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Two Fridas, Three Dresses

Feminist Representations of Kahlo's "White Dress" from Print to Digital

ABSTRACT *The Two Fridas* (1939) is considered the most ambitious work by Mexican painter and feminist icon Frida Kahlo, and dress is central to it. It famously depicts two versions of the painter sitting side by side with hearts visible and a vein bleeding, one wearing a traditional Tehuana costume, taken to stand for her Mexican identity, the other a white dress often described as "Victorian," regarded as alluding to her European heritage. Based on McLuhan's study of the way that communication technology affects cognitive organization, this article focuses on the white dress that has hitherto received less attention. Taking the dress as an index of the sensory environments McLuhan theorized, the article examines the versions of it on painting, photography and film, contrasting representations produced under print culture, and those crafted under electronic culture, highlighting the ways in which each illustrates McLuhan's theories and in one case even enables new interpretations of Kahlo's work. **KEYWORDS** Frida Kahlo, Marshall McLuhan, film and fashion, understanding the media, *The Two Fridas*

The Two Fridas by Mexican painter and feminist icon Frida Kahlo, painted in 1939, is considered the most ambitious work of her artistic career, and dress is central to it as it relates to identity (see figure 1).¹ It depicts two versions of the painter, sitting side by side with hearts visible and a vein bleeding, one wearing a traditional Tehuana costume, taken to stand for her Mexican—and specifically Indigenous—identity, the other the white dress discussed here, often described as "Victorian," regarded as alluding to her European heritage as her father was German. The painting has been variously interpreted as referring to Kahlo's personal life—her then recent and brief divorce from Diego Rivera, well known for his commitment to "Revolutionary nationalism" and Indigenous peoples, since it is the Tehuana version of the double self-portrait that features a whole heart; to Mexican history, with the two sides that had fought the Revolutionary War (1910–1924) depicted, that is, peasants versus the elites, here shown

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FIGURE 1. *The Two Fridas* (Kahlo, 1939), reproduced under fair use.

reconciling as they are holding hands; and even as international political comment on colonialism, with “a straitlaced Europe” bleeding Latin America, represented as the source of life, dry.²

Taking depictions of the “white dress” as an index of the sensory environments Marshall McLuhan theorized, the article examines the versions of it on painting, photography, and film, by women artists who have (re) created it in distinctly original ways: photographer Ishiuchi Miyako (2014); film director Julie Taymor, and costume designer Julie Weiss (2002); and of course Kahlo herself. The article contrasts representations produced under print culture and those crafted under electronic culture. The main focus of the article therefore is on *representations* of dress on specific media, rather than on dress as mediated technology, using McLuhan’s theories as a framework to analyze these representations.

It may seem controversial to draw from McLuhan's work for feminist research on the history of media concerned with representations of dress, given the well-known misogyny and racism that pervades much of his writing. However, the study of art—although textual here rather than visual—is said to have played a significant role in the development of McLuhan's ideas, since in the 1930s he became interested in how the formal properties of literature led to effects on readers, regardless of authorial intent.³ Apparently inspired by these ideas, and by the work of Harold Innis on writing, he later argued that each medium of communication provides a unique type of environment, whose widespread use reshapes people and culture by extending human capacities, and thereby “claiming our senses,” in particular ways. Employing a genealogical description of the evolution of the media from a Western perspective, he described a tribal age, when hearing dominated, fostering community, empathy, and a sense of immediacy; a literary age, when writing dominated, geared toward the eye but coexisting with the ear; an age of print culture, which he described as modern, national, featuring mass production of writing, with scientific ways of seeing, seeking linear chains of causation, and, crucially, focused on the eye. Last, he contended electronic culture would bring about conditions of sensory plenitude, stimulating the haptic and the tactile, with simultaneity replacing linearity and leading to globalization and transnationalism. In this account, under the earlier stages “dress and speech were accorded a degree of splendour and richness of texture” that universal literacy and mass production were eventually to eliminate completely. The sewing machine, McLuhan noted, “created the long straight line in clothes, as much as the linotype flattened the human vocal style.”⁴ While under the latter stage of electronic culture, women's fashions and hairstyles abandoned the visual for the iconic—or sculptural and tactual—dress, with a preference for coarse, heavy textures and sculptural shapes.

Moreover, it has been argued that even though McLuhan did not account for gender or race-related structural differences in his work, his theories can provide a way to understand how sexism and racism are tied to the technological—including dress, which serves a fundamental human need and has always been shaped by and driven by technological advances—as much of his misogynistic and racist language is related to his understanding of how other bodies are interfaces for white male power.⁵ For example, he argued that with electronic media—more directed to touch than to the eye in his theorization—dress had become more sculptural and textured, and thus

clad, “the American woman for the first time presents herself as a person to be touched and handled, not just to be looked at.”⁶ In other words, he did approach technology as a structuring form of power. This enables feminist perspectives into how a culture’s dominant technologies may alter or determine the social experience of gender, race, and class.

Further, as illustrated by the above quotation, McLuhan’s theory broadened conceptions of media to include clothing and fashion, which he cast as extensions of the skin that help to store and to channel energy. Indeed, Ganaele Langlois has used precisely this kind of feminist take on McLuhan to argue that a focus on textile—frequently dismissed as “craft” given its historical connection to women—as a medium of communication, highlights the formation of non-Western empires, from China and India to pre-Columbian civilizations: from the second century BCE, silk and cotton from Asia “profoundly impacted consciousnesses, tastes, and cultural identities, shaping vast global networks of exchange,” such as the Silk Road.⁷ Similarly, the Inca empire that once flourished in South America used Khipus, a form of textile art, to store information in colored knots, including an early form of binary code.⁸ Langlois contrasted this with the more familiar Eurocentric narrative on how Western media such as writing enabled forms of control over resources, time, and space that made the exercise of centralized European power across vast spaces possible.⁹ A feminist approach that switches the focus from writing as a medium to textile as a medium can thus furnish decolonial media histories.

With these considerations in mind—namely, that there can be a productive feminist angle to McLuhan’s views on the media, which are ultimately anchored on the study of art and take clothing and fashion seriously—this article is focused on media representations of the “white dress” originally featured on the double self-portrait titled *The Two Fridas*.

THE PAINTED DRESS

The Two Fridas was completed in 1939 for inclusion in the Fourth International Exhibition of Surrealism organized by André Breton in Mexico City. Breton maintained that the creative project of surrealism was based on “the belief of the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected association,” especially connecting the irrational, the poetic, and the revolutionary.¹⁰

A close-up to the white dress is in order here. It must first be noted that while it is indeed European in style, the outfit is most probably not

Victorian, but rather was contemporary fashion at the time of painting. Long evening gowns were fashionable in the 1930s as Classicism returned, and between 1930 and 1944 in particular “Romantic nostalgia” flourished.¹¹ Designers such as Madelaine Vionnet crafted designs featuring long collars like the one on the white dress, and as I argue further on, the model for its skirt may well have been an item owned by Kahlo dating from the 1930s.

In fact, rather than a white dress, it is an ensemble mirroring the Tehuana costume, consisting of a gored hemline skirt with pink and purple tones, featuring flowers at the bottom that appear to be formed by the dripping blood; a blouse with tiered sleeves; and a lace vest with spiral and other shapes, with a prominent opening on the right-hand side widely interpreted as symbolically gendering the garment as feminine. However, I will keep referring to it as “the white dress,” for convenience.

There are two areas in particular where McLuhan’s descriptions of print culture align with key tenets of surrealism that can be appreciated on Kahlo’s European style dress. The first is the claim that scientific modes of observation were prominent in this period. On *The Two Fridas*, it is the white dress that accommodates the quasi-medical illustration of an open heart; it is the one where the forceps (or scissors) rest—it is the one that bleeds. The lace itself is also reminiscent of the “chemical” variety, that is, a type of machine-made lace that relied on chemically treated fabric that would disintegrate once the design had been completed.¹² It shows the uneven edges typical of this work. Moreover, surrealism did in fact cast its activity in terms of scientific research of sorts, for example, by setting up a study center called the Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes, in parallel to founding “the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* on a model that referred not to literary publications but a popular science magazine, *La Nature*.”¹³ Breton had studied medicine and psychology, and psychiatry informed his initial formulations of surrealism as “pure psychic automatism.” Perhaps due to her own history of illness and previous interest in medicine, like Breton, Kahlo’s work often features medical paraphernalia.

The second area where McLuhan’s descriptions of print culture align with key tenets of surrealism that can be appreciated on Kahlo’s European dress is the observation that print culture was modern in scope. If modernity is understood as a period leading to self-reflection, again this strongly resonates with surrealism, which was also profoundly concerned with “the interrogation and opening up of the notions of selfhood and alterity, challenging received modes of identity with more complex—and more

inclusive—ones.”¹⁴ While the painting itself is ostensibly on the topic of identity with its double self-portrait, I want to argue here that it is the white dress where this modern interrogation of the self is more clearly brought forward, since the defining feature of this dress is its folding and pleating, evident on the skirt, the sleeves, and the vest. Derived from the Greek *plectos* and the Latin *pli*, which means “fold,” this is at the root of words such as “complex,” and also “duplicate,” “reflection,” and “replica” in many languages. In this sense, the word “pleat” not only describes “a technique for manipulating sheet materials, but it also evokes emotions, abstract thoughts and actions.”¹⁵ Beyond the etymological root of the word, materially, a fold “has the quality of simultaneously having both an exterior and an interior. The surface serves as an interface, while the folded space conceals and protects. The fold as a figure demonstrates how to conceive in terms of “both-and” rather than “either/or,” a feminist methodology.¹⁶ Thus understood, the white dress on its own actually “speaks of the double,” as it were, enacting a very modern, and feminist, reflection on identity.¹⁷

THE PHOTOGRAPHED DRESS

Skin and memory are the key concepts when considering the photographed dress from the perspective of McLuhan, as it is these that he claimed clothing and photography extended, respectively.¹⁸ McLuhan further linked photography to fashion when commenting on a quotation in *Vogue* magazine on March 15, 1953: “A woman now, and without having to leave the country, can have the best of five (or more) nations hanging in her closet—beautiful and compatible as a statesman’s dream. That is why, in the photographic age, fashions have come to be like the collage style in painting.”¹⁹

When Frida Kahlo’s wardrobe was prepared for exhibition at the Casa Azul museum in Mexico City in 2013, Japanese photographer Isiuchi Miyako was tasked—partly on account of her close connection with textiles, having been a designer herself—with making artistic records of the collection while bringing a fresh eye to it. Encompassing several Mexican indigenous traditional costumes, European and American style dresses, Chinese garments, and three piece suits, the collection certainly recalled McLuhan’s “collage.” Further, Miyako highlights the connection between photography and textiles through the vocabulary she uses to describe her craft, speaking of grain as providing “an attractive texture, similar to that of fabric,” and explaining she was attracted to the darkroom because it

was filled with the smell of chemicals that recalled the smell of textile dyes.²⁰

In addition to her relation with textiles, Ishiuchi Miyako had long used photography as a means to advance feminist agendas, which made her ideally suited, so to speak, to present the Kahlo dress collection anew. In the early 1970s Miyako had been involved in the burgeoning women's movement, and together with two other students had formed Ribū, a women's society with the motto, "In order to create from our gender, we need to be conscious of our class (as women)."²¹ Her feminist approach to photography, which ascribes high importance to subjectivity, intuition, and personal history, sharply contrasts with the approach of the male-dominated field of photography in Japan, especially in the 1970s. Further, most of her key exhibitions have been devoted to women. For instance, *Mother's* (2000), which featured clothing, makeup, and other personal objects that had belonged to her mother, evoking "a posthumous intimacy in which objects are transformed into potent repositories of human touch," the same feminist approach she took to Kahlo, among others.²²

For the Kahlo exhibition, among the clothing items that Miyako chose to photograph there was a purple silk taffeta skirt with a pleated hem and additional horizontal folds, featuring the flowers of the "white dress," that was most probably the model for it (see figure 2). Silk taffeta is often "shot," a textile technique that means the warp and weft threads are different colors, making the fabric look different depending on how the light hits it. This may explain the pink and purple tones of the painted skirt. The skirt shows signs of wear, tear, and mending, and it is this where Miyako mainly chose to focus (see figure 3). Of photography, McLuhan said that it was an extension of the eye but mainly of memory, an artificial way of preserving and organizing experiences similar to the way that writing extended speech. Photography made it possible to revisit and reframe past experience.

Miyako refers to photography in similar ways, establishing a connection to memory through the idea of scars, thereby bringing skin, and textile which can also tear, into the equation. She has likened the marks of scars on the human body to photographs: "when I first encountered the scar, I reflected on photography. . . . While a person hopes to remain unblemished through life, all must sustain and live with wounds, visible and invisible . . . an imprint of the past, welded onto a part of the body" (or a tear, on a piece of fabric).²³ A mended garment is thus cast as an imprint of the past, just like



FIGURE 2. Silk taffeta skirt c. 1930 belonging to Frida Kahlo. Photograph by Ishiuchi Miyako for the book *Frida* (2014), reproduced with kind permission from RM Editorial.



FIGURE 3. Close-up of silk taffeta skirt c. 1930 belonging to Frida Kahlo, showing mending. Photograph by Ishiuchi Miyako for the book *Frida* (2014), reproduced with kind permission from RM Editorial.

photography. Miyako's "white dress" (actually skirt) is a scarred dress, an index of McLuhan's ideas of both photography as an extension of memory and of fashion as an extension of skin. It is the image of a mended garment inscribed in time, with the memory of a wound, a tear.

Another interpretation of the painting thus becomes possible: might *The Two Fridas* then in fact be on mending? It is known from Kahlo's letters, interviews, and her garments themselves that she ascribed great importance to her clothing, caring for it herself (she had learned sewing from her mother).²⁴ The red line connecting the two can be understood as a thread, just cut, as well as a vein. The mending stitches on the skirt as photographed by Miyako somewhat resemble the shape of the flowers under the scissors, as they are being formed by embroidery or blood. The vest might also allude to the need for mending, since lace is a pattern of loss: "sometimes, loss [divorce, miscarriage] blossoms into lace."²⁵ Moreover, because mending is recursive, it can be understood as related to identity formation, and integrating identity in time; as Megan Sweeney put it, "Through the recursive process of mending, I greet my earlier selves, sit in communion with selves from whom I have been estranged"—a stance that highly resonates with the painting.²⁶

THE FILMED DRESS

From McLuhan's perspective, cinema was "a spectacular wedding of the old mechanical technology and the new electric world," and he still regarded it as an extension of the linear, sequential logic of print.²⁷ In many ways, the relation between cinema, women, and fashion is a close one. Indeed, terms such as "spool," "reel," "lace," "wind," "ribbon," and "trimmings" are shared by textile practice and filmmaking. These linguistic overlaps may originate "in the relationship between the mechanisms of the sewing machine and the film projector," which was based on the intermittent mechanism of the sewing machine.²⁸

Film itself can be said to be a form of tailoring: "It is stitched together in strands of celluloid, or now even virtually, woven into patterns, designed and assembled like a customized garment."²⁹ Further, from its inception, film was worked on "largely by women editors, who labored on strips of film in production houses that resembled fashion houses, where they cut and stitched together materials, mimicking the very process of cloth construction."³⁰ Thinking of film as fabric both underscores the materiality of photochemical film and offers a way to highlight women's contributions to histories of cinema.

However, it is rather fabric on film, that is, costume, frequently designed by women, that is usually considered for its role advancing film narratives. On costume, McLuhan's focus was on how it was deployed for realism, especially in historical cinema. He perhaps exaggerated when he claimed, in relation to films set in the middle ages that "so great is the precision and tyranny of the camera-eye [that] these costumes had to be woven by the same techniques as those used" in that historical period.³¹ But the assumed trajectory of technology had certainly been the perfecting of photographic realism.³²

Costume is central for the presentation of *The Two Fridas*, in the form of a tableaux on the murder of Lev Trotsky, in Julie Taymor's film *Frida* (2002).³³ In a seemingly oneiric sequence, a door is open to a room where the two Fridas are. The one dressed in white then leaves the room and walks down an alley leading to the house where the assassination of Trotsky took place, allowing viewers to see the dress in movement, revealing parts of it as its display unfolds in time. The rustle of the dress could almost have been heard, had it not been for *La Llorona*, a song about murder, playing in the background. Scenes of an assassin arriving there are then intercut with Frida's arriving. And just before the murderer strikes Trotsky with the



FIGURE 4. Still image of *The Two Fridas* tableaux from the film *Frida* (Taymor 2002), reproduced under fair use.

ice axe that killed him, blood stains both a letter that Trotsky was writing and the white dress on a superposed image of the painting where the locket with Diego's image as a child had just been smashed. (On account of this smashed locket, some have interpreted the painting as being about loss, possibly the loss of Diego through divorce and betrayal, but also the loss of a child.)

The scene is digitally rendered. Digital media are said to now provide a deeper level of control to filmmakers, comparable—if not surpassing—the control of painters.³⁴ In this case, rather than rendering a look as close as possible to the painted dress, however, its representation changed considerably, becoming much heavier, haptic, and “sculptural,” as per McLuhan (see figure 4). Instead of the light, airy fabrics with drape such as chiffon and crepe de chine, which seem to be depicted on the painted dress, this one from the film has the look of coarse cotton. It has lost the lace of the blouse to dark, heavy embroidery, featuring regular geometrical shapes. The sleeves have lost the last, lighter tier, and now have cuffs. Importantly, the opening of the vest is almost at the center and is now open, thereby neutralizing the gendered, symbolic aspects of its vulvar shape on the painting. The skirt has gained a sash and lost the pink and purple nuances, becoming uniformly ecru. Its sixteen folds are longer, more narrow, and stiffer, and the flower motifs are raised and textured, resembling applied paint. In this sense, its aesthetic design is in line with the eclectic and layered features

that McLuhan ascribed to clothing in the electronic era, reflecting simultaneity and hybridity, symbolizing the mutable identity of fashion as persona. But perhaps most notably, the dress has lost the bleeding vein, but not the blood. Instead of Frida's—or Diego's, as sometimes speculated—the blood has become Trotsky's, binding the garment to that specific episode of Kahlo's life.

The last reflection by McLuhan on cinema directly relevant to this discussion is that “the movie, as much as the alphabet and the printed word, is an aggressive and imperial form that explodes outward into other cultures.”³⁵ In placing “a Mexican mestizo communist woman—who, moreover, drinks heavily, takes drugs, and has lesbian relations—at the center of the story,” *Frida* worked against the grain, and largely achieved this by means of dress.³⁶ Indeed, costume designer Julie Weiss was awarded an Oscar for this film, as her work helped to define the character, telling the story through fabric and form. What better attire to become bloodstained than white lace?

CONCLUSION

Representations of the white dress on painting, photography, and film in print culture and the electronic age align with McLuhan's theories of the media, and also suggest a new interpretation of Kahlo's work.

The painted and the filmed dress illustrate his theories clearly. Print era clothing is said to mirror the visual, linear, segmented nature of that age, with clothing items being stable, maintaining hierarchies and reinforcing boundaries. This is the case with the painted dress: it reflects the hierarchies and boundaries of (upper) class, (European) ethnicity and gender (on the laced vest). It conceals and controls the body. Its folds display the interrogation of the self, typical of modernity.

Electronic era clothing mirrors instead the multisensory, flexible, identity-fluid environment of the “global village.” It shifts toward the immediate and the performative. It highlights, reveals, and adapts dynamically to the body and context. The filmed dress is indeed more haptic and hybrid, mixing styles while quoting the painting and linking the garment episodically to a specific passage of Kahlo's life, the assassination of Trotsky. For this crucial scene, the film actually cast the white-dressed Kahlo rather than the Indigenous dressed one, placing her in a global rather than a national context, a feature of the electronic age also highlighted by McLuhan.

As for the photographed dress (skirt), its accent on textile/skin, memory, and mending suggests a new interpretation of the painting: while *The Two Fridas* may well be about mourning, about Mexican history or about global politics, through a McLuhan-Miyako lens that focuses on the white dress it may also be about fixing, about a woman whose “layered processes of repair”—of clothes, of body, of the social fabric—blossomed into new creations.³⁷ ■

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