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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
01/10/25 -- Vol. 43, No. 28, Whole Number 2362

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Mini Reviews, Part 2 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the second batch of mini-reviews--well, not so mini for one of them, but a reprint of Mark's 2002 review of the docudrama FRIDA to go with a new documentary about Frida Kahlo.

("Wasn't last week the tenth batch?" you ask. Well, yes. We have been numbering based on the screener season, with the number resetting in July, the same as the MT VOID volume number, but having decided that this is just confusing, we will restart the numbering in January. Last week's is both the tenth of 2024 and the first of 2025.)

FRIDA (2024): FRIDA is a documentary about Frida Kahlo (is there any other Frida?) told in the style popularized by Ken Burns: photographs with voice-overs and camera movements (panning, zooming, etc.). There are some film clips from the period, both newsreels and general films of cities. But there are also animations of Kahlo's work, which both bring some motion to the film and give a real sense of the work.

Not surprisingly, Diego Rivera does not come off well in this film. But it seems that the more one learns about Rivera, the less one likes him--great murals, but a crappy person (not the only artist to fit that description, of course). One example: he had many affairs with women, but got insanely jealous if she had affairs with men. (Apparently her affairs with women did not bother him.) Andre Breton also comes in for some vilification.

For what it's worth, Kahlo's injury in a bus accident and her many surgical interventions brought to mind (to me, anyway) Cole Porter's similar situation.

In 2002, a feature film was made about Frida Kahlo, starring Salma Hayek, with Alfred Molina as Rivera. And in 2005, PBS's "American Masters" did a ninety-minute episode on Kahlo. However, this documentary is in a very different style, and also has the benefit of almost twenty years of additional information and retrospection.

Note: The subtitles are occasionally toned down. In one spot, she says in Spanish a show is "chingada", but the subtitle is that it was "a sh*t show". In another, she refers to what we would call big shots as "grande cacas"), but the subtitles does not translate "cacas". [-ecl]

Released streaming 14 March 2024.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt30319555/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/frida_2024

FRIDA (2002): The tumultuous life of Frida Kahlo is chronicled in the second feature film of Julie Taymor. Kahlo, a celebrated artist and also the wife of one of the great mural artists of the century, Diego Rivera, led a tempestuous life of pain and genius. This film is a visual feast though too often the viewer yearns for the focus of the film to be more on Rivera. Rating: 7 (0 to 10), +2 (-4 to +4)

The names Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo are tightly linked in the history of 20th century art. Kahlo was known for paintings that were profound and greatly introspective. Rivera was a great muralist and was known for cubism as well as his extreme left- wing politics. FRIDA details the life of Kahlo and her turbulent relationship with Rivera.

Kahlo was the daughter of a German-Jewish father and a Mexican mother. Her father instilled in her a lust for life and a personal force that she directs at everything that she does. She is ever a free spirit. While Kahlo (played by Salma Hayek) is still in college she first sees and is fascinated by Diego Rivera (Alfred Molina). At this point Rivera is already a famous artist. He is also already a womanizer. Then Kahlo is in a traffic accident that leaves her unable to walk for an extended period and in great pain for the rest of her life. She is confined to a bed and turns to art, drawing the only subject around of any real interest, the woman she sees in the mirror. She does the first of her many self-portraits. Self-portraiture would remain a large part of her work. She also teaches herself to walk again. Rivera, on a return visit to her school, is impressed with her talent as an artist and with her energy.

FRIDA covers their affair, their marriage, and their careers together. Each has affairs, though Diego goes in for dalliances a lot more than Frida is willing to tolerate. The film includes their travels to New York and the famous Rockefeller Plaza mural incident. (This may already be familiar to viewers from the PBS documentary and/or the film CRADLE WILL ROCK.) When Leon Trotsky (Geoffrey Rush) flees Stalin and travels to Mexico Rivera and Kahlo play host to him and become involved in his fate.

Sadly, the story of the two great artists does not really break much new ground. The relationship between Rivera and Kahlo is strongly reminiscent of that between John Reed and Louise Bryant in REDS. Director Julie Taymor is not always sympathetic to Kahlo, who has her own affairs but is hypocritically enraged by Rivera's philandering. Kahlo allows herself to be hurt by it. Also, one feels through the entire film that as interesting as Kahlo was, the real story to be told would have been that of Rivera. It is generally the verdict of history that Rivera was the better of the two artists and the film frequently leaves us wanting to know more of him.

Taymor herself is a great visual stylist. This is her third film, following the hour-long FOOL'S FIRE and the film TITUS. She also staged "The Lion King" for Broadway. She spices this biography with some terrific surreal hallucinations and mental images. When Rivera visits New York, Kahlo whimsically visualizes it in terms of the film KING KONG. Taymor's narrative is punctuated with paintings that come to life and images on a Mexican skeleton theme. Some of the visions are brought to life with an assist from the marvelous and morbid Brothers Quay.

Any work by Julie Taymor is worth seeing. While this story follows a predictable arc, it is visually stunning. I rate it a 7 on the 0 to 10 scale and a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

Released theatrically 25 October 2002. Rating: 7 (0 to 10), +2 (-4 to +4)

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120679/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/frida>

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I recently watched the film MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL, and decided I wanted to read the book. So naturally the first place I checked was the public library. Our library is part of a county-wide consortium and the entire consortium had *zero* copies. Given that this book was on the New York Times Bestseller list for 216 weeks (over four years), that seems a bit depressing.

I eventually bought MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL by John Berendt (Vintage, ISBN 978-0-679-75152-6) on eBay. And I enjoyed it immensely. I was sure that the film had made up a lot of the quirkiness, but apparently not. (Given that Berendt was a co-writer on the film, I suppose that's not really surprising.) The film did simplify Jim Williams's trial--or rather, trials. In reality, there were three of them, and almost a fourth, and that was probably just to complicated for a film. There was also a lot more to Joe Odom's story as well, which is why, if you liked the film, you should definitely read the book--it's more of what made the film what it was. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Isn't it enough to see that the garden is beautiful,
without having to believe that there are fairies at the
bottom of it too?

--Douglas Adams

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