

STUDY GUIDE



THE AWAKENING OF THE ANTS (EL DESPERTAR DE LAS HORMIGAS)

Written and Directed by ANTONELLA SUDASASSI FURNISS
COSTA RICA, SPAIN / 2019 / 94 MIN
Spanish 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 two articles on the history of women's rights in Costa Rica and what they are like now. Specifically, try to focus on articles surrounding women in the workplace and shared caregiving. Also look into the history of domestic abuse in Latin America.

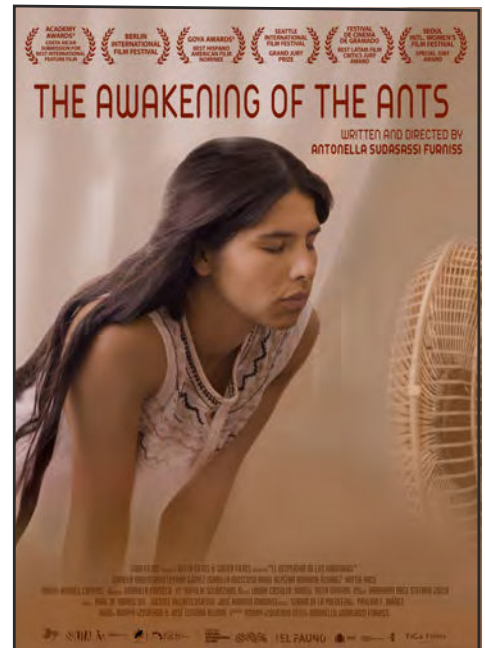
“According to surveys of the National Statistics and Census Institute (INEC), the women have less leisure due to their double responsibility at work and at home, but they study more to reinforce their training... They spend some 30 hours a week to improve their curricula and this time is longer among heads of families with low school levels and lower salaries, said Vicerrector of the University of Costa Rica, Irma Sandoval. Men devote 15 hours a week to household chores while women spend 37 hours doing those tasks, thus reflecting the gender gap, according to diarioextra.com website.”¹

- How do you think the film will deal with these issues?

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 *The Awakening of the Ants*:

For thoughtful, demure young housewife Isa, life in a lush, postcard-perfect Costa Rican seaside village is far from anyone's idea of a dream. She is being pressured by her intrusive and loudly opinionated in-laws to have another baby – a boy – even as her already cramped household struggles to stay afloat. She tends to the needs of her husband and two daughters while her own desires remain distant and ignored. Isa finds herself suffocated by rigid gender roles and the cloistered, provincial thinking that comes with small-town life. Desperately imagining some other way of living—single, childless, desired—while growing increasingly tense towards those closest to her, Isa finds herself at a breaking point awakening to the possibilities of a life lived on her own terms, in this engrossing and intimate feature debut from writer/director Antonella Sudasassi Furniss.



- 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)?

¹ “Women of Costa Rica over burdened with responsibilities,” *The Costa Rica Star*.
<https://news.co.cr/women-of-costa-rica-over-burdened-with-responsibilities/18855/>

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- What is the film's cinematography like?
- 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.
- Diegetic music and non-diegetic music play a major role in the film.² Think about the bar and party scenes. They are playing music known as "Cumbia," a genre of music popular in Latin America. Think about the tone of these scenes and how the music plays a major role in the scene's feeling.
- Think about the realistic nature of the character's acting. Why do you think the filmmaker wanted to use this method of acting for the film?
- The film makes heavy use of long tracking shots. Why do you think this is? How might this influence the work of the actors?

NARRATIVE

- How does the opening shot of the film, Isa and the family at a birthday party, set up the mood of the film and its themes? How does the mood of the opening scene contrast with what happens later in the film? How does it foreshadow the film's conflict?
- What can you tell about the protagonist, Isa, from the opening five minutes? How do you characterize her in the beginning of the film?
- Think about the first dream sequence of the film -- where Isa imagines herself mashing and eating a birthday cake. What do you think it means? How does it symbolize the themes of the film?
- Think about the film's magical realism.³ What purpose do these dream sequences have? What is the symbolism behind hallucinations?
- There are several scenes of Isa fixing a lightbulb. In one scene, while Isa and Alcides have sex, a moth flickers with the bulb. What do you think the lightbulb symbolizes?



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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/>

³ The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines magical realism being "a literary genre or style associated especially with Latin America that incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/magic%20realism>

NARRATIVE *(continued)*

- ❑ Think about the physicality of the film. Come up with two or three examples where physical objects in the film take on an ethereal quality. How does this connect to Isabel's sexuality?
- ❑ In one scene, Isabel's mother-in-law tells her that "it's one thing to be a good person. It's another thing to be a good mother." What do you make of this statement? How does it demonstrate a traditional view of women's role in society, even among other women themselves?
- ❑ Think about the film's church scene. How does religion play a role in women's gender roles? Do you think the church is a patriarchal institution? Why or why not?
- ❑ Isabel's sister tells her that "Alcides has been wanting a child for a long time." What does this demonstrate about conversations among women?
- ❑ Why do you think Isa goes to the bar?
- ❑ How is Isabel pressured to have another child, not by Alcides but by her entire community? What could this say about the role of women in Latin America?
- ❑ How does Isabel come to her decision? Do you think it's justified?
- ❑ What do you make of the last scene, where Isabel and her kids cut their hair? Do you think it's a triumphant moment?
- ❑ What do you make of the relationship between Isabel and Alcides? Is he a bad husband/father in your opinion? Why or why not? Take into account the film's last scene.
- ❑ Do you think Isabel is a good mother by the film's ending? Why or why not?
- ❑ How does Alcides react to Isabel's decision to not have another child? Do you think it was an appropriate response? Why or why not?
- ❑ The film ends on a slight cliffhanger. We don't know what happens next. Can you try to imagine how the community might react to her decision? Do you think they will be accepting? Why or why not?
- ❑ How does Isa change by the film's ending? Do you think she comes to terms with her role as a caregiver and mother?



THEMES

- ❑ How do gender roles play a large part of the film's drama? How does Isa subscribe and subvert her gender roles? What about her husband, Alcides? Does he subscribe or subvert his role as a man? What about the other characters?
- ❑ Think about all the times food is shown in the film. There are several scenes of Isa and the family eating at the table, Isa making breakfast, Isa peeling a mango. How do these scenes highlight the themes in the film?
- ❑ There is a motif of wetness in the film. Isa washing her hair, Isa taking a shower, and the shots of the Costa Rican sea. Why is wetness important to the film's themes? Think specifically about menstruation.
- ❑ In an introduction to her film for the film site MUBI, Antonella Sudasassi writes "abuse and micromachismos are taught behind closed doors through small actions." What do you think she means by micromachismos? And how are they taught "behind closed doors"? How does the film demonstrate this in the film?
- ❑ Did you find yourself relating to Isabel? Do you think women in the United States face the same societal pressures as Isabel does? Think of examples from your own life.
- ❑ How would you fit this film in the context of the #MeToo movement?
- ❑ Isabel's hair is black and very long. According to the filmmaker, this was a deliberate decision. What does hair symbolize in the film?
- ❑ How does the film explore women's sexuality? Think about the various sex scenes throughout the film -- what tone do they have?
- ❑ Think about the film's title. The ants are hallucinations, but they're also symbolic. Who are the ants? Why are they "awakening"?

