

STUDY GUIDE



UN TRADUCTOR (UN TRADUCTOR)

a Film by RODRIGO BARRIUSO and SEBASTIÁN BARRIUSO
CUBA, CANADA / 2018 / 107 MIN
Spanish and Russian with English subtitles



www.pragda.com

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 information on Cuba before the revolution and the main key points that led to it. Also, find two or three articles on the history of “the special period,” the economic crisis that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Find information on the Chernobyl disaster and Cuba’s role in the aftermath of said accident.

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 *Un Traductor*:

Havana, 1989: Russian literature professor Malin (Rodrigo Santoro, of *Westworld* fame) receives a mysterious note at the university with orders from the government sending him to a local hospital, where he learns he is expected to act as translator between Cuban doctors and the families of young patients from the catastrophic accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Initially raging against his new role, Malin is forced to stay on. He eventually becomes deeply devoted to his patients, who suffer from radiation-related diseases. But while he becomes “king of the kids” at the hospital, his relationships with his pregnant wife Isona and young son Javi suffer. Meanwhile, life around all of them shifts as the “Special Period”—the economic crisis in Cuba that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union—begins.



- ❑ 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 its socio-political and historical background.
- ❑ 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)? Who do you think are the main characters?

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- ❑ Think about the opening shot, grainy VHS tape of Fidel Castro’s meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev -- how does this shot immediately put you in the historical time period the film is in? How does this shot connect to Malin and Javi?
- ❑ Think about how the opening mixes documentary footage with fictionalized footage under the same diegesis. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to do this? What could it mean? Do you think the filmmakers achieved a smooth transition?
- ❑ Think about the music in the film, especially at the start of the film. How does the classic sounds of Cuban salsa add to the feeling of an idyllic Cuba? How does the music change over the course of the narrative? Does the music enhance the narrative, considering the historical period when the film is set?



(continued on next page)

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- Think about how the set design changes over the course of the film. How is Cuban life depicted at the start of the film? How is it depicted near the middle and end of the film? Make sure to analyze specific elements, such as costuming, make-up, lighting, and set decorations.
- Analyze the shot of Havana's citizens riding bicycles due to petrol shortage. What does its composition tell us about Cuba and the historical period it was set in? Is this important to the film's plot?
- How do subtitles play a role in this film? Do you think subtitles give you a particular insight that makes you, as a viewer, interact with the film in a different way? What do you think about this cinematic technique?



NARRATIVE

- Think about how Malin and his family are introduced to the audience. Did you think they were a happy family? Did you expect Isona and Malin to have conflicts? Why or why not? Give concrete examples to justify your line of thought.
- What do you think about how the film depicts Isona? Do you think the film does justice to her side of the story? Why or why not? Do you think Isona is a victim of her circumstances? Why or why not?
- When all the Russian professors are notified that they will be re-assigned as translators at the hospital, some of the professors complain to the president of the university. His response: "orders from above." How is this emblematic of Cuba at the time? Who is "above," and why must they follow their orders without question? Remember that, since 1959, Cuba has had a "one state-one party" political system.
- How are Malin and Isona a unique perspective to see Cuba at this time? Think about the worlds they inhabit and their socio-economic status. Do you think they ever experience the reality the rest of the country, the majority of the Cubans, live?
- Why do you think Malin protests, so furiously and arrogantly, against being a translator at the hospital? How does his attitude change, and why? At what particular moment do you think his attitude changes?
- How do you think the doctors at the hospital feel about Fidel Castro? Why do you think Gladys says to Malin, "I know who you can talk to -- Fidel!?" How is this an important depiction of the Cuban regime?
- Analyze the relationship between Malin and Gladys over the course of the film. How does it develop? How does it crystalize? Is it ever fully realized? Why or why not?
- Why do you think some of the family members say that Gorbachev is getting "soft" and "flirting with capitalism"? What do you think this says about the family's political views? If necessary, research about Gorbachev's latter years as the last leader of the Soviet Union.
- Analyze the relationship between Malin and Alexi. How does Alexi change Malin's attitude and his time at the hospital? How does Alexi inspire Malin? Why do you think the relationship is central to the film's narrative?



(continued on next page)

NARRATIVE *(continued)*

- Think about Malin's favorite bedtime story -- Carlitos the beekeeper. Why do you think this story in particular is his favorite? What does it symbolize? Why is this story relevant to the film's narrative?
- Why do you think Malin begins to inspire and interact with the kids at the hospital but neglects his own son, Javi?
- Analyze the scene where Malin sees the news that the Berlin wall has been torn down. Take a careful look at his reaction -- why do you think he looks upset? How does this moment foreshadow what's about to happen in the film and in Cuba? Remember that Cuba relied on the Soviet Union.
- Do you sympathize with Malin? Do you find him egotistical? Do you think he is an honorable figure? Or do you think he is arrogant and irresponsible? Do you think Malin changes over the course of the film? Cite specific scenes as evidence for your evaluation of Malin.
- Do you think Malin is a hero? Why or why not?
- What do you think about Malin's statement to Isona, "it's only art." Why do you think he says this to her? Do you agree with him? Do you think that in times of crisis, art is meaningless? Why or why not? Explain your answer fully.
- Near the end of the film, Isona and Malin are afraid of selling a painting to an American because they would have to hide the U.S. dollars. Why do you think this is? What does this say about the Cuban government's relationship



THEMES

- How is communism depicted in the film? Do you think communist Cuba is shown in a positive light or a negative light? Do you think the filmmakers lean towards a specific side of the political spectrum? If so, which way and why? Remember that the film is inspired by the directors' father and their experiences growing up.
- Analyze how, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba experiences a financial crisis, and meanwhile Malin's own family experiences its own crisis. How is the micro -- a upper-middle class family in Cuba -- used to understand the macro -- the politics of entire country? Can you name one or two parallels as examples?
- How is the idyllic version of communist Cuba depicted at the start of the film? How does that dream putrefy and erode as the film develops? What do you think this says about Cuban communism in general?
- Consider how the fall of the Cuban regime influenced the evolution of the Latin American left. Many of the region's hard-left figures are acquiescent to the Cuban revolution, even if it failed on many levels—as showcased in the film's portrayal of scarcity. Why do you think such brand of socialism continues to have many supporters? Research information on the Latin American "pink tide" to answer this question.
- Once Isona forgives him, she says to Malin, "Things will never be like before. But maybe they can be different." How can you take this statement and use it to understand at large what happened to Cuba during this time? How does this statement reflect the crisis many socialist states are now going through?
- Do you feel as though you learned about communist Cuba through this film? Why or why not?

