

 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



NATURAL PHENOMENA

A film by Marcos Antonio Díaz Sosa

Cuba / 2024 / 80 min
Spanish with English subtitles

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 Marcos Antonio Díaz Sosa at <https://pragda.com/film/natural-phenomena/>

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 *Natural Phenomena*.

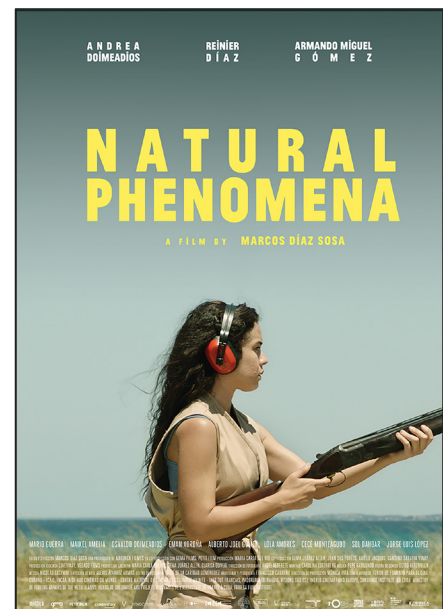
In late-1980s Cuba, local nurse Vilma is a crack shot eager to enter the national skeet shooting competition. The prize money would help her fulfill her dream of a bigger, more comfortable home where she could care for her injured husband and raise their soon-to-arrive child. Unfortunately for her, pregnant women are barred from competing, dashing her hopes — until a freak tornado whisks her over the rainbow to Niña Bonita, the isle hosting the tournament. Donning a blue dress and red slippers, Vilma sets out to prove her mettle in a strange land.

Natural Phenomenon captivates with its depiction of a strong, determined woman facing personal and social challenges as she seeks emancipation in a limiting context. A darkly comedic portrait of Cuban society, the film is a flourishing take on social cinema, a striking and moving narrative that addresses themes of freedom.

Exploring the rarely discussed topic of the exile of entire populations due to land exploitation, the film intertwines the protagonist's struggle with broader social transformations in Cuba.

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



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1980, over 125,000 Cubans left Mariel Harbor, Cuba and sought refuge in Florida in a mass exodus known as The Mariel Boatlift. At the time, there were several factors making life in Cuba difficult, including a weak economy, political repression under communist leader Fidel Castro, and growing social unease stemming from the lack of personal freedoms. Marcos Díaz Sosa's film *Natural Phenomena* (*Fenómenos Naturales*) subtly critiques the rigid Cuban bureaucracy of the 1980s and celebrates rural resilience. Through satire and allegory, the film reflects the contradictions of Cuban socialism, depicting a society where common sense frequently overrides official doctrine, mirroring the nation's struggle between ideology and lived reality.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- How does the film portray life in rural Cuba during the 1980s, and what visual or narrative choices support this portrayal? In what ways does the film engage with Cuba's socio-political history without being explicitly political?
- How would you describe Vilma's relationship with her immediate surroundings and daily life when the movie begins? How would you describe her attitude towards her husband, Ivan, and the life they live?
- How is Iván's character utilized to contrast or complement Vilma's journey and ambitions? As the film progresses, how does Iván's role in Vilma's life change throughout the film? What impact does his disability have?
- Vilma is a strong and determined character. In what ways does she resist or conform to the expectations placed on her as a woman and mother?
- The shooting sport plays a key role in Vilma's development. What symbolic meaning might it carry in the film? What is the significance of Vilma's ability to shoot with her eyes closed, and how does this affect her?
- Vilma's journey to the island parallels Dorothy's journey to Oz in *The Wizard of Oz*. In what ways is this evident, and how does the film deliberately blur the line between reality and fantasy?
- Why do you think there is such limited contact with the outside world, and what impact does this isolation have on various characters in the film?
- How does Garcel Fonseca's character suggest about navigating the systems of power and success within the 1980s Cuban society?
- In what ways does Vilma's visit to Fonseca mirror the moment when Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* goes "off to see the Wizard"?
- How do the missing people factor into the story? Are they literally gone, or has something else happened to them?
- Compare and contrast Vilma's life in the beginning of the movie and on the island. In what ways do you think she has been impacted?
- What questions does the ending leave open, and how might these relate to broader questions about identity, agency, or escape? If this movie continued, what do you think would happen next in Vilma's story?



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- The film's director, Marcos Antonio Díaz Sosa, said in an interview: "We made the film in the midst of a devastating national crisis. This meant, of course, challenges and anguish during production. And for me it was all the more terrifying because it was my first film. The distance between what I imagined and the real possibilities of achieving it was abysmal. But one never feels so alive as in the middle of such an adventure." How do you think this affected his mise-en-scène *?
- The movie opens with a black and white montage of footage of Cuba. Some of these clips include people shooting rifles, Cuban representatives at the Olympics, the destruction of buildings, an alligator being cared for by women and children, and cows at a farm. How do these clips set the tone for the rest of the film?
- How does the use of black-and-white vs. color reinforce the film's themes and emotional tone?
- Scenes in the film often include a repeated use of flickering lights from the television, the passing train, the fan, etc. What effect does this have on the viewer's experience?

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* "Mise-en-scène" is a French term referring to the deliberate arrangement of everything that makes up the frame of shot. This includes everything from the lighting to the props used in order to carefully convey mood and meaning.

CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES *continued*

- What does the role of sound design, particularly radio, fans, and silence, play in shaping tension in the film?
- How is the transition between reality and fantasy handled visually? Are there specific moments where you feel “worldly shifts”?
- What does the use of color grading (dusty tones to vibrant ones) communicate about mood or psychological states?
- There are often moments in the film where the camera focuses on household items for many frames, forcing the audience to direct their attention to them. How does the cinematic emphasis on these objects (like the coffee pot, TV, fan, alarm clock, radio, etc.) function symbolically? How do they reflect Vilma's emotional state or the routine she is trying to escape?
- How does the film play with depth of field, lighting, or framing to differentiate between emotional realities?



THEMES

- What do you think is the central meaning of Natural Phenomena?
- Film critic Ángel Pérez wrote: “Through Vilma's perspective, the filmmaker dismantles the triumphalism of the Cuban revolutionary discourse, detached from the suffocating reality of its people. An entire era is mapped through motifs like sports and television. The film's most ambitious aspect is its expressive power. In a parodic tone, Marcos Díaz Sosa manipulates staging, character design, and cinematography to reinterpret the aesthetic codes and ideological principles that fueled socialist realism as a producer of collective imagery.” What do you think of that statement?
- How does the film explore irony between Vilma's pregnancy and personal ambition as a shooter? What might this say about life as a citizen in Cuba?
- Compare and contrast Ivan and Fonseca as the two primary male figures in Vilma's life. What do their different roles reveal about societal expectations and support systems in 1980s Cuba?
- What does the film suggest about the tension between personal freedom and collective responsibility in Cuban society?
- How is motherhood portrayed in the film? In what ways does Vilma challenge or embrace traditional roles?
- What is the significance of Vilma's pregnancy to the narrative and its central themes? Is her pregnancy the root of the film's central challenges or is society's reaction to her pregnancy to blame?
- How does the film portray propaganda, especially through the line “every Cuban needs to learn how to shoot”?
- Reflect on the film's title. What meaning does it have for you after watching the film, both literally and metaphorically?
- How does the theme of escape function in the story — is it physical, emotional, or symbolic?
- What is the role of physical ability in the film, and in what ways is it portrayed?
- There are few women characters in the film. Reflect on the roles they play and how their womanhood is significant to the story. What critiques are being made about gender roles in Cuban society?
- How does the film portray collective identity versus individual desire? What does Vilma's journey reveal about the cost of standing out in a collectivist society?
- What do the references to *The Wizard of Oz* (red slippers, rainbow, etc.) add to the film's thematic depth?
- Does the film present nostalgia for the past, critique of the present, or hope for a different future? Or all three?
- Does this film ultimately take a hopeful or cynical view of Cuban society? How does Vilma's transformation impact your answer?

