

STUDY GUIDE



MONOS

Directed by ALEJANDRO LANDES
COLOMBIA, UNITED STATES / 2019 / 103 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. When asked how did the situation in Colombia directly inspire this movie?

Director Alejandro Landes said, “There has been a seemingly endless civil war in Colombia, a war with many fronts: paramilitaries, guerrillas, Narcos, the government, foreign actors and everything seems to be coming to a head. The fragile possibility of peace is in the air, and it’s been a long time coming... The former President was given the Nobel Peace Prize last year for signing a peace agreement between FARC, the main guerrilla group, and the government, but this is a peace that was rejected in the ballot box by a referendum and had to be pushed through by executive decree. The accord calls for all guerillas brandishing machine guns in the mountains and jungles to give up their weapons and head into the towns and cities. It’s still unclear how they will be received — will they be welcomed and helped to start anew or killed in the streets for revenge or forgotten? Also, despite the agreement with the guerilla’s commanders, many fear that dissident squadrons have splintered off to wage a war of their own, like you begin to see in *Monos*.”¹ Research the volatile situation in Colombia to learn about the film’s context.

INTRODUCING THE FILM

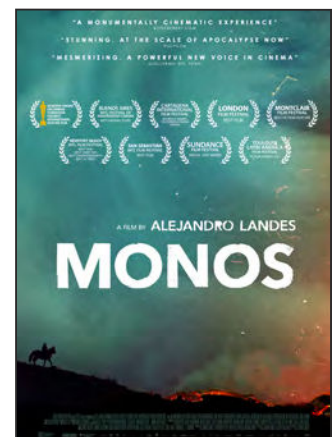
A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film’s narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film’s marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *Monos*.

A crossroad between *Apocalypse Now*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Embrace of the Serpent*, Alejandro Landes’ *Monos* tracks a young group of soldiers and rebels who run wild in the mountains of an unspecified South American country, while keeping watch over an American hostage, Doctora.

The teenage commandos perform military training exercises by day and indulge in youthful hedonism by night, an unconventional family bound together under a shadowy force known only as The Organization. After an ambush drives the squadron into the jungle, both the mission and the intricate bonds between the group begin to disintegrate. Order descends into chaos and, within *Monos*, the strong begin to prey on the weak in this vivid, cautionary fever-dream.

In his awe-inspiring third feature, Landes examines the chaos and absurdity of war from the unique perspective of adolescence in a way that feels wholly original, thrusting his diverse young cast into an unforgiving, irrational, and often surreal environment where anything can happen — even peace. The film’s sense of surreal menace is amplified by Mica Levi’s discordant soundscape and Jasper Wolf’s cinematography.

- 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 “A Conversation with director and co-writer Alejandro Landes.” *Monos* Press Notes

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- ❑ In an interview, director Alejandro Landes mentioned that provoking a sense of discomfort through the style of the film was important to him. Analyze a few scenes in which you see this happening, while taking into consideration style elements such as cinematography, music, editing, acting style, and **mise-en-scene**.²
- ❑ The film juxtaposes stylization with realism. Compare and contrast scenes in which each of these two artistic methods are displayed.
- ❑ The film was shot in location. How does this affect the mise-en-scene?
- ❑ The camera frame goes from long shots in the mountains to close ups in the jungle. Consider a pair of scenes using these two different frame lengths and analyze the significance of their placement in the narrative and what he tried to convey.
- ❑ How would you describe the overall editing style of the film? Is it fast-paced or slow?
- ❑ The mesmerizing musical score from Mica Levi is only 22 minutes long, but when it comes, it comes on strong. When does it appear? What images does it evoke? Why do you think the director gave it prominence in style, but not in length?
- ❑ How would you describe the color palette of the film? Are the colors dull, bright, vibrant? How does cinematographer Jasper Wolf use color to infuse the scene with an otherworldly, waking-dream environment?
- ❑ What does the hand-held camerawork bring to the story? Select a scene and analyze this point.
- ❑ *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Werner Herzog's doomed Amazonian adventures (*Aguirre, Wrath of God*, 1972; and *Fitzcarraldo*, 1982) have been the references critics have boxed *Monos* into. If you've seen those films, can you compare and contrast *Monos* with one of them?



² 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/>

NARRATIVE

- ❑ *Monos* is inspired by the volatile situation in Colombia (which director Alejandro Landes calls “a ticking time bomb”), but pointedly plays out in unnamed locales, devoid of any geographical reference points. How does this affect the narrative?
- ❑ Landes intentionally talked about the group *Monos* as a character. Can you describe the group as you would any film or literary character? Analyze a few scenes in which the group behaves as one character.
- ❑ Can you identify the many characters that compose the group *Monos*? How would you describe each of them? Why do you think they go by nicknames such as Rambo, Wolf, Boom-Boom, Bigfoot, and Dog, among others?
- ❑ The film is narrated by multiple points of view as opposed to the classical hero narrative. Do you think the latter would have been a safer choice? Explain why or why not.
- ❑ The *Monos* are in charge of keeping an eye on Doctora. Not much is said about this character other than she is an engineer. What do you think she represents?
- ❑ Who is and what is the role of The Organization?
- ❑ The threat of the enemy is latent throughout the film. However, it is never verbally disclosed who this enemy is, neither it is visually exposed. Who do you think is this enemy? Can you think of another enemy not explicitly mentioned in the film?
- ❑ *Monos* are forced to move as unseen troops close in, they’re never too far from another setup; ultimately, the only factor guaranteed to disrupt their antics comes from their own dysfunction.



THEMES

- ❑ The name of the film, *Monos*, alludes to the Greek word for "alone" or "one." How do you think this meaning plays in the film?
- ❑ *Monos* exposes war through teenage eyes and the director has expressed his interest in the "dynamics between teenagers that you see in the schoolyard". Can you compare and contrast the behavior of this group of teenagers with that of those from other films that explore the same dynamics?
- ❑ Why do you think the filmmaker chose to stay away from some of the more common aspects of films about child soldiers such as them being kidnapped or coerced into joining a guerrilla group?
- ❑ Landes expressed that, "youth serves as a metaphor for Colombia as a nation." Can you expand the analogy? How would you compare the characteristics of adolescence with those of a country?
- ❑ There is a lot of moral ambiguity in the film. Can you provide and analyze a few examples?
- ❑ Ambiguity and fluidity are prevalent in the film. Think about when and where the film takes place. Can you place the film in space and time? What about other aspects of the film? Is its ideology and that of the *Monos* clear? What about the character's age and gender?
- ❑ What themes do you think the director wanted to explore by this remarkable absence of boundaries and categorizations?

