

# STUDY GUIDE



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## BIRDS OF PASSAGE (PAJAROS DE VERANO)

a Film by CIRO GUERRA and CRISTINA GALLEGO  
COLOMBIA, MEXICO, DENMARK / 2018 / 125 MIN  
Wayuu, English, and Spanish with English subtitles

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## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a foreign film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country where that film comes from. Find two or three articles on the history of drug trafficking in Colombia and write a brief summary on what is happening and what has happened in the country. The history of drug trafficking in Colombia is very long, so please try to focus on the relationship between the Wayuu tribe and marijuana. You might find accounts that stand in sharp contrast with glamorized portrayals of cocaine trafficking (think Pablo Escobar). Also, find articles about the Wayuu people in Colombia, their history, their socio-economic circumstances, and their relationship to the government. Please use reliable sources. Ask yourself these questions in your research:

- ❑ What was their religion and social structure like? What values to the Wayuu honor and what do they frown upon?
- ❑ To what extent have they been colonized? Who else have they defended themselves against?
- ❑ How did this environment's characteristics create conditions that eased drug trafficking?
- ❑ What is the history of their relationship to Colombia and Venezuela's metropolis? What about other countries? How did gain access to the first world through drug trafficking?
- ❑ Some background information on drug-trafficking during the 1970s and 80s in Colombia: The *bonanza marimbera* was, according to scholar Aimar Arizmendi, "a period of ten years (approximately between 1975 and 1985) in which great sums of money entered Colombia as a result of drug-trafficking gangs. These gangs were dedicated to cultivating and exporting illegal amounts of marijuana through the Caribbean, principally through La Guajira, Cesar and Magdalena, and into the United States. This illegal trading occurred between clans and families that employed impoverished farmers. These families made millions of dollars and were recognized by their violence, vendettas and eccentricities. The *bonanza marimbera* also produced gains for many peasant farmers. Corrupt authorities permitted the growth of this illegal business by accepting bribes and donations from gangs."<sup>1</sup>



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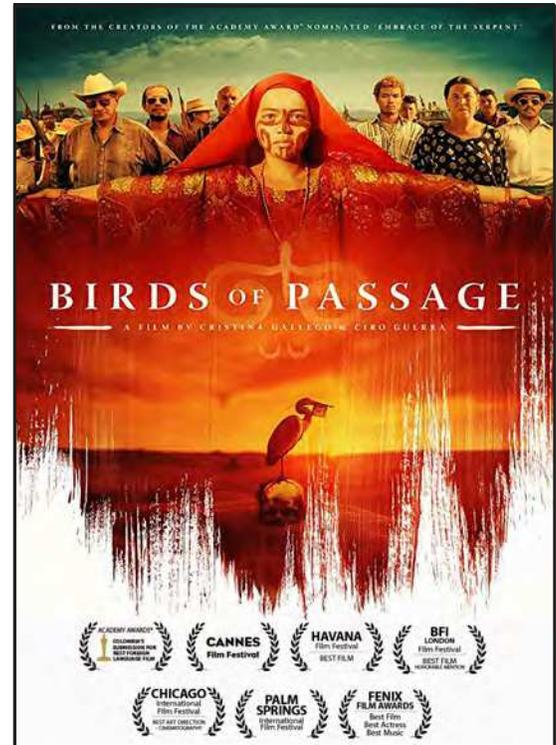
<sup>1</sup> "Bonana Marimbera, Adios!" *La Semana* <https://www.semana.com/especiales/articulo/bonanza-marimbera-adios/988-3>

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## 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 marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this official synopsis for *Birds of Passage*:

“From the Oscar-nominated team behind the genre-defying *Embrace of the Serpent*, comes an equally audacious saga centered on the Wayúu indigenous people during a crucial period in recent Colombian history. Torn between his desire to become a powerful man and his duty to uphold his culture's values, Rapayet enters the drug trafficking business in the 1970s and finds quick success despite his tribe's matriarch Ursula's disapproval. Ignoring ancient omens, Rapayet and his family get caught up in a conflict where honor is the highest currency and debts are paid with blood. A sprawling epic about the erosion of tradition in pursuit of material wealth, *Birds of Passage* is a visually striking exploration of loyalty, greed, and the voracious nature of change.



- What can you connect between the background information you found on the Colombian drug trafficking and the Wayuu tribe with the synopsis of the film? Can you make any guesses about how Rapayet's storyline will develop?
- From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main elements from the film's plot and the socio-political background to the film.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about just from the marketing materials (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images)? What does the promotional material's color palette tell you?

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## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

### CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- Analyze the opening sequence of the film, the ritual of the courtship dance. How does the dance connect to the larger themes in the film? Where is the camera placed and why is it there? What connections can you draw from this scene and the plot that follows? What does the dance and each character's interaction tell us about the importance of custom for the Wayuu?
- How does costuming play a role in the film? How do the different outfits reflect the themes of changing identity and clashing cultures that are present in the film? How does, for example, Moisés' outfit differ from some of the outfits worn by the Wayuu people? What other flamboyant fictional criminals does it remind you of? And what does this tell you about the changing cultural landscape of Colombia in the late 1970's and 80's?
- Many film critics have compared *Birds of Passage* to other classic rags-to-riches drug-war movies, such as *The Godfather*, *Scarface* and the Netflix series *Narcos*. Do you think these comparisons are fair or accurate? Why or why not? Do you think *Birds* sets itself apart from these films? If so, explain why. Consider both plot devices and aesthetics.
- *Birds of Passage* is vibrant with color: from the very first scene, the bright reds of Zaida's dress and face coloring jump out to the viewer. This is in direct contradiction with traditional gangster films, which are often darkly lit and consist of dark shadows. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to make *Birds of Passage* so colorful?
- Analyze the shots of nature in the movie. Why do you think the director chose to focus so many shots on the locusts, the goats, and birds? How is nature thematically relevant to the movie? Cite two specific examples and analyze the **mise-en-scène**<sup>2</sup>.
- How do the desert's arid conditions reflect the Wayuu's lifestyle? Consider how the forest is a place of abundance for marijuana growers and the beach a place of carefree decadence for Americans.
- Analyze how the set design and production reflects the themes in the film. For example, the modernist, white house Rapayet acquires for his family in the desert later in the film. What does it symbolize? What, specifically, about the house symbolises the themes in the movie? Can you think of other examples in the film's set design that demonstrates some of the bigger themes and changes within the movie?

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<sup>2</sup> "Mise-en-scène...is used in film to refer to everything that goes into the composition of a shot--framing, movement of the camera and characters, lighting, set design and the visual environment, and sound."

"Term Index." *The Columbia Film Language Glossary*. <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/>

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## CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- ❑ **Diegetic** and **non-diegetic**<sup>3</sup> music play a major role throughout the film. Select scene(s) that contain music and explain its use in the narrative: the emotions it produces for the audience and the tone that it creates. Think especially about vallenato music (Colombia's popular folk music) and the role it plays within the themes of change and tradition. Moreover, consider the importance of the oral tradition: how ancient communities used songs to preserve stories, keep them in the common memory, and give lessons to the younger generations.
- ❑ How do subtitles add an extra narrative element to the film? Think about times in the film where we don't see subtitles but a foreign language is nonetheless spoken. Can you tell when the different languages are spoken? Did you find that the use of Wayunaiki enhances the film's dramatic effect or not?
- ❑ From a screenwriting perspective, try to find the **inciting incident**<sup>4</sup> of *Birds of Passage*. What moment thrusts Rapayet into the main action, into the world of drug-trafficking? Once you find the moment, analyze the mise-en-scène and write down how you know that it's the inciting incident.
- ❑ Elaborate on what the inciting incident tells us about Rapayet's intentions. Do you think that his means satisfied his ends or do you think he is evil to a certain extent? What does this tell us about human nature? Does Rapayet seem relateable from an emotional standpoint?



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<sup>3</sup> "Non-diegetic sound is sound whose origin is from outside the story world. Voice-overs are typically non-diegetic, since the narration does not appear in the film's story world. Usually, the music soundtrack of a film is non-diegetic." "Term Index." *The Columbia Film Language Glossary*. <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/>

<sup>4</sup> "The inciting incident is an event that hooks the viewer into the story and sets everything else that happens into motion. This moment is when an event thrusts the protagonist into the main action of the story." -- "The Inciting Incident," *Scriptmag*. <https://www.scriptmag.com/features/inciting-incident-needs-page-10>

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## THEMES

- How do singing and song play important roles in the film? Think about the lyrics of the Wayuu song that the blind man sings at the start of the film: *“My memory has started to fade and with it, all the tales and stories that I’ve sung. Before my footsteps are erased, with my singing I want to remember the story of love, desolation, wealth and pain of the great family that destroyed itself.”* How does this song connect to the themes of the movie? Who do you think the blind man is singing to?
- The movie’s story is told by a wise, old, and blind man -- a very Homeric figure. What other elements of Greek tragedy does the movie have? Think of at least two other comparisons and reflect on why the filmmakers might have made references to Greek tragedies.
- At the beginning of the film, Rapayet says he can speak Spanish, but prefers to speak the language of the Wayuú, *Wayuunaiki*. What role does language play in the film? What does language represent to different cultures? And how does Rapayet -- who can speak both *Wayuunaiki* and Spanish -- represent the bridge between the Old World and the New World? How does language make or break trust and credibility? Can it work as a social class signifier?
- Think about the women in the film and their roles in the narrative. The Wayuú tribe is unique in that the matriarchs of the household own the houses and run the families. Do you think the women in the film -- Zaida, Ursula -- are strong female characters? Why or why not? Refer to specific scenes and examples. Also, consider how you define the concept of strong—be careful to not equate strength with purely masculine qualities.
- Think about the representation of Americans (“gringos”) in the movie -- the hippie, long-haired Peace Corps members who combat the spread of Communism and buy marijuana from Rapayet and Moisés. Why do you think they’re depicted like this? What role do they play in the movie’s plot? Why do the Peace Corps tell Rapayet to “say no to Communism”? What does this tell you about how “gringos” are perceived in certain social classes in Latin America?
- Think about what Moisés (Móncho) represents in the movie: why does the Wayuú clan so heavily disapprove of him? Do you think disapproval of him has anything to do with systematic racism? Why does he present the new car to Rapayet? Why is he always drinking? Does he respect the sacred traditions of the Wayuú? Do you like Moisés?

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## THEMES (continued)

- ❑ How would you characterize the relationship between the Colombians (the *arijuna*), the Wayuú, and the other native tribes? Is there a hierarchy in this dynamic? Explain.
- ❑ Some critics of *Birds of Passage* say that the movie reinforces the stereotype of Colombia as a country full of drug traffickers and narcos. Do you think this is true? Do you think the movie reinforces that stereotype or does it add fresh and new elements to that narrative? What other depictions of this narrative have you seen and which are prevalent in popular culture? Think about the historical War on Drugs and Pablo Escobar's consequences in the region and his influence on current popular culture.
- ❑ How do you stand on the conflict between tradition and development? How does sacred tradition erode and dissolve thanks to the introduction of drug trafficking in the Wayuú tribe? Think about specific examples where the interests of money come in conflict with native traditions.
- ❑ How does Rapayet develop as a character? Analyze his character arc and what happens to him as a character once he begins to succeed in the drug war.
- ❑ Why do you think the film is titled *Birds of Passage*? When do we see birds in the film? What do you think they symbolize?
- ❑ Do you think the film **exoticizes** the Wayuú people in any way? Why or why not? Think about this following quote, from a film scholar who criticizes the film.

“Concerned with the “traditional”, the creators of *Birds of Passage* were lost from the “modern” in this story. Therefore, rather than revealing the origins of drug trafficking in the country, what the film shows us is the inability of *Arijuna* Colombia to imagine and represent itself without instrumentalizing an allegedly primitive and exotic “other” to reflect it. And loaded with the weight of our limitations, in search of a historical realism that announces, but twists, *Birds of Passage* is attacked in mid-flight by the flurry of its own mistakes and tricks.” -- Lina Britto, “*The Guajira Revenge*.”<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>5</sup> Lina Britto, “The Guajira Revenge,” *UniversoCentro*. (in Spanish) <https://www.universocentro.com/NUMERO101/La-venganza-guajira.aspx>

