimately the original use of imagery that carries the film. Both *real and surreal*, the portrayal echoes Kahlo’s own artistry and depicts the powerful emotion and strength she possessed in a way rarely seen in cinema.

Concerning death, Kahlo is quoted as saying: “I hope the leaving is joyful; and I hope never to return” (*The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*). Like Frida Kahlo herself, Julie Taymor’s *Frida* leaves us with a visual opera of the artist’s intimate experience and emotion that proves to be much more than a standard biography.

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\(^{18}\) See *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*.

\(^{19}\) See [www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Frida_Kahlo/](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Frida_Kahlo/).
The Artwork of Frida Kahlo

Top left: Frieda (Frida) and Diego Rivera, general view; Top right: Henry Ford Hospital; Bottom left: A Few Small Nips; Bottom right: Self Portrait with Cropped Hair

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20 Top left: Frieda (Frida) and Diego Rivera, general view; Top right: Henry Ford Hospital; Bottom left: A Few Small Nips; Bottom right: Self Portrait with Cropped Hair
The Artwork of Frida Kahlo (continued) 21

21 Top left: The Two Fridas; Top right: What the Water Gave; Bottom left: Self Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States; Bottom right: The Dream or The Bed