

## The Complexity of *Frida*: Antiheroic Depictions and Heroic Appropriations of Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo is one of the modern era's most identifiable cultural personas, frequently depicted in film and literature, social activism, and her own paintings. In the 2002 biopic *Frida*, director Julie Taymor peels back the curtain of Kahlo's persona, showing us some of the humanity behind the icon. In her portrayal of the Mexican painter, Salma Hayek brings Frida to life as a rare female antihero and even rarer antihero of color, contributing a compelling female protagonist of color to the film canon. The film also stoked the flames of Fridamania, a frenzy of fandom surrounding Kahlo that began in the 1990s and resulted in the feminist movement coopting Frida as an icon (Israel). While Taymor does justice to Kahlo's legacy by portraying her as a complex antihero instead of a traditional heroic protagonist, *Frida*'s selective scope also does a disservice to Kahlo by repackaging her life for activist appropriation. Despite its success in capturing Kahlo's complexity, *Frida* glosses over too much of Kahlo's life to fully capture her personhood (a nearly impossible task for any biopic), giving fodder to feminists seeking to turn her into a clear-cut icon.

Taymor presents Kahlo as an antiheroic protagonist instead of a more normative heroic protagonist, allowing the film the better capture the larger scope of her humanity. Traditionally in films, protagonists are assigned heroic traits to capture viewers' admiration and sympathy. This heroic protagonist is the "sun around which the film narrative revolves," defined by morality, resourcefulness, bravery, and intelligence (Berg). However, some of the most compelling protagonists in film are *antiheroes* that dramatically depart from this conception of protagonism in that they lack traditional heroic qualities. Antiheroes are often morally dubious, deeply flawed, and unsympathetic, and they are almost always straight white men (Mittell). In *Frida*, however, Taymor transforms Kahlo into one of film's few female antiheroes (and a female antihero of color, at that). Taymor gives Kahlo the same moral ambiguity and complexity as any other white male

antihero by presenting us with Frida's virtues *and* flaws. Frida is vulnerable, tender, and resilient, but philandering, tortured, and plagued by addiction—swaggering yet profoundly insecure, emotionally stunted yet wise beyond her years; female characters are rarely afforded this kind of range and depth. It is this complex set of seemingly contradictory traits that sets Frida Kahlo apart from traditional heroic protagonists and establishes her as a compelling antihero.

Frida begins as a more conventional protagonist, a headstrong but non-threatening girl with enviable confidence, and after her accident, the viewer's sympathies for Frida grow. In a particularly saccharine moment, Frida proudly shows her parents that, despite slim odds, she has relearned to walk by sheer determination. As she slowly waddles towards her family and collapses in their arms, the viewer cannot help but root for her. However, once Diego Rivera (Alfred Molina) enters Frida's life, her character shifts away from heartstring-tugging, crowd-pleasing heroism towards a more challenging antiheroism. At a party with Diego, she shows a talent for drinking and reveals her knack for seduction, two unlikely traits for a cookie-cutter heroic protagonist. The first time her and Diego sleep together, she hesitates to undress, revealing the deep-seeded insecurities that stem from her injuries. Instead of the stereotypical, impenetrable heroic courage that many protagonists possess, Frida struggles with an inner conflict as she grapples with her corporal limitations and struggles with body image. This aspect of her character makes her more realistic and relatable, lowering Frida from a pedestal and highlighting her humanity.

As the film progresses, we see more of Frida's imperfections and inner conflicts, distancing her from a traditional heroic role and making her a more complicated, antiheroic character. The first time she discovers one of Diego's affairs, she takes him to a bar, gets drunk, and dramatically croons a drinking song while flirting with other men. She handles the emotional blow of Diego's infidelity in a decidedly *unheroic* way, unhealthily self-medicating and immaturely acting out.

Frida most dramatically subverts traditional heroic protagonism when she engages in adultery herself. When she sleeps with one of Diego's mistresses in America, she establishes her moral ambiguity as a character. Whereas protagonists frequently act as the moral center of films in order to garner audience support, Frida exists comfortably in a moral grey area, and she has numerous affairs with men and women of various marital statuses throughout the film. In the aftermath of Diego's affair with her sister, Frida's antiheroic qualities are fully foregrounded, and her brokenness—rather than her heroic strength or courage—becomes the focus of her character. As a woman scorned, alcoholism consumes Frida's life (her friend even remarks on her sizeable "bar bill"), and by the latter half of the movie, our fresh-faced hero is replaced by an embittered and cynical antihero, betrayed by love and battered by malady.

Presenting Kahlo's flaws, struggles, and mistakes instead of idealizing her is an inherently feminist act. In film, female characters are rarely allowed to be fully human, and are instead made into archetypes (mother, sex object, damsel, etc.). Ultimately, by depicting Frida Kahlo as a complex antihero rather than a cut-and-dried hero, Taymor attempts to embrace Kahlo's whole humanity instead of flattening her into a stock character. Presenting a woman as a complicated person with complicated motivations, fears, and insecurities is a radical act of feminism; thus, *Frida* is an inherently feminist film. The film, however, is not a perfect feminist work. Taymor filters out certain crucial aspects of Kahlo's life to make her more palatable for audiences which, in turn, led audiences to coopt Kahlo for the purposes of feminist activism. This is problematic.

After *Frida*'s release, Fridamania reached new heights, permeating feminist activism. Frida's unbrowed gaze joined the Venus symbol and Rosie the Riveter in the lexicon of feminist iconography. On a personal note, I have struggled to reconcile who Frida was and what she has become, and *Frida* only augments this conflict by depicting some truths but omitting others. *Frida*

successfully portrays Kahlo as a complex and flawed antihero, but glosses over other crucial aspects of her humanity, allowing audiences to coopt her as an immaculate hero anyway. Ultimately, Kahlo should be seen as a source of inspiration rather than aspiration. If feminism is as concerned with women's health and well-being as it is with women's equality and autonomy (which it should be), then Frida is a less of a feminist icon and more of a case study in how women are affected and shaped by external forces.

The last few decades have catapulted Frida to "feminist sainthood" (Schjeldahl). Frida's portrayal in the film as a driven, resilient, and visionary woman makes it easy to see why she has been coopted by feminists as an embodiment of female strength. Much of Frida's feminist status is also linked to her physical self-presentation. Kahlo emphasized her famous unibrow to poke fun at conventional beauty norms (Taylor, Mencimer). Early in the film, she dresses in a three-piece men's suit for a family portrait and wears a dress shirt and pants the first time Diego visits Casa Azul, defying gender norms. She openly consorts with her female lovers, as she does with Gracie (Saffron Burrows) at the diner, a surely radical act at that time. In addition, Hayek depicts Kahlo as unapologetically sexual, discovering her sexuality at an early age (which prompts frequent clandestine trysts with her high school boyfriend) and continuing to explore the spectrum of her sexuality throughout her life, taking male and female extramarital lovers. Her blatant disregard for patriarchal impositions, which is amply depicted in the film, is nothing short of inspiring.

In addition to her striking outward appearance, Kahlo's emotional and physical struggles garner a potent following among feminist activists, who identify with her "heroic battle in the face of feeling defective, deformed, and unloved" (Collins). But simplifying Kahlo's lifelong struggles as purely *heroic* places her on a pedestal and undermines her personhood. Many of her struggles were decidedly unheroic: she spent most of her life masochistically embroiled in a toxic

relationship, never overcame her severe substance abuse, and is widely believed to have committed suicide (Collins). While *Frida* depicts some of the aspects of Frida's life that should provoke a more critical take on her "feminist sainthood," it also omits many others. For example, her volatile relationship with Diego is depicted in the film, but leaves out Frida's constant and submissive doting on Rivera (to the extent of bathing him) and omits the fact that Frida adopted her iconic colorful indigenous style just to please Diego (Collins).

One of the most striking moments of the film that underscores the extent to which Kahlo's relationship with Rivera undermines her feminist credibility is when a newly separated Frida goes home to visit her father. She asks him to remind her what she wanted from life before she met Diego. Her father tells her, "You wanted to be your own person." If autonomy, independence, and personhood are at the center of feminist doctrine, then Frida's oft-romanticized relationship with Rivera directly undermines her own liberation. Yet the rest of the film glorifies their relationship, with them romantically reuniting at the end of Frida's life, the sins of the past magically wiped away. This is an example of the "game of telephone" through which Frida's story becomes more romantically distorted as it is retold, converting Frida's complex personhood into more simplified iconicity (Washington Post). While *Frida* does Kahlo a great service by portraying her as a flawed individual, its omission of "uncomfortable details" that would present her as a "far more complex and flawed figure" than activists or fans might like is deeply problematic (Mencimer).

Ultimately, there is nothing *explicitly* feminist about Kahlo's life story as it is told in *Frida*. The film shows that in her life, Kahlo "struggled not in common cause with women but, single-handedly, for herself" (Schjeldahl). This fact, of course, can still be interpreted as implicitly feminist, as any woman who pursues her goals, values her autonomy, and expresses herself freely is inherently a feminist. However, the appropriation of Frida as a feminist *icon*—as an embodiment

of feminist ideals and doctrine rather than a person—is where the true problem lies, especially when this iconized version of Frida is based upon an edited retelling of the artist’s life.

With *Frida*, Taymor makes an admirable effort to honor Frida’s humanity by depicting her not as a normative heroic protagonist, but as a challenging and tortured antihero. In doing so, Taymor captures a fuller sense of Frida’s personhood, presenting the audience with her courage and artistic brilliance alongside her less heroic traits, like her addictions, obsessions, and insecurities. But although Taymor succeeds in crafting one of film’s first (and best) female antiheroes of color, *Frida*’s selective scope is ultimately part of a larger trend of erasing more challenging aspects of Frida’s personhood in favor of embracing the more palatable ones. While it rightfully depicts Frida’s existence as an implicitly feminist one, it presents us with a complex but still edited Frida that is too easily adoptable as a feminist *icon* (instead of as simply a talented person worthy of measured admiration).

It is difficult for me, a participant in Fridamania (I have Frida posters, t-shirts, and pencil cases; my high school graduation cap bore Frida’s photo) to reconcile the discrepancy between Frida’s personhood and iconicity. As a disabled woman myself, I have always gravitated towards Frida’s approach to disability. She transformed her experience into art, and translated her pain into a universal visual language. However, I sometimes romanticize Frida as an all-encompassing personal “hero” simply because I admire this one aspect of her identity. Instead, Frida’s admirers should take inspiration from her accomplishments while still acknowledging the more flawed aspects of her personhood. *Frida*’s greatest success is in introducing audiences to Frida Kahlo, the complex woman and artist; it is up to audiences to go beyond the film and discover the full person.

## Works Cited

Berg, Charles Ramírez. *Latino Images in Film*. University of Texas Press, 2002. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/709065](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/709065).

Collins, Amy Fine. "Diary of a Mad Artist." *Vanity Fair*, Sept. 1995.  
<https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1995/09/frida-kahlo-diego-rivera-art-diary>

Israel, Michele. "Understanding Frida Today." *PBS*, March 2005.  
<http://www.pbs.org/weta/fridakahlo/today/index.html>

Mencimer, Stephanie. "The Trouble With Frida Kahlo." *Washington Monthly*, June 2002.  
<http://www.dalestory.org/LATINAMERICA/Mexico/KahloAndRivera/Kahlo,FridaTheTroubleWithFridaKahlobyStephanie%20Mencimer.pdf>

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York; London, NYU Press, 2015. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zwk](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3zwk).

Schjeldahl, Peter. "All Souls." *The New Yorker*, 5 November 2007.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/11/05/all-souls-4>

Taylor, English. "Eyebrows, Why." *The Atlantic*, 23 July 2014.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/eyebrows-why/374479/>