

Frida

¿Qué Más Quieres?

In dealing with a story too rich to treat exhaustively, this film employs not merely the exclusion of historical facts that are dramatically irrelevant, but also the streamlining and condensing of events by means of synecdoche. The audience is asked to familiarize itself with only one of Frida's sisters, one of her pregnancies and one city in the United States. For instance, as the designated sister, the Cristina of the film visits Frida in the hospital after her accident, while Matilde was Frida's principal visitor in history. This simplification also serves to intensify the irony of Cristina's "betrayal." The unavoidable episode involving the Rockefeller Center mural anchors the United States action in New York City. Frida's miscarriage is therefore imported from Detroit, requiring the omission of the words *Henry Ford Hospital* from the bed in her painting. Chavela Vargas is emblematic of many "ghosts" from the real Frida's past. Frida's Paris lover is a representative exemplar who stands in for Nickolas Muray, Isamu Noguchi and many others. Gracie too is told that she is neither the first nor the last in her category. The victims of this telescoping can take consolation in the fact that "some people have to get shot in a revolution."

The real Frida's right leg had been affected by childhood polio. Omission of this fact allows the adolescent Frida to be depicted so as to maximize the contrast between her condition before and after the accident. For the paronymically curious, the epithet *panzón* is derived from the same Latin source as the English word *paunch*.

Diego's auditorium mural issues the call to adventure, welcomes Frida with open arms and offers the mixed blessing of a Faustian bargain, which Frida implicitly accepts when she advances to stand beneath it. Frida then immediately begins paying the price by going off to experience her accident.

The lens flare near the end of *Heavenly Creatures* functions as an assurance of salvation. A similar role in *Frida* is performed by gold dust. This device is of such symbolic utility that it would have been a perfectly reasonable invention had it not been provided by history. Recall the tradition of mythical female taboo breakers. These intuitive women transgress because they know that the breaking of eggs can eventually yield omelets, while short-sighted men can only grieve over the broken eggs. When the gold rains down on Frida like a celestial benediction, it is annunciatory both of the pending breaking of eggs (almost literally in Frida's case) as well as the promise of future omelets. As if part of a sacred rite, Frida is marked and anointed as the chosen one in preparation for her ordeal of initiation. During this episode, Frida may serve as a compassion-evoking sufferer, in accord with Abelard's concept discussed previously. Viewers are at least invited to count their blessings. But eyes should be kept on the prize, for these are the lemons with which Frida will make lemonade. It is also of note that the sacrament is mediated by a man of the working class, with which Frida will strongly identify.

Diego discovers and examines Frida's self-portrait and is then seen arriving at her home. Excepting the intervening shot of her painting, a match-on-smoke implies their compatibility. Though a vocal anti-smoking lobby opposes such cinematic imagery, the film is already rated R,

and smoking, which Frida herself characterizes it as a vice, is reflected in such paintings of hers as *My Parrots and I* and *Me and My Doll*.

No small factor was the acquisition of permission to reproduce Frida's paintings. Picasso's were not allowed to be shown in *Surviving Picasso*. Similarly, permission to use Jacqueline Du Pré's recording of the Elgar cello concerto was withheld from the makers of *Hillary and Jacky*.

Frida may have actually met Diego formally at one of Tina Modotti's parties, but Frida and Diego both told the story depicted in the film. Lupe says that Diego has had half the women at Tina's party, and Tina may have been the most immediate cause of Lupe's breakup with Diego in real life. When Lupe says, "I'm his wife. I *was* his wife," a shot of Diego and Tina embracing intervenes between the two sentences. If Ashley Judd's accent does not sound idiomatically Italian, then perhaps it can be rationalized as an English translation of Italian-accented Spanish. Judd's most Italianate moment may be her expression of disappointment as Lupe begins to disrupt the wedding reception.

Frida's bogus European wedding attire is a red herring that teases those familiar with her biography. It also provides a setup for her painting *The Two Fridas*. Frida's Mexican heritage is supplemented by another that could hardly be more distinctive. Her father calls himself "a German Jew," but the name *Kahlo* is no more German than it is Mexican (and is no more Mexican than is *Hayek*). Supposedly, when Enrico Fermi asked his famous question about extraterrestrials ("Where are they?"), Leo Szilard replied, "They are among us, but they call themselves Hungarians." In *The English Patient*, Madox tells Almásy, "You're Hungarian. You always disagree."

During her DVD commentary, Julie Taymor wonders how many people catch Frida's very appropriate mythical reference to Medea, which is this writer's favorite moment in the film (the second favorite is the sound Frida makes when Diego comes to bed on their wedding night). The opportunity to savor this element is denied to the hearing-impaired because the English captions misinterpret the word as Spanish for "liar." Earlier, these captions misinterpret the first but not the second instance of the use of the word *mole* as "morning." Also, the story of Medea is paralleled by that of La Llorona, a song about whom is sung twice in the film.

A false impression is invited when two historical facts are juxtaposed but not explained. The audience is allowed to infer that the seemingly intact fetal specimen Frida observes is her son, apparently contradicting her previous statement that "the baby came out in pieces." In real life, Frida wanted her son portrayed as he *should* have looked, and Diego obtained medical books for her to consult. The cinematic Frida is thus best thought of as creating an idealized portrait with the aid of an anonymous specimen. This begins what might be called the "that's-what-killed-the-dog" sequence, with Frida's miscarriage, her mother's illness, her sister's black eye and her mother's death following in rapid succession.

Nelson Rockefeller is not reduced to a mere demonized caricature, and the plot survives the omission of Diego's offer to include Lincoln in the mural.

Lucienne Bloch was staying with the Riveras when Frida had her miscarriage. The film concentrates on the Frida/Diego relationship, to which Lucienne would be extraneous. Lucienne accompanied Frida back to Mexico, but the actual train travel is not depicted. The real Frida's first words to Lucienne were "I hate you," but they became good friends. This formula of a rocky start to a friendship with a woman is played out with Lupe and need not be repeated. An assistant seen on the scaffolding in front of the Rockefeller Center mural appears to be a woman and could be taken as Lucienne.

It will only be after Diego paints additional murals in New York that he will not “even have enough to get to Chicago.”

Cristina’s marital troubles add plausibility to her affair with Diego, prior to which she tells Frida, “[Y]ou are lucky to have him. I feel so desperate every day.”

A friend of mine once opined that Loreena Bobbit must be the best lover in history because her husband “went back.” Cristina thinks of going back to her husband and Frida says, “Well, you’re not.” Frida, however, repeatedly goes back to Diego. After Frida’s father offers “a short memory” as the most important factor for a good marriage, she takes these words of wisdom to heart almost pathologically.

Diego says that he and Frida may have been “born for each other” and that people will “have never seen a better match.” But even if they are in some sense soul mates, Tina is right to describe their union as “courageous.”

All relationships have an upside and a downside and involve compromise. Frida and Diego could have conceivably found partners with less objectionable downsides. But it is unlikely that either could have found a partner with a better upside. Additionally, the downside provides conflict, which is the foundation of drama, and without which the story might not be worth dramatizing. In the event, great benefit derives from the dynamic tension between the frequent underestimation of human endurance and the fact that hell hath no fury This also recalls Robert Donington’s observation that Richard Wagner “achieved . . . artistic maturity to the ultimate benefit of the world but at appalling cost to himself.”

After Frida explains her painting *A Few Small Nips*, the camera lingers on her for a moment as she is reminded that, like the man in the painting, her father too is bereft of his wife. This inspires her to visit him in the next scene, the initial exchange in which would make a good opening for a trailer: With the Miramax logo on screen, there would be heard a tapping sound. Then a male voice says, “Who’s that?” A female voice says, “The ghost of Frida Kahlo.” The male voice says, “Oh, I remember her.”

In real life, “that American actress” was Paulette Goddard.

That the soundtrack features an old recording of Chavela Vargas singing *Paloma Negra* is itself sufficiently wonderful to cover a multitude of sins. But beyond that, half a century after singing for the real Frida, Vargas appears and sings to Hayek’s Frida in a scene with the character of a séance.

In addition to their suspicion about Diego, the police would have had good grounds for questioning Frida because she was acquainted not only with Trotsky but also with his murderer, Ramón Mercader, whom she met in Paris and who dined in her home.

During the montage that spans the 1940s, it would have been nice to glimpse Frida’s students, Los Fridos, taking instruction from Frida in her home and later painting the walls of a *pulquería*. Also amusing would have been the incident, recounted by Hayden Herrera, where Diego and Frida whistle the “internationale” to find each other in a crowd.

When Diego leaves to go to Frida’s exhibition, Frida calls for Cristina, perhaps only to arrange logistics. But calling Cristina has already been associated with the administration of drugs. In the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Hector Berlioz, an artist partakes of a nonlethal but dream-inducing dose of opium. The flashback employed as a framing device also seems consistent with the effects of narcotics on an artist. Additionally, history related from a biased point of view, as by Salieri in *Amadeus*, is always to be taken with a grain of salt. Recalling “the imperfect subjunctive” of *Heavenly Creatures*, there is no absolute historical consensus regarding many events in Frida’s life. For instance, there is disagreement as to the location of her

wedding reception, even among those who attended it. Like the image of her fetus, the story may be taken as idealized. And forgiveness for any anachronism may be implied by Frida's question to Alex: "What difference does it make what order you read it in?"

The flashback that constitutes the bulk of the film is not absolutely discreet. It dovetails and harmonizes with the arrival of Frida at her exhibition in her "floating bed." The historical Frida actually did preside over this event from her bed, though she may have traveled there in an ambulance while her bed was trucked separately.

This film certainly has its share of detractors. But a mixed and polarized critical reception at least suggests something distinctive, while universal acclaim arouses suspicion of something safe, inoffensive and familiar. The latter should not be expected from so singular an auteur as Julie Taymor.

Even before Edward Norton's uncredited writing contributions are considered, the fact that the screenplay is credited to four writers could be taken as a red flag. For many, certain portions of the dialogue do seem to constitute the least satisfying elements in the film. But, as with Frida's own Faustian bargain, the bestial must be accepted along with the beautiful. Shakespeare was not above throwing bones to the groundlings, such as those who might "sit on the floor of a market in Toluca selling tortillas." Any naïveté in the style of the film reflects and is informed by the style of Frida's paintings. It can also be rationalized as Riveran populism and parallels the decision to perform the dialogue in English. And despite the reservations expressed in some quarters about Hayek, for Taymor's particular treatment, she is ideally cast and, incidentally, does an excellent job passing for a teenager.

The film's disclaimer states that some events may have been fictionalized, but certainly far fewer than were fictionalized by the self-mythologizing characters depicted. The filmmakers adhere to the standard practice of printing the legend, which was the policy of Frida and Diego themselves. For example, Frida was born in 1907, but claimed to have been born in 1910, calling herself a daughter of the revolution. This follows the tradition of George M. Cohan as a yankee-doodle dandy born on the fourth of July. For Rouben Mamoulian, "What survives best is myth, poetry. Realism dies." Therefore, the filmmakers need not trouble themselves to remove all of the story's mythical accretions.

At one theater, protestors complained that Molina and Banderas are Europeans and thus not Mexican enough. Protests concerning the casting of Rush and Judd seem to have been delegated to the Russians and Italians, respectively. One sign claimed that Maria Felix (Rivera's fourth wife) had said that Salma would not make a good Frida. So? George Bush said, "No new taxes." If that is the game that is to be played, then this writer will put the opinion of Chavela Vargas up against that of Maria Felix any day, not to mention the approval of Frida's niece Isolde recounted by Salma Hayek in a featurette on the DVD. And even if actors could be found with a greater physical resemblance to the historical people, they would almost certainly be far less talented and less capable of drawing an audience. And furthermore, at least Alfred Molina may have gotten within 50 pounds of Rivera, whereas Ruben Blades in *Cradle Will Rock* may not have gotten within 100.

In opera, great music and spectacle can save a weak libretto. Many of Schubert's songs are set to lyrics that pose no danger of outshining the music. Elliot Goldenthal's *Score*, which won the Golden Globe and the Academy Award, immediately draws attention through the inspired use of the glass harmonica. The first track on the soundtrack CD is titled "Benediction and Dream." This may be taken as a benediction from the filmmakers to Frida, with the flashback as Frida's dream, and the entire film as filmmakers' dream. The second track is titled "The

Floating Bed.” Frida lies in her bed, which floats above the ground as it is being carried and as it rides in a truck. The film thus begins and ends with an image of Frida in a floating bed. The “bloody accordion” in the lyrics of “*Alcoba Azul*” recalls the compressive buckling of the bus and the injuries of its occupants during the accident. Nonoriginal songs were chosen from among the favorites of Frida and Diego, and reflect their admirable taste.

As in *Heavenly Creatures*, there is occasional play with the ontological status of music similar to what Robert Stam calls the “de-acousmatization” that occurs when the man behind the curtain is discovered to be the voice of the Wizard of Oz. *La Llorona* is heard and then Chavela Vargas is discovered singing it. Seen on the enhanced soundtrack CD, but not in the film, Los Cojolites are discovered singing *El Conejo* as Frida’s party is driven to the pyramids.

One of the more curious reviews of this film is that of Ella Taylor in *LA Weekly*, 10/25-30/02. She writes, “I doubt whether Kahlo was ever quite the cheeky minx that Hayek portrays.” Taylor’s doubt notwithstanding, the received view is that “cheeky minx” would not begin to approach the facts. Taylor finds Diego “incongruously underplayed.” For people such as Frida and Diego, this would almost seem unavoidable. Of another medium, Frida herself said, “Literature is terrible for representing and giving volume to interior noises, so it’s not my fault if instead of sounding like a heart, I sound like a broken clock.”

Taylor has Frida telling Diego that he has “made people think about their ideals. What other painter can claim that?” Taylor replies to her misquotation, “Er, Picasso, maybe?” Er, before *Guernica*? Frida’s statement is made in 1933 and the ideals referred to are obviously political. With *Guernica* not to be painted until 1937, what work by Picasso was then capable of arousing passions beyond the domain of aesthetics? Continuing the temporal confusion, Taylor correctly dates Kahlo’s death to 1954, but also refers to this as being more than half a century prior to the time of her writing in 2002.

Taylor writes, “I’m not sure which image is the more gratuitously sickening: Kahlo impaled by a pole in the trolley-bus crash, or the pretty gold dust that Taymor obsessively sprinkles around the artist’s prone body, or, later, of the full frontal on her gangrenous toes.” This reaction to Frida’s toes demonstrates the vast range of human sensitivity. The subtlety of the image makes it astonishing to this writer that any clinical significance could be inferred from it. Even if the image of the toes is sickening, it would seem to be well-earned because numerous other injuries are downplayed and the film is rated R.

Taylor expresses gratitude for being saved from Madonna and J.Lo, but seems unaware of being spared the *Saving Private Ryan* treatment to which the crash episode is amenable. As noted earlier, this writer accepts the Faustian bargain in which this sanitized, Frida-light, diet-Frida, Frida-for-Dummies, sampler version is the price to be paid in return for the avoidance of immoderate carnage. The superficial, euphemistic style is absolutely consistent with Taylor’s own characterization of this film as “resolutely pop” and “a superior example” of “soap opera.” Since the gore could only have been worse, it is hard to imagine Thomas Bowdler himself not being satisfied. As Chavela Vargas sings in the film, “What more do you want?”

As noted elsewhere, history is to blame for the gold dust, not Taymor. And even if such plausible deniability were not available, it would be difficult to avoid a device of such symbolic efficacy. And “prone”? Quite the contrary.