

STUDY GUIDE



DROWNING LETTERS

A film by PAULA PALACIOS

Spain / 2020 / 81 min
French, English, Arabic, and Spanish with English subtitles



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BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Paula Palacios at <https://pragda.com/film/drowning-letters/>.

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 *Drowning Letters*:

Thousands of people risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea every year in an attempt to reach the European shores. In her new film, renowned documentarian Paula Palacios sheds light on the urgent migratory crisis taking place today.

While a mysterious voice coming from the depths of the sea reads letters written by mothers to their children, *Drowning Letters* follows a rescue ship of the Spanish NGO Open Arms as it embarks on a dramatic mission to save the lives of 550 people stranded in international waters. The film also takes us aboard a Libyan Coast Guard military ship and shows us the most dangerous place in the world, Libya, where human beings are abused and enslaved.

Featuring unprecedented access and must-see images, *Drowning Letters* is an urgent and necessary film to understand one of the most tragic chapters in contemporary history.



- From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.
- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/drowning-letters/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- Is the narrative linear, non-linear, or both?
- Whose story is the film narrating?
- Throughout the film, letters often don't reach who they are meant for and passengers often don't reach where they have sailed for. How would you describe this representation of journeys in the film?
- The film arises from a political and social event. How does this film approach politics uniquely?

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NARRATIVE *(continued)*

- ❑ The film arises from a political and social event. How does this film approach politics uniquely?
- ❑ Where are these refugees coming from? Where are they going?
- ❑ Who is Open Arms?
- ❑ Is the narrative straightforward? If not, what are the other cinematic devices that are used to tell the story? Does the film fulfill your narrative expectations, or as a viewer do you feel left wanting more from the story?
- ❑ How does the film help the viewer empathize with the refugees so that you feel their pain/ struggle? Does the film succeed in explaining what is happening to the refugees?
- ❑ When the refugees arrive in Europe, the narrator says, “When we leave our country, we never imagine that our need for a refuge can disturb a people.” Reflect on this statement in light of negativity towards refugees in the United States and other countries.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- ❑ How would you best describe the cinematography of the film in terms of whose point of view the film is shot from?
- ❑ What is the color palette in the film? Think about how the filmmakers have used colors in the film to affect the mood. What is the atmosphere that the color palette creates?
- ❑ The filmmakers don't shy away from using shots in which characters look into the camera. Reflect on the impact of these powerful moments and think about how this affects the viewer. Is the subject looking at the audience? How does this technique create a connection between the camera and the subject? How is this different from some other documentary films you may have seen?
- ❑ At times, the film is dreamlike. How does the soundtrack support this sensation in the film?
- ❑ What are the political issues the film addresses and what is the film's approach to heated political issues in particular? How is this film different from other documentaries about the refugee crisis and political conflicts?
- ❑ What role does the editing play in the pacing of the film? What are the different rhythms of editing? How is the film paced as a result?
- ❑ Given that the film was made by a woman, what specific aspects of the film reflect the filmmaker' gender?
- ❑ How much time passes in the film? Is it days, weeks, months
How is time constructed through editing techniques and how does this temporality relate to some of the themes in the film?
- ❑ Europe, the destination of th refugees, is visualized with rainy streets and brutal police force. This is not what refugees were expecting. What does the rain symbolize?
- ❑ Who is the narrator / voice-over in the film? Does the voice-over belong to one person or multiple people and what is the significance of this choice?



THEMES

- ❑ The narrator tells us that they would not have left their homes if they had other choices. Contrast this statement with globalization, mobility, and travel in other non-refugee contexts.
- ❑ At one point, the narrator says, “you were right not to leave”. What are the reasons we leave or stay behind? Relate your reflection to your own life choices.
- ❑ Several letters don’t reach their destination. Reflect on the specific type of communication involved in letter writing. How is it different from other types of communication?
- ❑ A child celebrates her birthday on a boat, neither here, nor there. What does this scene convey about refugees’ relationships with the concepts of place and home?
- ❑ In the film, the NGO Open Arms plays an important role. At one point, the narrator says that the same NGO that helps the refugees also complicates their journey. Think about NGOs and their limitations. What roles, both positive and negative, do NGOs play in the global refugee crisis?
- ❑ The only time we see people smiling in the film is when they are singing songs and clapping to the beat. What does this say about traditions of well-being and our own notions of healing? How does this scene make the viewer feel?
- ❑ Despite being a film about political events, very little information is given about the political context. What does the film choose to prioritize? How does this choice contribute to the overall quality of the film? Think about the personal and political in relation and opposed to each other.
- ❑ In one scene, a boat carrying refugees brings them back to Libya instead of Europe. Imagine what the passengers hoping to reach Europe must feel. The narrator explains the same refugees will try to leave again. Think about all the things it takes to achieve this journey.
- ❑ The film refers to “down here,” “the drowned,” “letters were ruined by rain,” and the voices from down below. Reflect on these phrases and the range of experiences, emotions, geographic and political places they conjure up.

