

 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



BAD HAIR

A film by Mariana Rondón

Venezuela / 2013 / 93 min
In Spanish, with English subtitles

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Mariana Rondón at <https://pragda.com/film/bad-hair/>

Bad Hair was released in 2013, already reflecting a Venezuela marked by poverty, social tension, and political uncertainty. That same year, Hugo Chávez's died of illness and Nicolás Maduro came to power. Since then, the country has plunged into a deep political and economic crisis, with hyperinflation, mass protests, food and medicine shortages, and growing repression. Millions of Venezuelans have fled the country, creating one of the world's largest refugee crises.

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Bad Hair*:

A nine-year-old boy's preening obsession with straightening his hair elicits a tidal wave of homophobic panic in his hard-working mother, in this tender but clear-eyed coming-of-age tale.

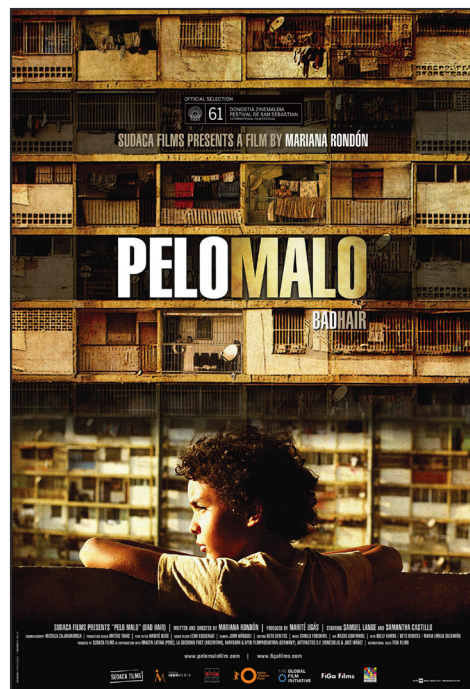
Junior is a beautiful boy, with big brown eyes, a delicate frame, and a head of luxurious dark curls. But he aches to straighten those curls, to acquire a whole new look befitting his emerging fantasy image of himself as a long-haired singer. As the opportunity approaches to have his photo taken for the new school year, that ache turns into a fiery longing.

Marta, his mother, is barely hanging on. The father of her children has died, she recently lost her job as a security guard, and she now struggles to put a few arepas on the table for Junior and his baby brother.

Junior doesn't even know yet what it means to be gay, but the very notion prompts Marta to set out to "correct" Junior's condition before it fully takes hold. This is a story of people doing what they feel they have to, partly out of fear, but also out of love.

From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film?
From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.

- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/bad-hair/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- > At the beginning of the film, how is Junior's family's social situation portrayed? What visual or narrative elements show their economic struggles?
- > Marta is a widow. What is her relationship with her son Junior like? How does the film portray her as a struggling and deeply unhappy woman?
- > Junior has "pelo malo", curly, unruly hair, and wants to straighten it for his school yearbook photo. Why is his mother, Marta, so strongly opposed to this desire?
- > Why is Junior's hair so central to the story? What does it reveal about his identity and his aspirations?
- > Why is there so much tension between Junior and his mother, and how does that tension evolve throughout the film? What key moments make their relationship worse—or, in some cases, briefly better?
- > What role do other characters—like the grandmother or Junior's friend—play in the story? How do they help us understand Junior's inner world and desires?
- > Are there aspects of the story that are left unexplained or ambiguous? Why do you think the director chose to leave these gaps, and how does that affect your experience as a viewer?
- > Can we try to understand why Marta seems unable—or unwilling—to show love to her son? What might explain her behavior, and how does the film encourage us to interpret it?
- > How does the film explore themes of gender and identity through Junior's experiences? In what ways does he challenge or conform to expectations placed on him?
- > Does the film follow a traditional narrative structure with a clear climax, or does it take a different approach? How does this shape your experience of the story?
- > What does the film reveal about life in contemporary Venezuela? How do the urban setting and societal pressures influence the characters' choices and conflicts?
- > What did you think of the ending? Did it surprise you, or did it feel inevitable? How did it make you feel about Junior's future?



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- > How does the cinematography reflect Junior's inner world? Can you identify specific camera angles, compositions, or movements that emphasize his isolation or emotional state?

What role does color play in the film's visual storytelling? Are there recurring color schemes or contrasts that underline certain themes or characters?
- > How does Rondón use the physical space of the apartment and the city? What does the setting tell us about the characters' lives and emotional confinement?
- > What did you think of the film in terms of acting of Samuel Lange Zambrano (Junior) y Samantha Castillo (Marta)?
- > How is natural light used in the film? What effect does it have on the realism and mood of the story?
- > How does the film use silence to convey meaning? Can you identify scenes where silence speaks louder than words?

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CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- What role does the musical score (when present) play in shaping the viewer's emotional response? How subtle or overt is it, and what does that suggest about Rondón's style?
- How does the film use long takes or static shots to build atmosphere? Are there scenes where the pacing or stillness creates discomfort or empathy?
- How does the editing rhythm affect your experience of the story? Is the pace slow, fast, or uneven, and what might be the purpose behind that choice?
- How does Rondón frame her characters in relation to their environment? Do we often see them in close-up, medium shot, or wide shot, and what does this say about their emotional distance or entrapment?
- How does the film blend realism with subtle symbolism or metaphor? Can you identify visual choices that go beyond realism to suggest deeper meanings (e.g. the friend's barbie doll, mirrors, doors, hair imagery)?



THEMES

- What do you think is the central meaning of *Bad Hair*?
- Vanessa Martinez, IndieWire's film critic, wrote: "*Bad Hair is a bold, sharply perceptive film that challenges viewers' assumptions. Your perception of Junior's identity by the end may well reflect your own biases—exactly as director Mariana Rondón intended, and she achieves this with remarkable finesse. Anchored by instinctive performances—most notably Samantha Castillo's powerful turn as Junior's mother, Marta—and an unsettling score, Bad Hair stands out as a gripping, thought-provoking work. It just might be this year's breakout foreign gem on the festival circuit.*" What do you think of that statement? Do you agree with her?
- Struggling to survive in a harsh environment and working to become a security guard, Marta sees Junior's fixation as a threat to traditional gender norms and masculinity. She fears Junior might be effeminate or homosexual. Could you explain that fear and her behavior? How does she try to "re-educate" her son?
- In what ways does the film address gender roles and expectations?
- How is the theme of parental love and rejection portrayed in the relationship between Junior and his mother, Marta? What does the film suggest about the limits of maternal affection?
- How does the film deal with homophobia and the fear of perceived queerness? How do societal pressures around sexual identity affect the characters' actions and attitudes?
- What does the film say about poverty and class in Venezuela? How do economic hardships shape the characters' lives, choices, and relationships?
- What is the role of physical appearance, especially hair, in shaping identity and social acceptance in the film? How does this reflect broader societal norms or prejudices?
- What role does freedom, or the lack of it, play in the film? How do different characters experience constraint, both emotionally and socially?
- How is loneliness portrayed in the film? In what ways are Junior and his mother both isolated, and how do they cope with that isolation?
- What does the film suggest about the tension between individuality and conformity? How does Junior's struggle reflect a broader societal discomfort with difference?
- How does *Bad Hair* explore the theme of childhood and coming of age? What makes Junior's journey different from a typical coming-of-age story?

