

STUDY GUIDE



MUTE FIRE

A film by ATEHORTÚA ARTEAGA FEDERICO

Colombia/ 2020 /83 min
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 Federico Atehortúa Arteaga at <https://pragda.com/film/mute-fire/>.

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 *Mute Fire*:

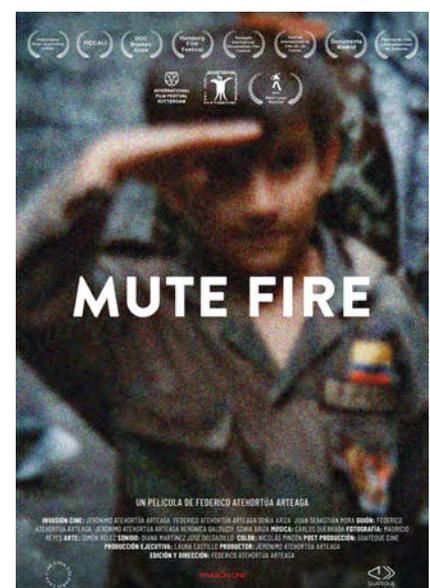
In the tradition of Harun Farocki and João Moreira Salles, in this personal film essay, Federico Atehortúa Arteaga examines the relationship between film footage, the events of the war in Colombia, his family's story, and the origins of cinema in Colombia.

On March 6, 1906, four people were executed in the streets for the attempted assassination of the then president of Colombia, Rafael Reyes. The representation in images of this event is considered the beginning of the cinema in Colombia. Arteaga embarks on a deep investigation of media representation through his film, which explores how cinema became an instrument of power and control in the country's violent political history.

As Arteaga's mother suffers an episode of mutism -without any explanation she stops talking-, the film's focus widens to examine the family's own relationship with imagery, memory, and politics. As a result, Arteaga decides to investigate the family's past and finds a video archive of a children's play in which he himself acts, pretending to be a captured false guerrilla.

These images bring him back to his original film and lead him to find the relationship that exists between recent tragic events in Colombian history, the *false positives*, innocent people extrajudicially killed by members of the Colombian army, and then falsely labelled as enemy combatants. Nobody knows exactly how many young people became false positives. The most recent report released by Colombia's attorney general's office says that between 1988 and 2014, around 2,248 people were killed. Previous reports by human rights organizations have estimated that the number may be 5,000 or even higher.¹

- ❑ 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/mute-fire/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



¹ Parkin Daniels, Joe. 2018. "Colombian army killed thousands more civilians than reported, study claims", *The Guardian*, May 8, accessed July 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/08/colombia-false-positives-scandal-casualties-higher-thought-study>

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- Reflect on what the filmmaker says in voice-over: “This was supposed to be a film about the beginnings of cinema in Colombia, but to talk about that we have to talk about war.” What does he mean? What is the film about? Is it about the beginnings of cinema in Colombia, about war, or is it about his mother?
- Is there a main character in the film? If so, who is it? If not, discuss what holds the film together?
- The filmmaker’s mother is mute, but doctors can’t explain why she can’t speak. The filmmaker’s father thinks she is pretending to be mute. Why do you think his mother can’t speak?
- At one point the filmmaker wonders if the first moments of cinema and his mother’s muteness are part of the same scenario. He says it is like looking at a surface where shadows are being projected and you can’t tell one object from another apart. What does he mean by this?
- How does Federico change by the film’s ending? Do you think he comes to terms with his mother’s silence? Reflect on the last shot, in which we hear his mother repeating his name, Federico, Federico, Federico....
- Raoul’s mother taught in a rural school and was involved in Colombian politics. Is her muteness also a political act? Why or why not?
- What do you make of the relationship between Federico’s parents? Is Federico’s father a good/ bad husband in your opinion? Why or why not? Consider the scene in which he explains why he feels their relationship should end.
- Towards the end of the film the filmmaker says that he must believe in his mother’s muteness. How has the making of the film helped the director achieve this?

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- What constitutes an essay film? Identify a few scenes that differentiate this film from other documentary films you have seen, making it an essay film.
- What filmmaking devices does the filmmaker use to make connections between disparate topics like the birth of cinema in Colombia, war, and his mother?
- The film emphasizes different camera and film formats. Identify at least three different film technologies used to make the film. What is the role of technology in the film?
- The filmmaker tells us that the birth of cinema in Colombia is linked to an attempt to assassinate President Raoul Reyes. Reflect on the non-linear thought connections in the film. What is the impact of this approach?
- Editing plays an important role in this film. Identify two sequences in which editing is used to make connections across time.
- In a series of long shots, we see the filmmaker’s family home emptied and readied to sell. The last shot is a close-up of a photograph of the filmmaker’s mother. What impact does this camerawork have?
- The filmmaker uses an ominous, drone-like tone over footage from amateur home movies of children playing. Similarly, in another scene at the hospital, his mother gets an MRI done. What impact does the film’s soundtrack have?
- In one scene the filmmaker says, “Twenty years ago, my mother filmed me. Now I film her.” Reflect on the film’s form and observation. What are the different cinematic devices the filmmaker uses to explore his relationship with his mother?
- The filmmaker talks about slow motion and re-play as important filmmaking techniques. How do these two cinematic devices impact our understanding of a scene?

THEMES

- ❑ The director's father thinks superstitions are for fools. What do you think? Is it possible to believe in medical science and its alternatives at the same time? Why or why not?
- ❑ The film tells us that the president of Colombia organized a photo shoot staging his assassination. This re-enactment marks the birth of cinema in Colombia. Reflect on the relationship between history and images. Do images tell the truth? Should one look for truth in images?
- ❑ We see the filmmaker looking at video footage. He recites a quote he found in an internet ad that says, "Recover all important moments of your life that are kept on old tapes and live those unique moments with your family and friends again." What does this mean?
- ❑ At one point in the film, the filmmaker says in voice-over, "We are all thinking about the same images." What could this statement tell us about images and the collective psyche.
- ❑ The film refers to several different re-enactments. Identify three and reflect on why re-enactments are important to the film's themes?
- ❑ The film explores the relationship between images in the media and politics. Reflect on current events. Describe a specific event in which the images portrayed in the media do not necessarily depict what happened in real life.
- ❑ In one sequence, we see a reflection of the filmmaker in the glass. What does this sequence tell us about the film essay as a genre? Are there any other film essays that you can relate to this film? In what way?
- ❑ In voice over, the film explains how politicians used cinema to advance national politics. Relate this to contemporary times.
- ❑ The filmmaker talks about how Thomas Edison used cinema to popularize the electric chair. What does this say about cinema as a form? Is it an art form?
- ❑ At one point, the filmmaker says he has experienced war only through images. Is this true for you? What impact does this statement have on you? What is the connection between war and its representation through images?
- ❑ For Carlos Pelbet there may be no difference between someone who suffers and someone who pretends to suffer. Explain what this means.
- ❑ In voice-over, the filmmaker says he made this film to find out if his mother was pretending to be mute. What does the filmmaker's intention tell us about the filmmaking process?
- ❑ In the film, the filmmaker says that images participate in the events they represent. What does he mean?
- ❑ In one scene we see the filmmaker's mother sitting in a rural area. Then we see a projection of the same image. Relate this to the nature of film, reflecting on representation and subjectivity.

