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DYNAMICS OF BLOOD IN FRIDA KAHLO'S CREATION

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Abstract: *Frida Kahlo is one of the first feminine blazes on the masculine stage of painting. Until the beginning of the 20th century, female artists were associated with water colours, thus Kahlo is a pioneer of oil painting. Moreover, her personalized style gathers elements in a surprising combination that wasn't experienced by art before. One of these elements is blood and its attributes – national, familial, Christian, uterine, malign, sacrificial, exposed and so on, in a vibrant relation with the idea of staginess and mask. An invitation to the never-ending carnival, Frida Kahlo's work doesn't conceive inner transformation, but only interchangeable settings and props. From this point of view her art materializes the dynamics of death.*

Key words: *blood, mask, self-portrait, death, identity, Modernism, Mexico.*

1. Introduction

As a whole Frida Kahlo's contribution to painting history is explosive and exhibitionistic; throwing art consumers against fulfilled suffering, along with an impressionistic function that is not of straight identification, but of reluctance and identitary anxiety.

In the light of a cultural discourse divided into three (what is called *Mexicaness* or national conscience extended to stereotypy and repetition, *political* voice assuming fanatically the promise of Communist judgement and *gender* revealing an impeccable feminist victimised identity), the artist is at the same time the Tehuan Indian, the party activist or the wounded woman by the negligent lustful man.

Artistic value within her existence is inevitably descended from it: „*I painted my own reality...*" (Kettenmann 48) As an artist she didn't fall back on tricks of artisticity; in other words she took parts of herself and exhibited them shamelessly on waiting canvas. Nevertheless, in the virility of her representations we see a supernatural strife to keep up with the exclusivist revolutionary masculine milieu from the beginning of Modernist era.

2. The Concert of Isms

Brought up under the exigency of personal history, all the same Kahlo arises from the meeting of some *isms* which partially explain her artistic style.

Humanist through education and message, as regards life understanding and interrelation, the artist ensured herself a place in the world system through a strong individualization.

From Baroque she absorbed the *allegory*, later on visible in the act of playing between representation akin to kitsch and subliminal meaning. Also, the well-known baroque *staginess* is reduced to a collection

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of masks. For that matter masking is expressed clearly by an impressive number of self-portraits in which motion and gestures are denied from the start. Action is illustrated only symbolically, either as a manifesto, or as a principle, never as motion itself. Therefore, Frida's universe, despite its bold exteriorization, is actually closed, without hope, spinning the never-ending vicious cycle of disease, surgeries, infections and corsets. To malign repeatability she reacts defensively with a sort of evanescent titanic behaviour (excessive attitude, parties, bisexuality, alcohol and narcotics).

Predilection for portrait bares uptight inertness caused by suffering, which can be neither overcome, nor ignored. Pain seduction is too powerful, and the viewer watching her painting is isolated in the same contemplation with the artist. Moreover, *dramatism* is just a pose, manipulating the spectator by an appeal to his emotions and rewarding him, in the end, with the revelation of the main character: the otherness that suffers from centrality. Whether there is or not transformation in Frida Kahlo's art represents the stake for the present study.

In the 19th century the Realist conventions and standards discard was issued and the mirror-like world representation took over. The future artist precociously felt the world as it is through poliomyelitis. The disease acted as a catalyst for an invalided dissimilar category: she is going to be identified by the children in the suburb as peg-leg Frida (*pata de palo*). Later on, her creation is to re-embrace the world in the mirror through nudity elements, anti-capitalist attitude and virulent social critique. The relevance of emotional and social order stands at the centre of her artistic vision that proliferates in accordance with beauty denial and emphasis on contiguous materialism. All the way it macerates the same suffering, changing only the settings.

During Modernism, the cultural age synchronous to the biography under consideration, there is a relation of partial synonymy between Frida and experimental art, seeking solutions not only for art expression, but also for surviving. The background consists in deep radicalism: challenging the whole human body and listing carefully all the deformities of industry and internationalism[1].

The designation of artistic vision as dominant religion meant a concomitant rejection of what is of industrial origin. Accordingly, the artist initiated a valuation of *primitivism*, pointing out an ethnographic interest for Mexican tradition and for the vigour of Aztec legacy in terms of encouraging the reproductive quality of art. The civilization kept alive by proliferating technical ramifications, smoke, wires or pipes contrasts with the simplicity and emotional charge of the non-occidental archaic realm, the cycle of nature and the regenerating strength of the land. Anyone would say: a voluntary insolent simplification, impregnated with dark humour and punitive opprobrium!

Reaching the pinnacle of her creative expression, she is wooed by Surrealism through Breton's mediation: „*The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb*" (Burrus 66), being assigned to Surrealist irrational and subversive matter when as a matter of fact Frida's painting is tremendously studied. The so-called repressed creativity, sub-consciousness par excellence, is actually sought, hunted for its redeeming value. However what drew Frida close to the Surrealists are her humour palpitating of anti-bourgeois social fervour and her ambivalent attitude, sometimes highly negative, towards women: not to be forgotten her virile portraits, blessed with thick eyebrows,

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moustache and constant endurance of traits!

A final historic contract is legalised with the Social Realism having as subscribers: critique, justice, class-fighting and declamation of inconvenient truths, such as unconcealed ugliness. There is a chopper pressure to look attractive and on that score chopping a woman's hair is viewed as a feminist manifesto: *See, if I loved you, it was for your hair; now that you're bald, I don't love you any more*[2].

3. Becoming an Artist

Frida experienced on her own flesh the history of art through all the ordeals to which life itself subjected her. Willingly, she didn't belong to any orientation, trend or artistic group, but she undertook from existence – for creative purposes – everything concerning her physiognomy of crossbred sensibility, respectively her acknowledgement of mixed blood, Indian and Spanish.

Duality in Khalo functions as a general mark, and not only because her origin is shared out between German grandparents on the father's side and Mexicans on the mother's[3]: in a happy onset of the world, a naked child keeps firm the red ribbon of blood bond. Her gesture confirms fertility and continuance of genetic heritage. By means of idyllism and exoticism, the representation could fall under the searing beam of kitsch. Despite this possible imputation, the allegory of her family hid in fact three spontaneous abortions, ovarian infantilism and the case of impossibility in having descendants. Still, the same plate of disconcerting irony after long and hard months of suffering!

Kahlo's basal dualism, fundamental for the development of the future artist, is at constant display within the dyad feminine-masculine, Khalo-Rivera, the dove and the elephant[4] - who is to the same extent the frog, the cannibal, women devourer, an insatiable spirit that lighted up in Frida the whole artistic arsenal, providing her with a meaning against an implacable fate. Frida tested so often physical androgyny (both in clothing or emotions) in revenge on man for his affairs, for being caught in the search and consumption of plural femininity. An early desire to overthrow the traditional roles shared within Mexican society is obvious in her revolted behaviour against the husband.

Modern tragedian, with a well-defined appetence for blood expressing metaphysical suffering and Christian passion, Kahlo witnesses above ground her own death, without ceasing to hope for a new birth by way of corporal dispersal. Her body, hard-to-bear layer, is going to represent the easel of a medical experiment, reiterated and failed all along the line. Training desperately for the role of wounded animal, inside the theatre of a barren world, with a leap in time cancelled by adverse nature[5], the human called Frida isn't in the know of metamorphosis, but only in the know of arrows and nails constellation.

Concomitantly, almost invariably, by means of her underneath ribbons, the artist reminds the viewer under homage or the silent partner under commission that she paints for him. Dedication has a symbolic value in what concerns her personalised staging: *I find myself here under your eyes for your own privilege* – the artist implies. The allegoric homage that commemorates an event – mostly traumatizing – belongs to the 150 years old tradition of altarpiece (*retablo*). Kahlo's amendment consists in putting aside the religious contextualization and getting inspiration from her own past, from her own panoply of moments and impressions: „*But for having a word to say, she had to display her scars and personal mythology in front of the audience*" (Souter 168). As painting

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is considered an offering materialising appreciation or hope, it evokes the so-called *ex-votos* that were given to cult homes in the past as a token of gratitude for a personal favour or a blessing. Back then the donee was God himself or a saint, whilst herein Kahlo's god is the doctor whose miraculous doings are acknowledged in spite of the subsequent backfire[6].

Vehement intimacy between Frida and painting produced a style that can be defined as confessional, veracious and visceral. On the canvas met her humours, bones and green wounds. By reason of that meeting it is almost impossible to denounce her creation as pseudo-art, as miming or lack of authentic emotion: „*Her subjects are personal, staggering, grotesque, fantastic, humorous, surrealist, religious and always loaded with feeling*" (Gariff 166). She painted herself notwithstanding solitude or specific feminine dramas. Upon the whole painting is not merely an act of courage, but a manifest narcissist phenomenon, ended up predictably in nightmare, suicide attempt and unceasing absorption of pills.

By restoring the question of origins and valuing blood heritage under the meaning of fertility and renewal of life-death cycle, the artist is concentrated on the ambivalence of self-birth and creation through abortion or double maternal failure[7]: mother's death thwarts her own birth along with all her possible descendants. Blood is the significant of life loss and prostration of it into the work of art; metaphorically it is the stranded train switch on the impeccable sheet of faith.

Ambivalence persists at biological level in Frida's attitude towards the parental figures. Her mother was a bitter Catholic, cruel in her bigotries and very difficult standoff and rejection materialized in her relationship with the daughter. At once her artist-father developed a sustained and understanding complicity up to weakness with his little Frida, being at the same time responsible for early initiation in photographic art. Obviously, he is to blame for the future realism of her portrayal representations. One would say a photorealism *avant la lettre* (compromised only at symbolic level) which is going to characterize her works until the last moment. Just then medicamentary regimen associated with the doddering hand shall dilute her technique[8]. Her closing obsession is given by Stalin's figure, accompanied by Marxist mysticism in which the blood spread by the atomic bomb under the candidature of the American power is purged by ideological commitment. Militancy dressed in Communist shirt with a red star adorning her chest (in one of Rivera's mural ballads) is going to wrap up a new-born body, recovered, freed miraculously by crutches.[9]

3.1. Meaning of Death

In the cosmological vision of painting affiliated firmly to indigenous culture, death (*la pelona*) appears either as object of derision, or as life's step sister; its doings are post-mortem portraiture (*difuntitos*[10]) or annual celebrations with extra amount of cheerfulness, sugar skulls and masks[11].

The skeleton, taking into account its root in popular gravure, isn't terrifying not even when it overlaps the pending sleeping body, therein a rather domestic double than a thrilling one. Either it appears under ground, on the street as a habitant of Mexico, climbed on still life or mystically as a third eye, there is no difference in its meaning. Only when it is marked with the name Frida[12] (in a mess of amorphous fleshes – the last reminiscences of her ancestral existence or fatidic expectorations at the end of repeated infections), the skeleton represents the

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piece de resistance from a pathogen museum. Hidden under a microbial blanket, the being diminished by prolonged suffering and drained off on the canvas in a disparate ontogenesis, is brighten by a large sun – saturated by blood, which doesn't warm her, but it signs her sacrifice. Under the same sacrificial logic it also appears the outstretched body on a movable bed[13], maimed by the action of incisions, fleetingly sustained by the cracked earth and liable to complete swallowing. The dualist solar-lunar principle reduces once again to essence the imagine of back-turned being, dominated by sun in righteous struggle with the feminine appearance, militant in favour of life and governed by moon. Blood leaking towards death from the first half of the painting appears written with demiurgical letters in the second, the sole death accepted being the one concealed under the mask of full life.

Another form of death approved by the artistic vision is death abbreviated through urgency and brutality to pure death, to which intelligence and human coherence haven't gained access yet, exemplified either in suicide[14], or in murder[15].

All together death is poetry, performance inspired from life and long drawn out in art, where the transit niche (the frame) bears the real maculated imprint of pure blood. The outrage is not visible in the act and its representation, but in the shock and disorder pressed against the real: „*<I felt really physically sick. What was I going to do with this gruesome painting of the smashed corpse of my friend, and her blood dripping down all over the frame>*"[16]. The hygienic attitude of society confronted with blood materializes in the desire to remove or destroy a painting which takes to such sanguinary exposures. Another hypostasis of blood – abject violence – maintains artistic ambivalence: mediocre in intention, immaculate in act.

3.2. Meaning of Life

In Aztec belief blood is the most precious man's possession, source of vital energy, and nurture for gods in the constant regeneration of the cosmos: „*Moreover, dignitaries and priests used to cut their legs, ears lob, and the tongue in order to bring the Sun blood tribute*" (Soustelle 151). The honorific function of blood in Aztec society promotes heart on the last hierarchic level of the sacred. Thereby it is considered the blossoming flower, the exclusive complement of the god and dedicating it to him represents the solemnest gesture of abnegation. Kahlo is going to privilege this symbol of *bleeding heart*[17] adapting it for the staging of disillusion, loss and complete seclusion. The disproportionate size of the heart thrown near tottering and disconnected legs (from the superior limbs) personifies beside organic devitalisation, the re-evaluation of a meaningless life. In *The Two Fridas* (1939) in a post-marital halving, the hearts describe the being divided between the Mexican woman - loved and deceived to blood, and the Occidentalized woman - rejected and in jeopardy of bleeding passively to death, kept artificially alive by a surgical clamp. The value of the double doesn't simply refer to separation and marriage crisis, but it carries out the beginning of unresolved dialectic, namely which is the proper mask in facing and handling the real.

The centripetal force that gives course and legitimates the masks procession in Kahlo's painting is failed maternity[18], the uterine blood which scatters not only the sheets but her entire artistic vision, always turned towards this ambivalent feminine product. Its *morbid* quality derives from the reality of the accident, the congenital malformation, the blood evacuation out of her body and the alarming laboratory record. On another hand, its *artistic*

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quality, namely fertility and creation nascence, the flow of blood that binds the six objects of sexuality and miscarriage becomes accordingly the main colour for filling and justifying her existence: „<*My painting carries with it the message of pain [...] Painting completed my life. I lost three children and other things that could have filled this terrible existence. Painting substituted for all this...*>"[19]. Total solitude is emphasised, in addition, by the dimension of the hospital bed, by the desolate nakedness and by the feeble bonds. That is the will exertion to keep in her palm (gathered in a sort of mortuary bouquet): a masculine foetus copied from an anatomical atlas, a snail, an orchid, a steam sterilizer, a bone model and a salmon pink anatomical model. The woman is held captive in an essential realism: „*Frida Kahlo did not paint her reality as it was seen, but as she felt it. The outside world is thereby reduced to its essentials, and a sequence of events condensed into a powerful climax*" (Kettenmann 35).

Although suspected of Surrealism in her artistic work, by means of conspiracy among spiritualism, Freudian analysis and Marxism, her creative potency tends rather towards an unsophisticated surrealism invented for her own sake wherein charisma and humour are powerful devices. The visualization of the bunch of ribbons from Henry Ford Hospital as a bunch of cynical umbilical cords requires slow-motion and microscopic fixation of the viewer's eye separately on each element due to the presence of the snail - symbol for the slow course of non-finalized abortion.

A similar ocular vigilance requires from its audience the work *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), popularized in the Parisian art as a surrealist manifesto out of vying with any other Mexican production. The female-artist approaches the femininity of the water to summarize her existential jungle in a mess of fauna and floral elements, levels and floating ages, melting more paintings in a single fantastic one. Water refers to the *mirror* – the self-consciousness in which she plunges to give colour and shape to the series of self-portraits, the acuteness of the bond identity-rebirth or rediscovery; and to the *window* of childhood through which she used to get free for joining the other Frida. The siphon from the bath restores almost invisibly the blood dropped off the sick leg. Respecting the chronology, in *The Broken Column* (1944) the body is already on loan raiment, from which blood was completely evacuated, the only material of signification being the *flesh* kept in straps and protecting delusively the grace and suppleness of the Ionic column, broken in three. Out of the Christian imaginary grows the theme of martyrdom, the flesh stabbed by nails or arrows, dramatic expression that shows her suffering under the hope of resurrection.

Pain relief is conjured through the presence of a thorns crown that encircles ironically her neck[20]. So, it defeats any possible drawing out of function. In pre-Columbian symbolism thorns are signs of resurrection and rebirth, in Kahlo's symbolism renewed vitality verges on the limits of endurance. The sole act of identifying is the one with the *hummingbird* that hangs from her necklace as a reverse of the traditional meaning: mishap, hurt and death.

Direct witness of consumption with the highest level of symbolization, substitute for her unborn child, signalizing excessive love and concupiscence, the *monkey*[21] is a Pagan agent towards whom Frida displays the blood bond. The red ribbon complicatedly wound and unfurled in an umbilical manner secretes all the endeavours undergone in the maze of relationships, familial intersections and the final homage paid to primates' order.

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4. Conclusion

The martyrdom, drawn out in grotesque in *The Wounded Table* (1940) by signing up the allusion of the last supper, reveals the way in which the artist chooses to circumscribe the truth: by creating the impression of a lie, of a dazzling theatricality. In this respect she possesses a farcical sense of comedy that is deliberately infantile, especially in the way it popularizes a Christian Frida, surrounded by Mexican apostles. Among them a carton Judah or a skeleton express the regression of Eucharistic sacrament thrown away to the floor. For Frida that is a sign for embracing a continuous show state: „*Frida created a galleria of images under the shelter of a mask that had never moaned or cried*" (Souter 216). It is curious how the weeping is just exterior, a symbolic add-on that belongs to the props, allowing her traits the same stretching and firmness, without grimace. Under the hint or announcement of death, her creation oscillates permanently between mask and unmask, between self-concealment and self-exposure. The introspective serious and frozen *face* from the series of self-portraits (with or without curtain) is placed under the stigma of death, a never-ending processional expectance, deprived of the derisory rush of passing away: „*She chose to be incinerated in the crematory, because after so many years spent in a bed along her short life, she wouldn't want to spend an eternity on her back*" (Souter 244). Only cremation can prolong the allusion: death is present altogether and it stays alive by means of art.

Due to her death once with the accident, with the debut of full age, Kahlo seeks in art the way or transition towards a different life. Her painting has restored the rhythm of lost breath and the forgotten flow of blood. The fountain of blood that springs from her chest in one of her works[22] clarifies specific adhesion to life, taken on credit and discharged by painful interests, not so by losing her own body[23], but by ritual killing of life in her creation: the artist doesn't transfigure inert matter, doesn't give life, but she paints indefatigably the poetry of losing it.

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[1] Referring to the United States experience, unveiled in "Self-portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States" (1932), "My Dress Hangs There or New York" (1933)
[2] "*Mira que si te quise, fué por el pelo,/ Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero*" from "Self-portrait with Cropped Hair" (1940) in connection to "Diego and I" (1949) – self-portrait in which her hair works as a noose
[3] "My Grandparents, My Parents and I" (1936)
[4] "Frieda and Diego Rivera or Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera" (1931) – wherein marital union engages also a symbolic tutorship of the Artist Rivera for his future wife in the field of art
[5] "The Wounded Deer or the Little Deer or I am a Poor Little Deer" (1946)
[6] There is to see "Portrait of Dr. Leo Eloesser" (1931), "Self-portrait with the Portrait of Dr. Farill or Self-portrait with Dr. Juan Farill" (1951) – the sole disclosure wherein pigment is substituted by her own blood and the palette function is taken over by her heart
[7] "My Birth or Birth" (1932)
[8] For that is to see "Self-portrait with Stalin or Frida and Stalin" (1954)
[9] "Marxism Will Give Health to the Sick" (1954)
[10] "The Deceased Dimas Rosas at 3 Years Old" (1937)
[11] "Girl with Death Mask" (1938)
[12] "Without Hope" (1945)
[13] "Tree of Hope, Keep Firm" (1946)
[14] "The Suicide of Dorothy Hale" (1938-1939)
[15] "A Few Little Pricks" (1935)
[16] Recounted by Clare Boothe Luce, Dorothy's best friend that had commissioned the portrait for her friend's mother (Kettenmann 47)
[17] "Memory or The Heart" (1937)
[18] "Henry Ford Hospital or The Flying Bed" (1932)
[19] Extras from the artist's diary (Souter 246)
[20] "Self-portrait dedicated to Dr. Eloesser" (1940) or "Self-portrait with Necklace of Thorns"(1940)
[21] "Self-portrait with Monkey" (1940)
[22] "The Love Embrace of the Universe, The Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego and Señor Xólotl" (1949)
[23] „*<I hope the exit is joyful… and I hope never to come back… Frida>*", she wrote in her diary (Kettenmann 84)

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