

## NEGOTIATED FILMS:

### ALBERTO A. ISAAC'S *MUJERES IN SUMISAS* AND JULIE TAYMOR'S *FRIDA*

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As E. György Szőnyi wrote in *Pictura & Scriptura: Hagyományalapú kulturális reprezentációk huszadik századi elméletei* [Pictura and Scriptura: Twentieth-century Theories of Tradition-based Cultural Representations],

[W]e live our lives amidst words and images. Whatever we think, act, perceive and reflect on we put into words and this system of signs covers the world and our knowledge of the visible. Yet, we often get the impression that we are more connected to reality through vision than through language. Do we not first understand something and only then think about it or verbalize it? Moreover, are we able to see 'neutrally,' that is, without our vision being influenced by our existing (and verbalizable) experiences and images? The nature of and relationship between words and images has preoccupied humans since immemorial times, and today in the wake of the new multimedia revolution, these questions are perhaps more important than ever.<sup>1</sup>

In tandem with the ideas above, especially with the concept of the reality through vision, is today the question of images, stereotypes and representation in films, with one of the most complex and challenging representations concerning women in mainstream cinemas. Moreover, in the burgeoning world of contemporary multimedia, moving images bring up not only an increasingly labyrinthine perspective for interpretation but representations as such raise even more questions than before. Especially, if pleasure is involved in the game (of watching films).

Visual pleasure in the mainstream cinema, as Christine Gledhill claimed, is generally organized so as to "console and flatter the patriarchal ego and its Unconscious"<sup>2</sup> by reproducing ideological film structures that maintain an illusory image about people, but particularly about women. In Claire Johnston's view, the woman in Hollywood's dream facto-

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<sup>1</sup> Szőnyi E. György, *Pictura & Scriptura: Hagyományalapú kulturális reprezentációk huszadik századi elméletei* (Szeged: JATE Press, 2004), translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," in Sue Thornham, ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 167.

ries "is presented as what she represents for man."<sup>3</sup> This image is mostly achieved by the movie plot and the task of feminist film criticism is here to challenge this very traditional narrative line. Gaylyn Studlar finds the psychoanalytical approach unsatisfactory in the study of visual pleasure, especially when it comes to women in cinema and remarks that "[M]any of the assumptions adopted by film theorists from Freudian metapsychology or Jacques Lacan seem inadequate in accounting for visual pleasure" because in order to understand "the structure of looking, visual pleasure must be connected to its earliest manifestations in infancy"<sup>4</sup>, which exclude a gendered vision on women's image. In this context, it seems that "strict Freudian models", are not more than "a dead end for feminist-psychoanalytic theory."<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, feminist film critics should rather focus on "pre-Oedipal conflicts" that invite "consideration of responses to film by spectators of both sexes that may conflict with conscious cultural assumptions about sexual difference"<sup>6</sup> and gender identity. Apart from the suggestion above, Noël Carroll suggests that a pragmatic feminist approach in film should drop all previous theoretical assumptions with which they formerly argued and start their quest with an entirely new mode of investigation that is not based on patriarchal laws. Carroll supposes that

many feminist theorists will say that I mistakenly assume that they accept the pre-suppositions of contemporary film theory whole cloth, when, in fact, they reject its patriarchal orientation and are attempting to alter it in fundamental ways by, for example, developing a theory of the female subject. [...] However, in doing this they are essentially rebuilding the framework of contemporary film theory from the inside, whereas if I am right one ought not to try to rebuild it. One ought to scrap it entirely. One cannot develop a theory of female subject positioning if the very notion of subject positioning is insupportable.<sup>7</sup>

This strategy is employed primarily for the intradiegetic world of the movies but what needs to be taken into serious consideration also it is the technological dimension in filmmaking. As Laura Mulvey wrote in her seminal essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in Johnston, ed., *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: California University Press, 1985), 616.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 605.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>7</sup> Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 7–8.

Cinema," the use of technical advances as extradiegetical tools can also be effective in new representations of women in films<sup>8</sup>—but this topic deserves a larger detour than this present essay.

Nevertheless, in order to make the female subjects' positions more acceptable, feminist film critics have continuously sought to reinterpret various existing definitions, identities, ossified concepts and structures in both filmic and feminist theories, enabling them to perform various negotiations on the representation of women in given films in order to reveal the still existing contradictions in terms of gender representation. Gledhill observed that there is a considerable source of so-called "negotiation"<sup>9</sup> in many contemporary mainstream movies, including blockbuster films. This negotiation originates in the combination of different modes of representation, which facilitate films to function, on one hand, on the level of the illusionary inherent in the fictional production (and which is responsible for producing what Mulvey coined as "visual pleasure") and, on the other hand, on a more realist level (guided by the imperatives of feminist critique), which is synchronous with the social, political and economic realities inside and outside the narrative world of film.

In this framework, the aim of negotiation is to fuse the intradiegetical "visual pleasure" provided by classical narrative cinema with the practice of alternative filmmaking into a visual construction that would resemble the pleasurable negotiation of an enjoyable feminist film, which Johnston termed as "counter-cinema."<sup>10</sup> Gledhill emphasizes that the illusionary and realist modes described above not only may but they should coexist within the same text, similar to the co-habitat of more genres (and subgenres) within a film, or resembling that of the formative (artistic) and realistic (documentarist) tendencies in the cinema. According to Gledhill, negotiations take place on three levels:<sup>11</sup> the first level is the institutional level, (for example, the studio), the second is the textual level (such is the story line), while the third level is that of spectatorship (involving for example, gender conscious viewers). A successful negotiation is therefore a threefold process that can create a special type of film labelled as the "negotiated cinema"<sup>12</sup> or negotiated films.

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Sue Thornham, ed., *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 58–69.

<sup>9</sup> Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," 176.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," 96.

<sup>11</sup> Gledhill, "Pleasurable Negotiations," 169.

<sup>12</sup> Réka M. Cristian, "Gender and Cinema: All Sides of the Camera," in Réka M. Cristian and Zoltán Dragon, *Encounters of the Filmic Kind: Guidebook to Film Theories* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2008), 96.

The negotiated films take into consideration the basic elements of traditional visual narratives and classical narrative cinema – ensuring a wide, possibly even a global audience and subsequent marketability as opposed to the revolutionary, avant-garde, art, independent and counter-cinema films that have a more limited number of viewers and are mostly locally exhibited – with the gender conscious representation of women in contemporary culture. This stance is in line with the strategy Johnston proposes when she says that it is imperative to develop a collective work producing a new type of film, which reflects a revolutionary strategy that challenges traditional representations of women in mainstream cinema,<sup>13</sup> and is similar to what E. Ann Kaplan advocates. Kaplan suggests that the new films should not only intradiegetically deny the visual gratification dominant cinema provides but these films must also seek to introduce the audience into new habits of watching by educating spectators to “like the pleasure of learning”, instead of just simply accepting the “pleasure of recognition/identification”<sup>14</sup> that classic narrative cinema ensures.

In the following, I will discuss two examples of such negotiated films that also educate their spectators through the pleasure of learning. Both movies were produced in North America; the first in the mid-1990s, while the second at the beginning of the 2000s. One is a less known Mexican production and the other is an American blockbuster; one is directed by a man, the other by a woman. The first is Alberto Ahumada Isaac’s independent art movie, *Mujeres insumisas*, titled in English as *Rebellious Wives* or *Defiant Women*, sometimes as *Untamed Women* and even *Untamed Souls*, which came out in 1995 in Mexico;<sup>15</sup> the second is Julie Taymor’s blockbuster movie, *Frida*, produced in 2002 in the United States<sup>16</sup>. I have chosen these movies because they are produced in two different cultures but close enough with each other on the two sides of the Mexican-American border; both were made in a time-span of a decade and with directors of different genders; both movies have women as protagonists and all of them are of Mexican origin. Moreover, the topic of each film is concerned the life-course of these Mexican women in their homeland and abroad in a visual narrative strategy that can serve as example for further representations of women in North-American and global cinema.

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<sup>13</sup> Cristian, “Gender and Cinema,” 89.

<sup>14</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 198.

<sup>15</sup> Alberto A. Isaac, dir., *Mujeres insumisas*, produced by Claudio Producciones, Televisine S. A. de C. V., Universidad de Guadalajara, Gobierno del estado de Colima-Universidad de Colima, Fondo Estatal para la cultura y las artes de Colima. 1995, 115 min.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Taymor, dir., *Frida*, Miramax, 2002, 123 min.

Isaac's *Mujeres insumisas* is an evident gender-conscious film based on real-life events. It pictures a group of Mexican women, who decide to leave behind their families and village homes of their native Comala (situated in the Mexican state of Colima) and move to the United States to Los Angeles. Each woman's journey discloses secret encounters within and outside their households, exposes untold individual stories, and uncovers the veiled identities of their subjects by questioning the dominant structures of patriarchy in family and society as such.

According to Rosa Maria Fregoso, "[i]n male-directed [Chicano] films" the audience is most frequently directed to "see how commercial, aesthetic, and political contingencies, circumscribed by male privilege" that coalesce "making it literally impossible to frame the woman as the central subject of cinematic discourse"; in consequence this type of narrative cinema tailors "a socially pertinent discourse to the problem of the [Chicano] male-subject."<sup>17</sup> However, apart from the stream of American Chicano and Mexican films—most notably in those produced at the end of the twentieth century—Isaac and his celluloid story do the contrary. This movie is a rare gem of feminist representation of Mexican women that bears the mark of the "pleasurable negotiation of an enjoyable counter-cinema",<sup>18</sup> where the visual pleasure characteristic of classical narrative films is pragmatically fused with conscious practices of alternative filmmaking (in other words, it is based on real-life events and has, in parts, an almost documentarist flavor) in order to have a more realistic and a genuinely political correct mode of gender and identity representation.

Isaac's film sets its discursive mode right from the beginning with a San Onofrio quotation, an important motto highlighted also by critics, which says that "[W]oman, with respect to man, is neither worse nor better; [she] is something else."<sup>19</sup> The women of Comala are indeed "something else": in this film they seem, at the beginning of the movie, to be like everyone else in the village but soon it becomes evident that behind the public idyll of their compulsory, everyday stories these individuals conceal most of their private lives. To put it another way, they live a masked, false life. Confined for the greater part of their days (and nights) to the domestic realm of their kitchen and house, being forced into an imposed 'proper' place within the ossified patriarchal symbolic order, they live and act accordingly but only to a point in the intradiegetic time, when

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<sup>17</sup> Rosa Maria, Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis/London, University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Cristian, "Gender and Cinema," 96.

<sup>19</sup> David Wilt, "Alberto Isaac, Film Director," accessed September 04, 2022, <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~dwilt/isaac.htm>, page created on May 14, 2001.

they decide to change the world around them. And since such change at the local level would be virtually impossible because of the norms and laws of their rigid culture, these women decide to take control of their lives by leaving their hearth (*comal*) and the town of Comala. This is the moment in the movie when the housewives cease to be 'normal,' ordinary wives confined in stereotypical roles (as they do in most mainstream visual narratives) and become *mujeres insumisas*, those rebellious, defiant women developing into extraordinary actors of their ordinary lives. Indeed, as David Wilt writes, "[w]hile the actions of the women in *Mujeres insumisas* are out of the ordinary, the most touching and impressive aspect of the movie is the representation of the true friendship and support which exists between the [...] protagonists."<sup>20</sup> This strong, sisterly tie binds these Comala women into an unusual protagonist-group of actors, with each embodying various identity features invisible up to a certain point in Isaac's visual narrative but which gradually grow into a visible form, into a visual documentary reflecting women's life narratives intertwined into a coherent plot of gender subversion.<sup>21</sup>

The visual documentary of *Mujeres insumisas* becomes a story of stories, unveiling, with every event, an important aspect of each woman's intriguing personality. The characters' concealed life-episodes include, besides obscured past stories, also a number of suppressed domestic assaults: Clotilde, for example, was frequently beaten by her husband, who cold-heartedly even snapped several of her fingers making her unable to work for a time; Chayo struggled each day to spoon-feed her obstinate, elderly mother-in-law being meanwhile silenced by her continuously abusive husband; Isabel had a disabled daughter and a dysfunctional family with whom she was not allowed to actively communicate, while Ema had to endure her husband's constant sexual abuse. With Gloria Anzaldúa's words, these women who were concealing their entire lives behind the proper wife-mask, were "doubly threatened" by having "to contend with sexual violence" with their existence constantly "prey to a sense of physical helplessness."<sup>22</sup> However, by running away from their families, the Comala wives leave "the familiar and safe home-ground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain"<sup>23</sup> of a new life and free play of their true identity.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Réka M. Cristian, "Concealed Americans in Alberto Isaac's *Mujeres Insumisas*," in Réka M. Cristian, Andrea Kökény, and György E. Szőnyi, eds., *Confluences: Essays Mapping the Manitoba-Szeged Partnership* (Szeged: JATE Press, 2017), 169.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1985), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>24</sup> Cristian, "Concealed Americans," 170.

Ema, Cloti and Chayo become Anzaldúa-types of new women, *new mestizas*. They are, at the end of the visual narrative, not obeying silent Indian wives in Mexico anymore but turn into strong willed American Chicanas/Xicanas in the U.S. juggling not only cultures and citizenship but also learning (and making the audience also) to see their gender in a more realistic a pluralistic mode. This is indeed a lesson in pleasurable negotiation that is made obvious through the final images of the film with the three women sitting by the breakfast table, giggling, enjoying themselves, exhibiting their individual desires for career or life and making plans for the future, their future, not one that has been pre-written for them. This image stands in symbolic opposition with the images from the beginning of the movie, when these women have apparently lost their self-esteem, living as puppets on ropes in a patriarchal set-up of imposed family romances behind which lies abuse, violence, discrimination and, in many cases even sexual harassment.

The Comala women in Isaac's *Mujeres insumisas* can be confined neither into the classical maternal stereotypes of Mexican culture – the good mother, the Virgen de Guadalupe or the bad mother, La Llorona –, which they avoid simply by running away, nor into that of *mujer mala*, the bad woman, the prostitute. And here is the smart pleasurable negotiation of the gender-work of this film: Chayo, Ema and Clotilde successfully escape the previously mentioned stereotypes (Isabel, unfortunately, becomes herself a version of La Llorona and goes back to her home) but especially that of the *mujer mala* by exhibiting a strong moral stance that prevails over most patriarchal expectations or imposed cultural roles. The trio of Mexican women succeeds in what most (Mexican) men could or did not by transgressing not only their own domestic borders (the home, the village and the state) and but also by a smooth, that is, legal entering into the United States. Here, they achieve not only personal autonomy but also an unprecedented economic freedom and manage to stand on their own feet by opening their business, a private Mexican restaurant. Once in the United States, Chayo, Ema and Cloti successfully (re)assess their racial and national roots, too, which were up to this point in the film less visible facets of their identities—and which they took for granted back in their native Comala. In assessing and reassessing their identity as free, autonomous *mestizas* turned Chicanas in the U.S., Chayo, Ema and Cloti grow from invisible, oppressed, rural figures, into valued members of the urban, multicultural California society.

The Comala women have succeeded through a long journey by first “taking inventory” of their past and various hidden burdens of their private lives; then heading to a “conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions” when they ran away and managed to

"communicate this rupture"<sup>25</sup> through the letter they left to their spouses, to use Anzaldúa's words and stages of liberation outlined in "La consciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness" from *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Ema, Chayo and Cloti revise their life-narratives and reshape their identity by adopting new perspectives after their trans-border migration to the 'other' America behind the border of Mexico: The United States. This road movie mingles stories of self-discovery with that of friendship and overall provides an enjoyable narrative line combined with a visual critique of North American patriarchy. As a result, Isaac's *Mujeres insumisas* succeeds in constructing a counter-cinema of pleasurable negotiation or, in other words, a negotiated Mexican film by infusing element of classical narrative cinema in its otherwise art world.

*Frida*, the other film I chose for discussion, is a biopic about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, a politically active, bisexual woman artist. The movie was written (Hayden Herrera) and directed (Julie Taymor) by women and most of its producers were also women (Salma Hayek, Sarah Green, Nancy Hardin, Lizz Speed, et al.). The protagonist, played by Salma Hayek, has a fluid, artistic body which is (re)-presented in a specter of images: in mirrors, in photos, in Frida Kahlo's self-portraits and in other paintings, in newspaper clippings, and in the character interplay of Hayek as Frida in Taymor's overall vision conceived as a visual performance of femininity.

Taymor's biopic pays homage to the multifaceted Kahlo in its cultural commentary by interweaving the artist's person and art, thus revealing Kahlo's intricate sites of identity. Frida's identity profile is presented through the aestheticized body of her paintings disclosing a person who "speaks to an array of intersecting discursive traditions" that belong to an array of "national, postcolonial, feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, (bi)sexual, surrealist, and magical realist"<sup>26</sup> contexts. The protagonist of *Frida* embodies the inner reality of emotions which materialize in eccentric visual representations by disclosing an unusual perception of love coupled with bodily pain. The private Kahlo appears, consequently, in a number of naïve, surrealist forms through which Frida, the artist, finds a way of expressing and negotiating her identity, a quest adapted by Taymor in her cinematic discourse, too, making *Frida* an interpretive framework about intricate discourses of liberation and fulfillment encompassing everything "from masterpiece to pure kitsch."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Micki Nyman, "The Disabled Body in Julie Taymor's *Frida*," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3–4 (2010): accessed September 04, 2022, <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1274>.

<sup>27</sup> Rex Reed, "Frida: A Lush, Sensuous Triumph," *The New York Observer*, October 27, 2002: accessed September 04, 2022, <https://observer.com/2002/10/frida-a-lush-sensuous-triumph/>.



In Taymor's movie, Kahlo's art is presented sophisticatedly "prankish as its subject"<sup>28</sup>, while the artist's flamboyant style provides an unusual way of manifesting identity. Kahlo's character exposes her identity through intricate love processes in a film that is an outstanding example of contemporary negotiated film that takes into consideration the basic elements of classical visual narratives (especially the plotline and the main love theme of the movie) by fusing the visual pleasure these movies provide with the subversive practices of alternative filmmaking (counteracting the stereotypical image of the woman in general, and of the woman as artist in particular) into a pleasurable negotiation that represents revised cultural assumptions resulting in a new type of character: the negotiated cinematic character.<sup>29</sup>

On the level of the classical narrative, this film is the love story of Frida and her husband Diego Rivera – played by Alfredo Molina – a classic romance embodying considerable subversive potential, especially in terms of gender issues. Nevertheless, the most important counterhegemonic element in this visual discourse is the alternative display of the woman artist through her own self-portraits. Taymor imports into the cinematic narrative Frida's art works representing the painter as seen by Kahlo herself. The projection of the protagonist's own works in the film, obviously part of a self-reflexive representational strategy, is a crucial element undermining the schemes of classical narrative cinema and pleasurable narratives that exhibit the woman as a sexualized object of scrutiny. To stress this strategy, the film's narrative focuses on the crucial moments of the artist's diegetic life that converge into Kahlo's paintings that are cloned into the film as moving images. These 'edited' images turn into facsimiles of Kahlo's painted canvases while the protagonist becomes a negotiated cinematic character and the model for an alternative cinematic practice of the woman's self-representation. *Frida* becomes a personal history revised through Kahlo's paintings culminating in a gendered account of an idiosyncratic art history. Taymor reinterprets the traditional portraits of the artist and affirms a novel view on Kahlo's life and work by juxtaposing the layers of history's grand narratives with the unconventional stories of Frida's visual and written documents. (Actually, many of Kahlo's paintings display crucial moments of her identity quest contextualized in a regional American crisis of representation that occurred in great part during the worldwide economic uncertainty culminating in the Great Depression.) Kahlo's paintings in the film depict Frida's bodyscape of explicit signs, comprising a natural body, where the physical

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Réka M. Cristian, *Cultural Vistas and Sites of Identity: Essays on Literature, Film, and American Studies* (Szeged: AMERICANA E-Books), 2011, accessed September 05, 2022, <https://ebooks.americanaejournal.hu/books/cultural-vistas-and-sites-of-identity/>.

figure is combined with the artist's body politic reflecting gender-conscious representation of her own body battles. These features depict Frida's heterogenous identity, the result of a multitude of subtle negotiations between Kahlo as a radical artist and activist, and Frida as an exquisite woman represented by her artistic bodies displaying her multiple identities through a myriad of images in mirrors, photographs, in the artist's self-portraits and by different film techniques (such as the setup of dialogues and the use of special language use, Frida's specifically *mestiza*, Tehuana-type of clothing combined with European fashion, and so on), which appear in a refined cinematic performance of femininity in Taymor's version of the artist's life. Similar to the real figure, Taymor's Frida does not claim one distinct identity: she exhibits a range of Fridas which present the identity of the artist within the frames of a classical narrative system by engaging in various encounters that highlight her subjective facets as daughter, as woman, as lover, as wife, as artist, as friend, as modernist, as Mexican, as patient, and as political activist, among many other profiles.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, negotiation generally but especially in the representation of women – which according to Gledhill means “the folding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take”<sup>31</sup> in an intersection of production but also of reception processes – seems to work seamlessly well both in the independent film I chose as well as in the blockbuster movie made in a Hollywood studio. In Isaac's *Mujeres insumisas*, negotiation is achieved through successful attempts to include elements of classical narrative cinema into the body of the art cinema, while in Taymor's *Frida* the negotiation is accomplished by embedding subversive items in the mainstream structure of the Hollywood film. Both movies turn out to be, in this regard, negotiated films. In both films, regardless of their context, production, genre or theme, pleasurable negotiation is achieved primarily through the components of classical narrative cinema that embodies visual pleasure and ensures the causal flow of events but which also, more than often, contains a special, subversive potential that ultimately leads to successful filmic negotiation.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” 169.