

STUDY GUIDE



EMA

Directed by PABLO LARRAÍN

CHILE / 2019 / 102 MIN
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 that film comes from. Find out information about adoption processes in Chile and adoption reversals in general. Are they common? Director Pablo Larraín chose this topic after learning about several real cases in Chile.

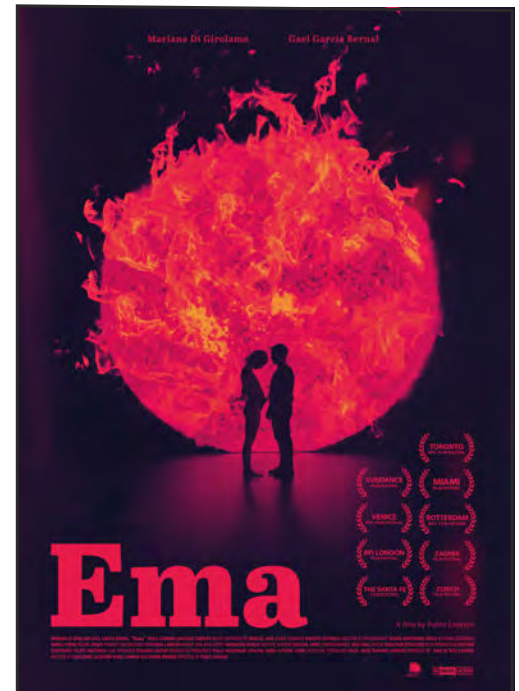
Familiarize yourself with Reggaeton and how it is perceived. In an interview, Larraín mentioned, “I think reggaeton is an interesting type of music that can be understood and considered in many ways. Some people claim that it’s misogynistic, that it doesn’t treat women properly, and there are even more political ways of understanding it.”¹ What are these other “political ways” of understanding it?

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 *Emilia*:

Emilia is a young dancer living in Valparaiso, Chile. She and her husband, Gastón, who is a choreographer, decide to separate after giving back Polo, the son they adopted together but were unable to raise. In the aftermath of this decision, Emilia seeks love affairs in order to overcome her guilt. However, she has a secret plan to recover everything she’s lost, and she will do anything to get what she wants.

- 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.
- Do you think that the film will be politically charged? If so, why?
- 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)? In what ways does the marketing material differ from larger commercial productions?



¹ “Everything Is Political: Pablo Larraín Discusses Emilia”. Savina Petkova, May 1, 2020, MUBI <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/everything-is-political-pablo-larrain-discusses-ema>

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- ❑ The film's opening cuts back and forth from a dance performance, splitting it up in several parts. Later, the camera stays with a long sequence of reggaeton "street" dance. What do you think these very different editing styles convey about the two kinds of dance and how they function in the narrative?
- ❑ The film uses a music-video aesthetic in certain parts. Can you choose a scene where you think this style is portrayed and analyze the stylistic choice?
- ❑ Would you say that style overpowers narrative, or that it serves the narrative in the film? Expand your response.
- ❑ The film takes place in the coastal city of Valparaiso and Larraín has described it as another character of the film. Think about the stylistic choices the director made while shooting and analyze how they support this statement. Find moments in the film in which the cinematography reflects the rich and colorful nature of the city.
- ❑ Valparaiso has a combination of labyrinthic streets and hills, while also being an open port city. In what way does Valparaiso mirror Ema's character and the film's narrative.
- ❑ How does the cinematography reflect the mercurial changeability of Ema's character? Think about frame, movement, and lighting to and analyze a few scenes in which Ema's inner turmoil or outlandish actions are externalized.
- ❑ Diegetic music and non-diegetic music play a major role in the film.² How does music affect the mood of the film? Does it change when it is coming from within the narrative vs. soundtrack?
- ❑ What does each character's musical preference say about them?
- ❑ How would you describe the color palette of the film? Are the colors dull, bright, vibrant? How might the colors reflect the film's themes?
- ❑ Do the filmmakers use artificial light or natural light for the majority of the scenes? Explain how this decision might inform the film's themes.



² 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/>

NARRATIVE

- During an interview, Larraín mentioned that, “everything is political, and you have to acknowledge that. A character would always be a small metaphor, or a reflection of something that’s bigger, and that makes it all the more exciting.”³ Discuss what you think Ema represents.
- Larraín is known for films that revisit and rework Chile’s past. However, Ema is taking place in the present. Do you think this story would have worked if placed in a past period? Expand on why or why not?
- Ema seems like a character who can provoke hate, or love. Why do you think it is that almost everyone who meets her in the film ends up loving her? How do you feel about her?
- How would you describe the character of Ema? What about Gaston, played by Gael Garcia Bernal? Would you consider them well fit for each other?
- How is Ema’s gender fluidity used in the film? Does it advance the story, or it is simply a character trait?
- Think about how the film administers information, does the viewer know less, the same, or more than the main characters? Why do you think the director chose this strategy to tell the story? Can you associate it with a specific narrative genre? In what genre would you place Ema?
- Can we blame Polo for his actions, or does the blame fall on the parents who raised him? Do you think parents make children who they are, or are we born with inherent characteristics?
- During the film, Ema and her husband blame each other constantly about the loss of their child. Think and analyze one of these scenes. Is it actually important who is guilty?
- In the film we see a social worker tell Ema she is unfit to be a mother, but Ema is insistent on being a mother. Explore this dilemma and the lengths Ema will go to be a parent again.
- Initially, the film doesn’t seem to have a clear narrative direction. Instead it moves from one scene to the other as an instantaneous dance. Taking into consideration the final scene. Would you say this is true? Why or why not?
- Although the final scene explains a lot about the characters’ actions throughout the film, it is quite open. What questions are you left with at the end?
- In the film, dance cannot be contained to the studio; it spills out onto the streets of Valparaiso. How is this related to the narrative? What are the other things that cannot be contained and “spill out”?



³ “Everything Is Political: Pablo Larraín Discusses Ema”. Savina Petkova, May 1, 2020, MUBI <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/everything-is-political-pablo-larrain-discusses-ema>

THEMES

- ❑ The image of the burning sun appears prominently in the film and its promotional materials. How would you associate it with Ema? Think not only about the sun but also about the constellations relationship to it to make your analogy.
- ❑ The film is a bold interrogation of the concept of nuclear family. How are the ideas of parenthood explored in the film? Do they conform or deviate from societal norms? Explain.
- ❑ What do you think about the filmmaker's decision to approach the issue of adoption from the point of view of the parents after the aftermath of a failed one?
- ❑ Do you think Ema and Gaston love each other? How do they manifest their love? In what ways do they taunt each other at the same time?
- ❑ How is sexuality portrayed in the film?
- ❑ The film celebrates female agency and empowerment. Would you consider Ema a feminist film/character? Take into consideration that Ema's director, screenwriter, cinematographer, choreographer, and music director are all male. Does that change your answer?
- ❑ We see a number of different styles of dance in *Ema*: Gaston prefers contemporary dance, but Ema wants to dance something different: reggaeton. What do each of these dances represent?
- ❑ Find moments of crisis in the dance company and evaluate where these issues stem from. Why does Gaston look down on reggaeton?
- ❑ Dance is the main way of expression and communication throughout the film. Explore in detail all the different ways in which dance means something other than dance.

