

# STUDY GUIDE



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## LIQUID TRUTH (AOS TEUS OLHOS)

a Film by CAROLINA JABOR

BRAZIL / 2017 / 90 MIN  
Portuguese 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 pedophilia in Brazil and how the country faces such allegations. Research on the country's culture of machismo and its particular story of homoeroticism.

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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 synopsis for *Liquid Truth*.

What if the only evidence of a crime is the testimony of a parent interpreting the unclear words of her child? Alex is a young boy on the swimming team. His father Davi is always disappointed he never gets first place. Noticing that the father's pressure has been affecting Alex's behavior, Coach Rubens tries to offer emotional support. Extremely outgoing, he's widely popular with the kids. But the personal attention becomes questionable when Alex's mother Marisa says her son confessed that Rubens was inappropriate with him in the locker room. At first, Alex's father is hesitant to pursue the matter, concerned about his own image. The school principal is slow to react, too—worried the whole thing could be a misunderstanding. But when Alex's mom posts about the incident on social media, there's no going back.



- ❑ 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)? Consider how the color blue is used in juxtaposition to human bodies.
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## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

### CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- ❑ Analyze the film's opening shot: a boy's legs kicking underwater. What does it symbolize? How does it set up the story that's about to follow? What does the boy's movement tell you about what's to come? How does it relate to the title?
- ❑ How are bodies shot in the film? What could the filmmakers be saying here?
- ❑ How do the filmmakers use the swimming pool as a character in and of itself? How is the pool filmed? Pick apart one or two scenes where the filmmakers make extensive use of the pool and analyze what they might be trying to convey.
- ❑ Why do the filmmakers include slow-motion shots underwater? What is the purpose of these shots and how do they speak to you? What do they say about everyday life in the swimming pool?
- ❑ Think about how music is used throughout the film. How is it used to build tension and suspense? Think about two distinct scenes that use music and analyze what effect they have on the viewer.



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## CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- How would you describe the color palette throughout the film? Are the colors dull, bright, vibrant? Think about how the colors of the film might reflect its themes. Consider the cinematographic contrast between scenes that take place in the swimming pool and scenes that take place outside of it.
- Think about the scene in the locker room where Rubens kisses Alex. How is it shot cinematically? Is it hyper-dramatized? Or is it shot as any other scene? Did you know that something was wrong? Did you see it as malicious when you first saw it? What cinematic techniques does the director use to set the tone for the scene? Analyze camera angles, lighting, and other elements of the **mise-en-scène**<sup>1</sup> as evidence for your answer.
- Analyze the shots from the interrogation scene, shown below. What is significant about them? How do they reveal something new about Rubens, and something new in the film? What did you feel while watching this scene? Consider how the director uses cinematic techniques to set the tone and highlight certain power dynamics.
- Analyze the scenes where Alex's mother decides to tell the other members of the swimming club the truth about Rubens through social media. What's going on cinematically? How do the filmmakers visually tell you that it's an important moment in the film's narrative? What does it tell us about the importance of technology for this set of parents?
- Why do you think the end credits are typed out in the style of a text message? What themes are the filmmakers underlining here?

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## NARRATIVE

- How do you think the film portrays Rubens at the start of the film? Did you find him a likeable figure when he was first introduced? How does he use his charisma? Analyze the opening ten minutes of the film and try to describe your feelings towards Rubens before he kisses Alex.
- What do you make of Rubens' homoerotic jokes and hyper-sexual humour around the other swim instructor? How do they add to the film's narrative and to your assessment of Rubens' personality? Did you find his behaviour acceptable?
- Evaluate how the film's tone evolves—from a kid's swimming pool academy to a story about allegations of inappropriate sexual behaviour. When do you think this change takes place?
- How did your perception of Rubens change throughout the course of the narrative? What does his character development (or lack thereof) say about his waning psychological state throughout the film?
- How would you characterize the relationship between Alex's parents? How is their relationship relevant to the film's narrative and to the accusations against Rubens? What does each parent's relationship to Alex tell us about his family structure and the way it's affecting his development?
- Do you think Rubens is guilty? If so, do you find him likeable despite his accused wrongdoing? If you don't think he's guilty, what made you reach that conclusion? Cite specific scenes as evidence for your assessment of Rubens.



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<sup>1</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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## NARRATIVE *(continued)*

- How is the father's accusations against Rubens' sexuality relevant? How does the father's homophobia play a role? Consider the research you did on machismo culture and homoeroticism in Brazil.
- How do you think the swimming principal, Ana, handles the accusations? Do you think Ana was on Rubens' side? Why or why not? Do you believe her reaction was inappropriate? Do you think she should have fired him earlier? Why or why not? Elaborate on your answer.
- Consider the #MeToo movement. Can you see any parallels between the power dynamics at hand between men in power and abused women who have decided to talk to reporters, and Rubens and Alex's decision to speak to his mother?
- How does the relationship between Heitor, the other swim instructor, and Rubens change after the accusation? How is Rubens perceived differently, not only by the characters but also by the audience? How is stigma used as a tool and what role does technology have in enabling social shame?
- What did you think about Alex's parents? Did you find them over-protective? Did you agree with what they did? Why or why not? Do you think their lack of communication and tension was productive or counterproductive when trying to protect their child? Explain your answer.
- Why do you think Alex rarely speaks in the film? Why don't we ever see him speak for or against Rubens? How is this fact relevant, and what does that say about the accusations? What does it say about sexual accusations in general?

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## THEMES

- What's the role of homophobia and pedophilia in Brazil? What does it say about Brazilian society? How is it similar/different to the U.S.?
- Why do you think the filmmakers chose swimming and not, for example, basketball? What about swimming lends itself to the topic of pedophilia?
- Consider how we, as a society, are expected to simply *trust* so many people with the development and care of our children.
- What power relations take place in the pool? How could these dynamics lend themselves to abuse? Consider director - teacher, parent - director, parent - teacher, co-worker, and most importantly teacher - student relationships.
- How does the internet and social media play a huge role in the film? Think about the moments in the film where the characters use social media. What do you think the filmmaker is saying here? What does it tell us about the herd mentality of the parents in the film?
- Why do you think one of the protestors against Rubens yells in the end, "film him and post it online!" What does it say about the internet culture today and the problem with online scapegoating? How does technology enable social stigma and shame—for better and for worse?
- Would this story be possible without the internet? What would have happened if Alex's mother had never posted about the incident on social media? How would that have changed the entire narrative?
- Carolina Jabor directed this film. How do you think that being a woman filmmaker affects the film's storytelling? Consider how parenting, particularly motherhood, is an important theme in the film.
- Do you think the film -- and by extension, the filmmaker -- take Rubens' side?

