

## Photographic Extimacy in the Collage of Images Technologies in Julie Taymor's *Frida*

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### Keywords

Frida Kahlo, film, photography, extimacy

Quite early on in Julie Taymor's 2002 film, *Frida*, the young protagonist (played by Salma Hayek) is seen helping her father, Guillermo Kahlo (Roger Rees) in the dark room to finish the day's development. She casually dries her father's hands, puts away chemicals and chats with her father. All the equipment, the processes, the intimate atmosphere of the dark room lab seems absolutely familiar to her, she's quite obviously at home in this setting, a knowledgeable assistant to the photographer. A bit later, we see her dress like a man for a family sitting, posing in front of her father's large format camera, creating – or recreating – the familiar Frida image that is purely photographic this time. The sequence that presents her trip to the USA with her husband, Diego Rivera (Alfred Molina), is shown in a peculiar way in the film: like a break from the traditional narrative representation, Taymor opts for an avantgarde-inspired photo montage that sums up the trip and the experience as entirely different from the scenes at home.

These are the most significant scenes or techniques where photography interferes with the filmic design of Taymor's adaptation: either on the level of representation, or on the level of the narrative structure. The rest of the film understates the presence of photography with two notable exceptions: Lupe Marín's (Valeria Golino) small exhibit that Frida cannot help but admire, and her trip to Paris, which is rendered in a typically analog photographic manner visually (significantly parting with the rest of the filmic color grading). While photography in the narrative of *Frida* is linked with the father, Guillermo Kahlo, in the light of some recent findings in terms of the Frida Kahlo archive, I would like to argue for the overall photographic influence that is strangely missing from Taylor's movie, but seems to insist as the foreclosed logic of representation on many levels.

First, I am going to focus the background of Frida Kahlo's photographic involvement to argue that photography plays a pivotal part in her later experiments with painting, especially when it comes to the iconic self-portraits. Second, I will relate the way the painterly is preceded and influenced, so to speak, "framed" by the photographic, and find entry points in the filmic representation that explain the strange and seemingly unmotivated appearances of the photographic, and how that transforms the iconic framework of the movie. The return of the strangely repressed mode of representation will explain not only how and why photography is a latent in-between technique that helps the transitions from paintings to filmic scenes, but also how the photographic comes before the paintings and thus prefigures the filmic through the stroke of the brush already. If the paintings, and the scenes emanating from within the creation of those paintings are rendered intimate in the movie, I argue that photography is the foreclosed and uncanny framing device.

## 1. Photographic involvement

Before I turn back to the movie and how it utilizes the multimedial channels in its pictorial representation, I would like to explore how photography comes to play a significant role in Frida Kahlo's life and art. What even those who only watched the movie (and had not heard about Frida Kahlo or her family) know is that Guillermo Kahlo, originally Carl Wilhelm Kahlo, born in the German empire in 1871, was an architectural photographer. He was persuaded by his wife (whose father, Antonio Calderón, was a photographer of Indian descent) to take photography seriously. Guillermo's father-in-law gave him his first full equipment (a large format, wet plate camera with the necessary extras for developing the images), and "the first thing that they did was to go off on a trip around the Republic. They produced a collection of photographs of indigenous and Colonial architecture" (Herrera 2018) that brought Guillermo a commission "by the Mexican government to record the nation's architectural heritage" (ibid). So, in the first decade of the 20th century, "using fine German-made cameras and more than nine hundred glass plates that he prepared himself" (ibid.) he did just that.

As for his style, Guillermo Kahlo was the perfect epitome of an architectural photographer: he "was a fastidious technician with a stubbornly objective approach to what he saw," without any tricky effects or romanticism. As Herrera notes, "[h]e tried to give as much information about the architectural structure he recorded as he possibly could, carefully selecting his vantage point and using light and shade to delineate form" (ibid). Architectural photography was – and still is – a meticulous process, with many fields of knowledge involved, such as art, geometry and physics to produce a two-dimensional documentary image that evokes the three-dimensionality of the object with all lines and shapes perfectly preserved (see an example for the analysis of such a meticulous endeavor in Edith Wharton's reconstruction of the Rheims Cathedral with photographic precision in Kovács 2017, 559). We know from Guillermo Kahlo's glass plates and developed images that he meticulously composed the imagery to erase human subjectivity from the scopical regime as much as possible – both on the side of the subject and on that of the object depicted.

With this kind of photography, there is no subjectivity allowed to show forth, thus it can be argued that this tradition is one of the strongest advocates of what Johanna Zylińska would call "non-human photography" – a tendency that runs opposite the style developed by Frida her own art, as I later demonstrate. According to Zylińska, this type of photography may be seen as "decoupled from human agency and human vision" (Zylińska 2017, 2) as the mechanical or technological aspect of image making becomes more and more inductive in how we take photos of our surroundings. This somewhat techno-deterministic view – or at least a historical stance echoing the early views on the photographic process – resonates with the fastidiousness of Guillermo's methodology of representation: something that is going to be foreclosed in how his daughter utilizes photography as a technological supplement for her self-portraits.

The reason why I think it's important to see Guillermo Kahlo's methodology and style is that his daughter, Frida, studied this type of image-making before she turned to painting – she worked as a dark room assistant to her father, and he "taught her to use a camera and to develop, retouch, and color photographs" (Herrera 2018), so it shouldn't come as a surprise that photography would play a significant role in Frida's life in many aspects. As Herrera notes in Frida Kahlo's biography, "the young Frida did not have much patience for the exacting work, something of her father's fastidiousness, his concern for minute surface detail, would later appear in her own paintings" (Herrera 2018) – a claim that sounds fascinatingly romantic, but in fact does not make justice to the utterly personal touch of Frida's paintings, or her iconic image as an artist.

There is, however, a significant turning point in the life of the Kahlo family – and in that of Mexico, for that matter, that results in the making of the iconic Frida image. Guillermo Kahlo was photographing the Mexican revolution from 1910, and could not help but place himself into a reporter position, thereby assuming a subjective role in the making of images. Looking at her father's developed war images, Frida was later shocked by the terrors appearing on the plates and paper, so much so that it changed how she perceived herself as a subject being photographed. She notes that "I knew that the battlefield of suffering was reflected in my eyes. Ever since then, I started looking straight into the lens, without winking, without smiling, determined to prove I would be a good warrior until the end" (Herrera 2018).

The significance of this claim cannot be understated, as this is a conscious decision that creates the famous, well-known, now-iconic Frida-look that she retains in most of her self-portraits. In other words, it is through photography, photographic representation, objectifying her subject-as-an-artist that she composes the look that would consequently define her painting – and her self-image as an artist. Moreover, we also know today that this iconic definition of the self brings about a less discussed workflow for Frida: she started using photographs as models for her own – and sometimes others' – portraits, whereby the photographic image precedes the painterly, creating an intriguing problem for representation – of Frida Kahlo's art, and of the film by Julie Taymor that creates a moving image re-interpretation of all this.

Before I tackle the issue in detail, let me also note that in 2004, some six thousand photographs were found in the Frida Kahlo's Mexico City home ("Photographing Frida Kahlo"), among which we find not only portraits of herself and the circle of friends throughout her life, but also photographic experiments, documentations of paintings, inspirations for paintings, and studies that directly serve as bases for later paintings among other things like pieces of everyday clothing and objects that Diego Rivera locked up and allowed to be opened only twenty years after his death. The massive amount of photographs in this newly found collection testifies to Frida Kahlo's continued interest in photography: a form of art and a technique that paralleled her work as a painter.

To make Frida more photographically oriented preceding the Taymor-visualization, there are two more notable uses of photography in her life and art that is completely missing from the film, but are pivotal in understanding my insistence on photography being relevant in the present frame of interpretation. The first is the documented study of photography in Nicholas Haz's workshop, where she learned to work with film materials (as she used to be trained in the wet-plate tradition). Haz is an important figure in the history of photography, as the Hungarian-born American photographer inspires and helps Ansel Adams to work on his famous Zone-system. But he was also important in another aspect in Frida's life. When he emigrated to the USA, he was first employed by Nickolas Muray (born in Szeged, Hungary) with whom he shared a stylistic admiration for pictorialism – or the painterly style of early photography that tried to compete with the established art of painting for recognition. It is following her studies with Haz that Frida meets Muray and while developing an intimate relationship with him, they start to work and experiment together with the then overlooked potentials of color photography.

The reason why I emphasize these photographic roots (all somehow originating from Hungary and introducing the stylistic and formulaic features of German and Central-European photography of the time) is that I think it is quite evident that Guillermo Kahlo's, Nicholas Haz's and finally, Nickolas Muray's influence would subsequently become notable in Frida's painting, especially her iconic self-representations. Guillermo's war images transform Frida as a model; Haz introduces pictorial film photography, i.e. the imitation of the painterly in photography and a strong sense of composition; Muray changes the way Frida uses color palettes, and self-representation in general, as it is through modelling for him that her pose acquires the stature that becomes another hallmark of her self-portraits. A lack of reference to Muray's influ-

ence also highlights the image of the independent female artist (like in James biographies the image of James the gay author has been highlighted recently, see Kovács 2007).

It is in this light that I find it somewhat interesting decision that Julie Taymor's film downplays the significance of photographic image-making, as akin to filmic representation as probably no other technology and form.

## 2. The Photographic: transitions from painting to film

Taymor uses Frida's paintings as hinge points in the narrative: they not only signify turning points in the artist's life, but consecutive scenes evolve out of the still images – most of them self-portraits painted in different periods of Frida's life. As Réka M. Cristian argues:

Taymor imports into the cinematic narrative Frida's art works representing the painter as seen by Kahlo herself. [...] 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. (Cristian 2014, 82–83)

What I wish to add here is that this negotiated character and the alternative cinematic practice based on Kahlo's self-representation is based on photographic practice and representation. Yet, apart from a couple of instances, photography is not present in the film.

In one of the scenes in the last third of the movie, Frida sits in front of her canvas, and we see a mirror installed a bit further away that serves as the source of the self-portrait image. In reality, however, we know that Frida often used photographic self-portraits as models of herself for the paintings. In fact, she also used photographs for other works as well: for instance, she used her parents' wedding photo as a basis for her famous *My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, and she recreated older paintings of hers for smaller versions through a photographic documentation of those original paintings.

This process culminates in what one could term as a multiple photographic amalgam with different levels of exposition and framing. On the conceptual level, the facial expression, more specifically the defiant gaze that has become her trademark feature, refers back to the emotional affect evoked by her father's war photography. It can also be seen as a visual recomposition of the childhood memories that were more connected – in some way or another – to the medium of photography, rather than to that of painting. On the formulaic level, the self-image stands in for the mirrored painter as an object-at-a-distance that proposes a multiplication of spatial frames (as also visually reframing the situation through the multiplication of screens and scenes).

On an affective level, the colorful paintings that are utilized as trampolines for filmic sequences in Taymor's movie are results of Frida's collaboration on color photography projects with Muray. Here I wish to suggest that the color grading of the movie in several parts takes its model from these experiments with color photography by way of transmitting hue, saturation and vibrance through Frida Kahlo's paintings. One of the most famous, iconic images that testify to this transfer, "Frida Kahlo on White Bench" (1939), is in fact done with the so-called Carbro technique (or carbon-bromid transfer, a process Muray experimented with before Kodak released its first color slide film emulations) and most of the colors of the film from this period evoke the result of this technique. Interesting to note, however, that the film mistakes the photo to be taken in Paris by an artist from Breton's circle, starting what might seem as a short love affair with Frida. In fact, the photograph was taken by Muray in New York, and just to add another correction to Taymor's reinterpretation of the origin of that iconic image: the image comes from the last phase of Kahlo and Muray's relationship, rather than being an initiation of the affair between them.

The technique evoked by this kind of self-portraiture is “perspectivity,” which Ana Peraica explains is “setting oneself at a distance,” which is simultaneously the “subjectification of space” and the “objectification of the self” (Peraica 2017, 16). It is on the border of this division (that can easily be seen as a problematization of the private and the public or the inside and the outside) that the self-image becomes a representation that is somehow in-between the self and the image becoming rather uncanny. Perspectivity, in this respect, is at the very core of Frida Kahlo’s art, coming through the multiplicity of “expositions” of her photographic involvement.

In Taymor’s *Frida*, the perspectivity of photographic representation is foreclosed both on the narrative and on the structural level. However, the intimacy of the self-images the narrative hinges on haunt the story of the film, and create an uncanny return of the intimate moment of the clash of subjectification and objectification in the making of the image. The intimacy of this moment turns into extimacy precisely because the very act of the birth of the image is erased from the narrative, or – rather – introduced as a “screen memory” (from the Freudian term playfully arriving in Taymor’s vision of the multiplication of screens) (Freud, 237) that covers the photographic practice. The intimate moments of creation, an autographic occupation in Nelson Goodman’s term, are foregrounded without the allographic precedents which are then rendered as extimate to the filmic representation.

Extimacy is a term coined by Jacques Lacan to appropriate the Freudian term *Unheimlich* as related to the dichotomy of inside and outside, subject and other, the Real and the Symbolic. As Mladen Dolar explains,

It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*. (Dolar 1991, 6)

The extimate can also be linked to another Lacanian term, the *objet a*: that which the subject always already misses but curiously is the very “thing” that in turn defines it (Dragon 2015). These can be, for instance the voice or the gaze – in other words, objects once somehow connected to the subject and then later in the psychosexual development got foreclosed for some reason. However, as Joan Copjec argues, this foreclosure is not a clear denial: it is the incorporation of the very act of foreclosure, which takes the foreclosed object right into the core of subjectivity (Copjec 1995, 128). This is how the *objet a* becomes extimate: this is precisely how the photography returns from the silenced and repressed void of the visual and narrative organization of Taymor’s film to frame the movie as a snapshot of Frida Kahlo, the artist. Photography foreclosed is even more powerful in the visual organization of the flow of events than present: the intimacy in front of the paternal camera during childhood and adolescence comes back in defiance through the re-use of such images and further self-portraits in the re-composition of *Frida*, the artist, through a mise-en-abyme of cameras – Guillermo’s, Murray’s, her own, and finally, Taymor’s. The intimate space of the subjects is thus folded into itself through various

Taymor’s film thus operates through the latent framing of the narrative through photography and the photographic act. While the movie uses particular self-images as the bases for narrative development, in other words, uses paintings to compose the filmic sequences (both in terms of biographical and stylistic references), it does not include the gesture of composing most of those iconic paintings through photography. Yet, because of the latent presence of the features we can identify in Frida Kahlo’s involvement in photography (both as model and as practitioner), photography returns as the film’s repressed, foreclosed kernel, rendering the intimate self-imaging processes at the core of the movie as a peculiar, extimate practice.

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