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GRINGOLANDIA: VISUAL METAPHORS AND FRIDA

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Abstract: *The essay focuses on the visual metaphors of America in Julie Taymor's film entitled Frida (2002) and discusses the ways in which the film constructs and reconstructs with the help of the artist's paintings the world of the thirties America as seen by a third millennium movie.*

Key words: *visual metaphors, Gringolandia, thirties, America, woman artist.*

1. Introduction

Julie Taymor's American production entitled *Frida* (2002) arrives at the peak of the intellectual craze labeled as 'Fridamania.' Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) is the acclaimed and controversial Mexican painter with hybrid ancestry. Her mother was Matilde Calderón y Gonzáles, a Mexican mestiza, and her father, Wilhelm/Guillermo Kahlo, a German-Hungarian Jewish photographer (Sárosdy 2003, Kettenman 7-8). Frida Kahlo's paintings are nowadays increasingly featured in museum exhibitions worldwide and still hold record auction prices while her life has been "variously constructed in books, operas, plays and documentaries" (Clifford 2002). Taymor's movie is in this context a filmic biography abounding in visual tropes about Frida Kahlo's Mexico and her views about the United States and France. The protagonist is subject to "a cinematic transition" (Cristian 2004), that range from corporeal pain to surrealist forms. Kahlo's art in this filmic biography is made complex, controversial and abounding in lyrical digressions. The movie presents us with a version of Frida's life story in visual metaphors that permit complex subjects to be "more intellectually manageable" because biography at its best is "history made personal" (Gehring 2003).

2. Metaphors of the US

Julie Taymor's *Frida* presents this history made into a personal herstory in myriad of private and public perspectives. Among of the most intriguing ones is the sequence when Frida Kahlo (Salma Hayek) and her husband, Diego Rivera (Alfredo Molina), the famous Mexican mural painter, are on their trip to the United States of America. During its almost 19 minutes out of the entire length of this blockbuster American movie – and also occasionally passim – the film presents a comparative visual American Studies project. The "Gringo" country or "Gringolandia," as the protagonist calls the U.S., needs a "cultural rhetoric as interpretive focus" (Mailluox 116). One can view Taymor's film as grabbing this focus that builds around the visual text a heterotopic place for America in concordance with the current trends of

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American Studies. Frida is a cultural locus that encompasses the symbolic cultural centers and also the de-centered places of the U.S. both from an internal and external point of view. This film is similar to other cultural constructions that "create a place for story," while narrativizing "a local cultural real" (Stewart 3). In Taymor's *Frida* the local and the particular meet a general "American mythic imaginary" (Stewart 3) and interpret it, accordingly. As Mexican visitors, Rivera and Kahlo, make up for an interpretive "space on the side of the road" that is essentially a place for a multitude of subversive paths, too. Frida and Diego are both enchanted and resistant to what America might generally and particularly mean to them. As an exercise in cultural otherness the film attempts, as many similar incursions in the style of Kathleen Stewart's "side of the road" approach, "to perform the diacritical cultural poetics of an "Other" [story] of America" (Stewart 7).

Taymor's film presents an intriguing comparative vision in terms of metaphors about the U.S., especially Kahlo's pictorial or verbal America. While exploring her encounter with another America during her stay in the U.S. and after that, the movie, in a reflexive mode, interprets Frida from an American perspective. "We are going to take Gringolandia by storm" says Kahlo, "they are never going to know what hit them" (Taymor 2002). Her words are uttered in Mexico, before leaving, outside the U.S. and define it with the help of the collective pronoun "they" and "them" that culturally distances the speakers from the ethnoscaped object of speech. Frida, conscious of her own hybrid, mestiza, background, sees America as a place of stereotypes, a homogenous place that needs "conquering," that is, redefinition. The most widespread metaphors Europeans and many other nations used to visualize America then relied on its representation "as a country of leveling, erosion, and shallowness" (Kroes 43). In the movie, Frida nourishes similar views before she arrives to the U.S. at the beginning of the thirties. The crisis of representation in the 1930s in the U.S. included themes of dislocation and bewilderment; in this a context any individual was subjected to "the forces of the world rather than the other way round" (Veitch 5). Frida does not entirely adhere to these but Diego, as a potential agringando (Americanized) figure sees the potentials of cultural heterogeneity in the "newness" of the U.S. and enthusiastically claims that: "There is no reason for any artist to go to Europe for inspiration. It is all here: the magnitude, the power, the energy, the sadness, the glory, the youthfulness of America" (Taymor 2002). The film depicts these words on a basis of Max Ernst-like surreal vision of some well-known U.S. metaphors.

These metaphors are presented through a suggestive collage of moving images focusing especially on New York and later only by allusion, to Detroit and Chicago. The film turns here into cartoon-style, a subgenre that stresses a specific critical standpoint of the filmic narrative. The cartoon-collage presents, at first, a steamboat that brings the immigrant crowd to the land of hope, freedom and the pursuit of happiness - with Frida and Diego on board - The Statue of Liberty rising from the waves, and American stamps with the graphics of the Brooklyn Bridge, followed by skyscrapers - metaphors of American's vertical development – embodied by The Empire State Building and The Chrysler Building. Frida's voice subtitles the images of the American myths by subverting them: "I see the majesty that Diego sees. All the American comfort is a myth […] the rich […] thousands are starving" (Taymor 2002). The visual spectacle of the film

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shifts here to a more critical standpoint. The Ford industrial area and the mass-produced Tin Lizzies are presented as explicit metaphors of industrial, corporate and scientific development that lead to an alienated consumer society. The New York Stock Exchange and Wall Street are explicit metaphors of corporate development and cathedrals of capitalism, which are even more disturbing when placed in a period of economic crisis. On the background of the industrialist, urban America, ethnic groups as icons of a multicultural and multiethnic America are represented her by Jewish, Chinese, and French quarters of New York by the suggestive image of banners written in different languages. The intellectual montage of the film builds on the image of the white dove and decadent cocktail glass of the wealthy in symbolic opposition with the image of the workers, and the unemployed queuing on the background of the one-dollar bill and the slogan of "Labor Age" (Taymor 2002).

While in the U.S. Frida tries the American way of life and entertainment: she goes to see the *King Kong* movie and finds "ways to entertain" herself while chewing popcorn. The "Gringo" style of living seems quite surreal. Diego is seen now as a well-known New Yorker, a celebrated artist; more than 50,000 people see his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Arts. As a metaphor of a partially Americanized Rivera through the huge artistic success he encounters, he transforms into a giant King 'Diego' Kong climbing the walls of The Crysler Building while airplanes fly around him in a newsreel-like picture (Taymor 2002). As King Kong, Rivera is on his best way to become a new cult figure of America, an alien giant on his road to fame. He begins to live his own American Dream and starts to be "the most talked about man this side of Rio Grande." Frida gives her own definition of the American Dream. According to the filmic Frida "the Gringos are friendly" but the most important things for them is "to have ambition and to succeed in becoming someone" (Taymor 2002). After participating in several American bohemian parties, Frida is still pessimistic about the American Dream generally and has doubts about the successful metaphors of the America she encounters. She says that "everything about this country inspires" Diego, who is "a big Mexican piñata with enough candy for everyone" (Taymor 2002). However, Frida remains skeptical about Diego's American success.

Another figure in the line of visual metaphors about America is that of the younger Rockefeller (Edward Norton) who is the financial patron of Diego and a symbolic representative of the "the culture of capital" (Munslow 23, 44). Rivera is about to finish painting the mural of the Rockefeller Center's Hall in New York but the Rockefellers do not let him have the figure of Lenin, Trotsky and Engels on the wall because in the thirties' America this offends many. As a criticism of a(ny) critique of America, Diego's artistic mural is erased from the wall. "My painting," claims the politically conscious Diego. "On my wall" replies, in a patronizing mode the young Rockefeller (Taymor 2002). After his political encounter with the corporate head, Diego sharpens his criticism of America in a manner that recalls "the tangible embodiment of everything that is wrong with capitalism" (Kroes 27). His consequently emerging anti-capitalism and anti-Americanism seamlessly blend into each other. It is at this point when the movie seems to gather the visual metaphors of U.S. in a surreal place where Umberto Eco would claim, that the American and non-American clichés "are having a ball" (Eco qtd. in Veitch 114).

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During the time of Diego's artistic crisis, Frida undergoes an abortion, which leads to her hospitalization. The film does not mention any particular place but the painting Frida Kahlo has painted afterwards is entitled *Henry Ford Hospital* o *La cama volando* (1932, oil on metal). The abortion is connected with the Henry Ford Hospital by blending the concepts of infertility with vision of excessive capitalism in the protagonist's post-partum depression. It is after this traumatic experience that Frida insists on going "home" since she does "not belong" and because she is "tired of these people" (Taymor 2002). The film later shows Frida is in a bathtub, another surreal background, now coupled with The Empire State Building at her feet. The water in the bathtub is symbolically the confluence of the East River and the Hudson River. On the fading background of this surreal image, King 'Diego' Kong is falling from a skyscraper in a visual metaphor of Rivera's artistic-ideological rejection that depicts the end of his American Dream that ultimately turns into an American Nightmare. Diego wants to stay and fight for his rights in a democratic culture that grants opportunities for all. Frida refuses to fight in this foreign country not only because she sees herself as already alienated from the person she used to be before arriving to America. She is even more critical when she realizes the consequences of her stay in the U.S. Kahlo is desolate and seems to subscribe here to Ter Braak's words in labeling America as "an entropy, a pointless, senseless waste of energy" (Braak qtd. in Kroes 20). The film freezes here in Frida's painted image of the New York period entitled *Allá cuelga mi vestido* o *New York* (1933, oil collage on wood) where Frida's ethnic clothes symbolizing both her natural and political body dry in the cultural winds of America. For Frida America represents the site for a special cultural exchange. This is an exchange between flickers of joy and long moments of rejection, similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir, who - in her travel report *L'Amérique au jour le jour* - lamented on the fact that while in America "she was torn between excitement and rejection" (de Beauvoir qtd. in Kroes 26).

3. The Comparativist Model

The comparativist approach of *Frida*'s America can be found in the "foreign translation" of Frida Kahlo's works about America. This "foreign translation" that Taymor's film presents is through the interpretation of the character Trotsky, the guest of the Rivera-Kahlo couple. Trotsky's reading Frida's America implies a joint interpretation of the American visual metaphors. As a political refugee in Mexico, he is enchanted not only by the personal style of Frida's pictures but also by the social, ideological and political content these have. The film focuses on three paintings that Trotsky stops at. One is the painting about the suicide of Dorothy Hale entitled *El suicido de Dorothy Hale* (1938-1939, oil on wood), a painting that was ordered by Claire Boothe Luce, the editor of the Vanity Fair magazine rejected the painting because of its horrific content (Kettenman 50, 51). The painting depicts the fall of a beautiful American woman from a skyscraper and can be interpreted as Frida's her critique of the consumer society that enables such tragic things to happen. The second painting pertaining to America is the one that depicts the bathtub scene, entitled *Lo que vi en agua o Lo que el agua me dio* [What I saw in the water or What the water gave me] (1938, oil on canvas). This painting connects back to Frida's New York period and visualizes modern American society with its symbols of power and all material objects depicting the consequent loss of basic human values

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in an industrialized society. The third painting Trotsky encounters in this part of the film is the New York picture entitled *Allá cuelga mi vestido* o *New York* (1933, oil collage on wood) (Taymor 2002). None of these pictures are shown in filmic close-up, the only detail the spectator is able to see is the art collector's name Edward G. Robinson and the price of 200 dollars a piece for which the American art dealer Julien Levy sold these paintings. These paintings become part of the American cultural heritage by the mercantile act they undergo and also by the topic they depict.

Taymor's film offers a double comparativist model of understanding the U.S. both as appraisal and criticism. Similar to Nathaniel West's "self-reflexive" approach about the surrealist American literature of the thirties, "grounded as it is in the anti-aesthetic strategies of Dada and surrealism" (Veitch xvii), *Frida* presents similar self-reflexive tropes in her visual definition of America. Kahlo's visual, surreal metaphors of the U.S. bear a specific importance in her own definition as a woman, as an artist, as Mexican, and as leftist. The cultural critic Barbara Brinson Curiel locates the personal pattern of her Mexican grandmother's immigration to America, saying that her grandmother "did not come to the United States, but the United States came to her" (Brinson Curiel 202). In this regard, Taymor's movie employs visual metaphors about the U.S in such a manner as to suggests that it is not Kahlo who went to the United States but it was rather the United States that 'went' to her. And as a paradox, perhaps the best example of this inversion is the painting that is completely missing from the movie: Kahlo's self-portrait on the border of Mexico and the U.S. entitled *Autoretrato en la frontera entre México y los Estados Unidos* (1932, oil on metal). The painting shows a beautiful woman, the artist herself, balancing between two worlds: Mexico, as the natural land of her ethnicity, and the U.S., as the politically charged industrial-corporatist state, the mirror in which she could see/paint her identity; two seemingly different worlds meeting in Kahlo's private translation, symbiotically and symbolically bordering each other through her natural and political body.

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