Responses

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A Motion Portrait

Julie Taymor, Frida

Just as Frida Kahlo is able to infuse the pain, frustration and passion of her life into her paintings, Julie Taymor is able to create a living portrait of Frida's life with her 2002 film. At first glance the majority of the credit goes to the surreal visual representation of Frida's work throughout the movie. The use of motion and action when representing the paintings gives insight into the origin and process that were involved in creating her paintings.

The structure of the narrative in the film, by following specific events, allows Taymor to reveal the specific motivations behind Frida's desire to create. This forms a connection with the audience that is entirely unique to the medium of film. Yet, it does in a way create a limited focus on which the moviegoer is able to experience the images. The difference in experience between someone seeing one of Frida Kahlo's paintings without any background information and someone who has knowledge of Frida's challenges is significant. Consider the self-portrait that Frida paints while in bed. Taymor is able to direct the interpretation of the piece by preceding the event with a vivid reenactment of her accident on the trolley. The slow motion shot, with the gold dust is beautiful, but it is intended to provoke a specific response in the viewer that will shape the viewer's interpretation of the painting. Watching Frida overcome immense pain in order to walk in the courtyard is another example of tailoring a specific way of looking at

Frida's life. The repeated use of close-up shots of the archaic medical treatment she receives is intended to shock and incense the viewer. She speaks of the feeling as being "cut up and re-broken so many times." The audience is uncompromisingly told that this *must* be what drives her. The issue at heart is, shouldn't Frida's paintings speak for themselves *without* the need for explanation? Is it necessary, or even right to change the original images by making them part of the film? By altering them in such a way the paintings become living entities. They are no longer only the works of Frida Kahlo, but a communal effort from the entire production staff of the film. However, it is this "communal effort" that is precisely the strength of the film, as well as what makes it achieve something that would be impossible in other mediums.

For example, Taymor has a very strict control over the use of color in the film. Frida is shown wearing red each time Taymor wishes to represent a moment of significant change in Frida's life. However, she is not wearing red when she has her accident on the bus, but it is also an event that is entirely outside of her control. Red then, signifies moments where Frida makes a choice that will drastically alter the course of her life. She is wearing a red dress in the movie while she is painting a self-portrait where she is clearly wearing a white dress. She is wearing a red dress when she speaks with Trotsky on top of the Mayan temples. The strongest image of herself in the red dress is the one she wears when she is carried in her bed, to the presentation of her work in Mexico, which is something she had wanted more than anything for her entire life. In that case, she made a choice that would ultimately lead to her death, yet it is important to realize the connection through repetition in the film. The color red is

essential in discovering which aspects of Frida's life that *Taymor* feels were most influential in her development.

For example, during her wedding, Frida is wearing a *green* dress, this image mirrors the painting it is intended to represent (and that is subsequently shown later on). Yet, while the act of marriage and the wedding itself is a crucial marker in the timeline of events in Frida's life, it is *not* where Frida makes her choice to love and to brave the consequences of her love with Diego Rivera. That choice is made in the scene in the alleyway, right before the first time they make love. While this may not be a realistic depiction of the actual events, the direction in this scene is well chosen. The dialogue in the scene is structured to explain the complexities of Frida and Diego's troubled relationship. By having Frida instigate the kiss with Diego Rievera, an imbalance in the level of desire is established. While their passion may have been equal, Frida is shown as having *more* of an interest in Diego than Diego has in Frida through this one action. Diego, who states that he had been womanizing long before she ever came around, is not shown in a position that affords the potential to change that attitude. This scene also sets up Frida's "acceptance" of the nature of who Diego is, through their definition of trust (which is something that Diego unfortunately smashes). Most importantly, the scene begins with Frida coming through a door, wearing a vibrant *red* top. On the surface, the costume would seem to signify her affiliation with the communist party. But as Taymor has shown in other parts of the film, the red in Frida's clothing is a subtle visual cue that indicates that there is an imminent choice that will have lasting effects both on Frida's life, as well as the way the audience will understand her.

Ultimately, the specific choices to alter the original artwork and to focus on specific pieces of Frida Kahlo's life are like the brushstrokes to the "motion portrait" that Julie Taymor and crew have developed. While the original meaning and intent of the pieces of art used in the film may differ from that of the film itself, what has been created is no less heartfelt and stunning than that of Frida Kahlo's masterpieces. The final shot of the film, which quotes Frida saying "I hope the exit is joyful, and I hope to never return," leaves a final lingering question. Was her final wish granted? Or is the act of rememberance a means of denying her that wish? Her art exists as a form of herself that is now permanent and undying. The production of this film is a sign that her wish may never be granted.

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Don't Worry ... We're AMERICANS

Costa-Gavras, Missing

Costa-Gavras' approach to the issue of American involvement in the Chilean Coup of 1973 is *specifically* tailored to reach an American audience. The term "missing" carries a certain resonance to the American public by evoking images of milk box cartons, amber alerts, photo-flyers, and widespread national coverage of missing American persons in the media. This is a luxury that is present in very few regions in the world, and certainly a concept that is "missing" (or absent) in the majority of Latin American countries. This difference between available methods of support, as well as their eventual outcome is central to the message that Costa-Gavras is preaching with Missing.

This makes the choice to focus the story around the real-life events surrounding the death of the American journalist, Charlie Horman, all the more chilling. There is a sinister undertone to the film that rises from the absence of a clear perspective of the Chilean people. They are *always* portrayed as outsiders. Even characters with close connections to the main cast (the boy who played with the duck, the neighbors, etc.) only have brief moments of screen time in comparison to every single American cast member. The perspective, at least on the surface, is extremely limited in scope.

This is perhaps Costa-Garvas' greatest challenge to overcome. How can he get the American public to care about the Chilean perspective by focusing his story on the

death of an *American* journalist? His answer is the massive change in the mindset of Ed Horman through the course of the film. When he arrives in Chile, Ed represents the typical mindset that Costa-Gavras expects from his audience. He is utterly pro-American in his mindset, and completely naive with regards to the living conditions anywhere outside his sphere of reference. He doesn't see his son, Charlie, as anything more than an idealistic fool. And, he is completely baffled by the concept of someone being arrested without doing *anything*. He addresses the American way of life early in the film by stating,

> "a very good way of life it is, young lady, no matter how much people like you and Charles try to tear it down with your sloppy idealism. I can no longer abide the young people of our country who live off their parents and the fat of the land and then they find nothing better to do than whine and complain."

In a sense, Horman is literally screaming the words of the aging American establishment. These words signify the point of view of the people who are pressuring military action in Latin America in order to preserve what they feel is the essence of the United States of America.

In fact, Captain Ray Tower (United States Navy), who spends the entire film leading Beth and Ed Horman on a wild goose chase, solidifies this connection alongside the U.S. Ambassador near the end of the film. Before continuing it is crucial to understand that the words of the script are *not* documented or concrete, they are used to present a particular standpoint on the issue of American involvement in the Chilean Revolution of 1973. Yet, Costa-Gavras' opinions on the truth of the matter lie within the line stated by the American Ambassador, "This mission is pledged to protect American interests, our interests." The Ambassador states that if Ed "hadn't been personally

involved," he would be "sitting at home complacent and more or less oblivious to all of this." This statement could be said of all Americans. Costa-Gavras uses Missing as a messenger to *personally* involve his entire audience. Furthermore, in the same scene, Ray tower nearly mimics Ed Horman's original opinions by stating that the American way of life is a "damn good one."

This is the moment of truth for Costa-Gavras. It is at this point where he establishes Ray Tower as a foil to Ed Horman as he originally appears in the film. If Ed Horman's initial point of view is similar to the expected mindset of his target audience at the beginning of the film, then it is *also* similar to Ray Tower's perspective. So in order for his message to be effective, Ed Horman *and* the viewer must change significantly.

There are three major sections of the film that Costa-Garvas uses in order to subtly develop this change in Ed Horman. The setup of the film, before Ed arrives in Chile, establishes credibility for Charlie and Beth's story. It gives the viewer a reason to follow the events leading to Charlie's disappearance, as well as getting the audience to learn a little bit about the conditions existing in Chile at the time. Specifically, the curfew in effect, and the scene where Beth has to hide in a corner through the night creates an emotional connection with the viewer that allows Costa-Gavras to create his first major change in Ed and the audience. There are two actions that both father and son share that serve as a bridge towards Costa-Gavras' first move. Both Ed and Charlie reacted rashly to acts of violence and oppression of the Chilean people. Charlie tries to stop a man being beaten in a bar, and Ed repeatedly smashes a door into an armored truck. Because we are taught to care about Charlie early on in the film, the scene where Ed visits their home to collect his son's drawings has infinitely more impact than it would

without the set up. Ed's eyes are opened about the nature of the life that his son led, and as he understands more, so does the viewer.

Costa-Gavras' second maneuver involves the stadium and the mortuary. He uses these two stages to establish a concrete difference between the perspective of the Chileans, and that of our own. We are told that the Chilean woman who is assisting Beth and Ed could be killed for even *talking* to them. Because she spends so little time with the Hormans, her input is subdued only to resurface when they actually gain access to the stadium. Her situation, Ed's reaction to the armored truck opening fire, and the bodies of the dead lying on the streets creates the hesitation seen when Ed is asked to take the microphone to find his son in the stadium. The interaction between Ed and the Chilean man he mistakes for his son is Costa-Gavras' opportunity to literally expose the difference between American opportunity and that of the Chileans. The Chilean man can't have his father come looking for him, it is something that neither he nor any other prisoner held there have ever had a chance for. The Chileans do not have milk box photos, picture-flyers, or national media coverage for their missing people. Costa-Gavras is using this scene as a means to express that within an international scope, nobody *cares* about the loss of a single Chilean life (let alone thousands), they simply disappear.

And yet, in reality, the bodies do *not* disappear. No amount of media blackout, or forced ignorance will ever change that fact. They must go somewhere, and in Missing they are shown as the thousands of unidentified bodies in the makeshift "mortuary" that Beth and Ed sift through to attempt to find Charlie's body. This scene is Gavras' third step in changing Ed Horman's perspective on the American way of life. It is here that

they discover the body of Frank Teruggi, who they had been told was released to return to America weeks earlier. This discovery relates two completely different points. First, it provides concrete evidence to Ed that his “friends” at the Embassy had been lying to them. In this case, Costa-Gavras uses this revelation to create the seeds of doubt within the viewer’s mind about the trust that they place in government protection. If they are lying about this, what else could they be lying about? The price of the preservation of our way of life comes at what cost? This couldn’t be clearer without examining *who* it is that provokes a reaction in Beth and Ed. Out of the multitude of dead bodies they pass by, only one is able to provoke a strong reaction in either character: the white American man. Although it is more subtle, the intention of this scene is strikingly similar to the exchange between the Chilean man and Ed in the stadium.

Without these three specific points, Ed’s reaction to the death of his son, and his confrontation within the Ambassador’s office would be lost to the audience. Ed’s journey parallels the audiences, and when Costa-Gavras’ moment of truth arrives, it is his intention that the viewer echoes the words “Well, they’re not mine,” with gusto along with Ed as he denounces the “American interests” that he had originally been so fond of.

And this brings up the most terrifying aspect of Costa-Gavras’ film. Ed Horman experienced a definite shift in the core of his beliefs. Ideally, the same shift is intended to occur in the viewer as well. Yet, the film ends *without* resolution. It ends with the following voiceover:

> “Ed Horman filed suit charging eleven government officials, including Henry A. Kissinger, with complicity and negligence in the death of his son. The body was not returned home until seven months later, making an accurate autopsy

> impossible. After years of litigation, the information necessary to prove or disprove complicity remained classified as secrets of state. The suit was dismissed."

Neither Ed nor Beth were able to make *any* changes. Regardless of the fact that they themselves may have become more aware, they were completely powerless against the United States Governmental forces that were involved in the murder of Charlie Horman. Costa-Gavras makes the point that the Chilean Government would not have acted out Charlie's execution without the consent of the United States (or at least its embassy and/or military presence there.)

The problem is that the facts are unclear, and without concrete evidence one way or another (as the information is classified) there is no way to make a truly critical assessment to the factual accuracy of Costa-Gavras' account of Charlie Horman's disappearance. However, he *is* able to raise issues of the difference between the situations present in Latin America versus the United States. Missing also serves as a statement with *authority* that the United States has no business interfering with the affairs of other countries only to serve its own selfish interests.

Ultimately, Costa-Gavras' Missing instituted a profound change in my perspective on the world as a whole. It made me want to change things, yet at the same time extremely reluctant to do so. I feel guilt over events that I have had no direct relation whatsoever with. Yet any attempt to instigate change abroad seems to me like it would make me no different than Charlie Horman, by sticking my nose in places that it doesn't belong. I am left questioning my identity as an American, and with the current situation in Iraq, makes me feel ashamed of my ignorance of the cost of the way of life that I take

for granted. Costa-Gavras can certainly count on his message being received loud and clear by at least viewer.

Works Cited

"Missing (1982) - Memorable Quotes." Internet Movie Database. 20 Oct. 2008 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084335/quotes>.