

Short Film Analysis: *Frida Kahlo's Corset*

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This film depended upon *mise-en-scene* to articulate its space and composition. Because of this elected style, the actors in the film move about in semi slow motion, as if moving through water, which gives the viewer the time (and responsibility) to analyze what is important in the scene. Through the use of this style, the viewer is more sensitized to movements of actor and camera, spatial relationships, framing, and lighting, whereas in classical Hollywood continuity style, the editing is designed to push the viewer through a progressive narrative (demanding less responsibility).

Since *mise-en-scene* involves such nuanced focus on “everything that goes into the scene,” from framing to sound to set design, the film was shot on set rather than on location, where there could be more control over such composition. This controlled environment elicits the effect of a staged, choreographed piece, more theatrical and poetic than realistic, so that the viewer does feel a certain amount of safe distance from the content. And of course, the film takes as its subject a portrayal of a woman who has become an icon for Latin Americans, feminists,

gays and disabled people, so her story has taken on a kind of popular mythic quality that also creates distance and possibly hyperbole.

Yet the film plays with the idea of “Santa Frida” as martyr. Using Frida Kahlo’s own words and surreal images, it plays with the idea of suffering by turning the clinical object of the corset into an object of arte and personal beauty. Similarly, Christianity, with all its pathos, is evoked and inverted throughout the film. A crown of thorns is adorned as a necklace. Blood is used as paint. Religious hymns accompany the solemn walk of the medic. “Gold dust”, a rare special effect in the film, “enshrines the remains.”

The film also transcends the notion of Kahlo as suffering victim in its use of rich color, poetic text, and voice-over to portray the sensual embodiment of Kahlo, even as it depicts the story of her orthopedic bondage and pain. The medical discourse is subverted as the artist’s language emerges. The cast becomes an extension of her self. The column she paints, as her spine, is cracked and later described as “winged”. The corset is real. The medical colonization of her body, too, is real and painful. But so are the fissures of that reality, that discourse. Through the cracks in the plaster her self emerges, on wings. Frida, who, over the course of the film, moves from a passive body being wrapped in “Gringoland”, to a woman who wraps herself in her own story and art, tells her audience, “I am the subject I know best”. An embodied contradiction to the medical establishment, she is “Still Life”.

The film begins with an extreme close up of the eyes of the actress who plays Kahlo. She looks at us, the audience, and then away. We hear a voice over, a woman with a Mexican accent. “Yo. I. Frida Kahlo”, she says, marking her individuality, and subjectivity from the start. The next shot is text (the title) with voice over that includes translation, a transitional pattern of cutting back and forth that will mark the film throughout, weaving together poetry and visual images.

The next image is a medium shot that frames Frida’s torso and head as we see her slowly, methodically, removing her adornments: her dangling earrings, beads, silky scarves of ‘hibiscus and rose water”, the blossoms in her hair. She tells us, “I shed my skin to the cold light of day”, and the audience begins to anticipate the ritual that will follow, a ritual that involves pain and vulnerability. But she has already evoked the chameleon, the possibility of shedding skins and transforming her colors. “Everything changes, everything flies and goes away”.

The next shot is of a water basin and the Foley sound of water pouring. Then, a squeak when the doctor or nurse (all we see are white hands extending from a white coat) turns the water off. The music now becomes religious chanting, a spiritual hymn. We are transitioning into the ritual we have been anticipating. We see Frida’s hands clasped (as if in prayer?). The nurse (it now seems because of her shoes) walks in measured steps. All is white and sterile. She places the “holy water” on a white table with oversized, crude steel instruments and three rolls of bandages laid out upon it. The *medico*, as the credits list him or her, remains

faceless, anonymous, a pair of hands extending from the white coat, now dipping bandages into the water, a baptism.

“Wounded deer. Splattered tears.”

Pain, sadness.

Now we see a shot of Kahlo’s bare back. The white coat begins to encase Kahlo in her corset, wrapping the bandages around her. The shot is only of their torsos, no faces. The voice over tells the story of Kahlo’s being “cut and wrapped and bound” in Gringolandia, where the people wear white, cold faces of “uncooked bread”. Kahlo raises her arms, Christlike, so the white coat can do his/her work but her compliance is superficial. The voice over and text tell us, “Deep in my belly there are anarchists rising”.

The theme of resistance and defiance becomes more developed from this point on. It’s unclear who is imagined as addressee when Kahlo says. “You hear what you want to hear”. Is it the medical establishment? The Gringos? The audience who comes to see her art? And since this is a reenactment, who is the modern imagined audience in this depiction of Kahlo’s resistance and icon status? When Kahlo writes/speaks “My blood oozes a tale of others’ fears” she might be speaking to the able-bodied world or the medical establishment that creates a taboo around bodies broken, disfigured, or vulnerable.

“Do you believe everything you hear? My blood writes its own tale.”

Her suffering is her own.

“Only a mountain will understand a mountain.”

Here, there is reference to a hidden script, insider knowledge, a privileged audience that doesn't project fear onto her body, written in blood, that extends beyond the dominant discourse whose authenticity is put into question. When we see Kahlo later, shot in her “crab shell” that “captures my pain, my pictures, my pleasure” we know she is not trapped because she scuttles sideways, on the margins, “towards ourselves”. (Who is now included in the use of “our”?) Now she begins to wrap herself in her own bandages; a series of shots that blur and dissolve into each other. The pace quickens and the fragments of poetry collide. The voice over competes with the visual scraps of text she is wrapping herself with.

“Portrait of Mexico, See me fly.”

The camera pans away and we see Kahlo sitting proudly in her newly painted corset with its planets and cracked column running through her body's core. The image we're left with reminds us of one of her own self-portraits, a final homage to the artist.