

STUDY GUIDE



ON THE ROOF (EL TECHO)

a Film by PATRICIA RAMOS HERNÁNDEZ

CUBA /2016/ 75 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 where that film comes from. Find two or three articles on Cuba's contemporary history and write a brief summary on what is happening and what has happened in the country. Please use reliable sources.

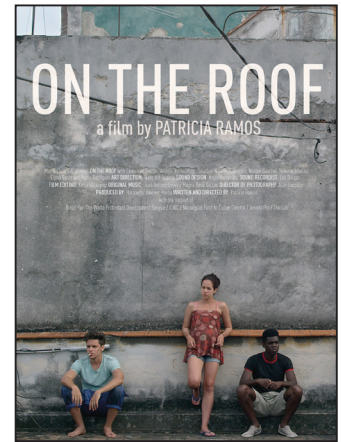
INTRODUCING THE FILM

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 *On the Roof*:

In this feel-good ensemble dramedy, a flat rooftop in an old Havana neighborhood is the natural habitat for three friends who spend their days and nights dreaming about the future.

Yasmani is an amateur pigeon fancier who is too shy to talk to a girl he likes; Victor José has convinced himself of his Sicilian descent and now prefers to go by Vito; Anita is five months pregnant and pretends that she doesn't care who the father is. In the midst of their boredom, without money and dreaming about success, they decide to set up their own business. The cost of this dream will finally lead them to personal maturity, but with some difficulty.

A deliciously off-beat romantic comedy, *On the Roof* doesn't shy away from tackling the problems facing contemporary Cuban youth. The film offers an impeccable balance of colloquial charm and universal appeal. Patricia Ramos and her excellent cast have crafted highly relatable characters with varying degrees of ambition, ingenuity, and quirk.



- From the film synopsis text, 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 about what the film is about just from the marketing materials (i.e. trailer, poster, and image stills)?

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- Keeping in mind wardrobe, dialogue, and behavior, how are the characters introduced to us at the start of the film?
- What do the close up and medium shots of the different characters aim to portray? What can you uncover about the characters' emotions from these shots? Do these emotions vary throughout the narrative?
- How does this first scene establish the tone? Does this tone change as the narrative moves forward? If so, how does it change? Think of the shading and lighting, the sound (diegetic and non-diegetic), character behavior, and dialogue¹ throughout the film in your response. Select scene(s) that contain sound and explain its use in the narrative: the emotions it produces for the audience and the tone that it adds to the dialogue.

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¹ "Diegetic music is 'produced within the implied world of the film'...The sound of a mother's voice as she is shown singing to her infant is clearly diegetic, and the faint sounds of a music box might be assumed to be coming from inside the nursery, even if the source is not shown on screen. In contrast, non-diegetic music refers to music that accompanies a scene but is external to the fictional world, such as dissonant orchestral chords sounding as a figure appears in a deserted alley or throbbing music punctuating a car chase." Tan, S.-L., Spackman, M., & Wakefield, E. (2017). The effects of diegetic and non-diegetic music on viewers' interpretations of a film scene. *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 34(5), 605-623.

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES *(continued)*

- The film plays close attention to common objects that the audience might take for granted, such as clothing and fabric. Analyze the scene in which Anita is washing clothes (17:25-19:52) and explain why you think the director puts an emphasis on fabric. What does it symbolize? How does it allude to Cuba's socio-economic problems?
- Do you notice a change in the characters' appearance (clothing, hair, makeup, etc.) from the beginning to the end of the film? What does this change in appearance symbolize?
- Think about what atmosphere the *mise-en-scène*² creates, such as the gray walls, rusted metals, collapsed structures, and contrastingly, the use of color and recycled items, in order to explain what mood and tone this set creates. Does this connect to any theme that emerges from the film?
- The film mostly takes place within one block, on one roof. What effect does this create on the viewer? Does it evoke a feeling of claustrophobia? What does this restriction symbolize? Think about Cuba's history in your answer.
- There is a sense of voyeurism created when you're looking at the world below through your own roof. How does the camera achieve this effect? Pick one or two scenes and analyze how the camera creates a sense of voyeurism.



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

- How does the first scene (02:05-06:05) introduce the film's hopeful tone? Elaborate on any symbols (the birds, the roof, the views, the use of sound, etc.) you can uncover that connect to the tone.
- How is Yasmani introduced to the audience in the opening minutes of the film? Is he generally alone in the frame? If so, what do you think this signifies?
- What assumptions can you make about the film from the opening minutes? What do you think the film is about? Do these assumptions evolve or stay the same as the film continues?
- How do Yasmani, Anita, and Vito's personal back-stories influence their personalities, values, motivations, and actions? What are the differences and similarities among Yasmani, Anita, and Vito's personalities, values, motivations, and actions?
- How do the dynamics change between Yasmani and his friends (Anita, Vito, 'El Yeti,' and Betti)? Explain why you think they change throughout the narrative.
- How does the friendship among Yasmani, Anita, and Vito advance the plot?
- Explain why Yasmani, Anita, and Vito decide to open the pizzeria. What motivated each of them? What obstacles did they face? How did they grow from these obstacles? What did this growth help them achieve?
- Why do you think the director made the choice to film the entire narrative on the roofs of Havana? What does it symbolize? Think about the attitudes and perspectives of the various characters on the roof to those on street level, such as Yasmani's father and Vito's grandmother, when outlining your response.
- Why do you think Vito reminisces over his grandfather, over his supposed Sicilian roots? What could this obsession with the past symbolize?



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NARRATIVE *(continued)*

- ❑ Is the narrative suspended, or is there a resolution in the final scene (1:09:11-1:12:09)? What can you conclude from the final scene?
- ❑ What tone does the film end on? Explain the significance of the tone and connect it to what you believe the director wants the audience to understand about Cuba's future.
- ❑ Think about your responses to the characters. Did you like them? Is there one character in particular that you identify with? If so, explain how the character development makes him or her more relatable.
- ❑ What are your reactions to Yasmani's father? What does he represent? What generational differences do you notice between Yasmani and his father?
- ❑ What did you enjoy most about the film? Was there something you did not like or fully understand about the film?



THEMES

- ❑ What are the main themes in the film?
- ❑ What message do you believe the director wants the audience to understand about poverty?
- ❑ Can you assess the filmmaker's political view on Cuba's past and present? Analyze her intentions using key scenes throughout the film.
- ❑ Explain how the director demonstrates the intricacies of the Cuban economy in this film. Think about the characters' business model, including its setbacks, and the role of tourism in your response.
- ❑ Analyze Vito's monologue about the success of his grandfather, on the top of the roof (14:15-15:49) and connect it to the film's theme(s). What tone emerges from this monologue? What reactions does it incite from the other characters in the scene?
- ❑ The transformation of material objects becomes important for the characters' everyday reality. Select scene(s) that demonstrate this transformation and discuss its importance to the theme(s).
- ❑ How does this film demonstrate a reverence for European culture? Explain whether the film supports this admiration for Europe, criticizes it, or remains mixed or neutral. Make sure to include an analysis of the final scene in your response (1:09:11-1:12:09).
- ❑ Think about gender throughout the film. How are the women portrayed? How are women viewed by men, and vice-versa? Is this specific to Cuba, to Latin America, or is it more universal?
- ❑ Why do you think the director decides to create Vito as a character that dreams over travel plans throughout the film? What's Cuba's history around this topic, including travel bans?
- ❑ And, why has the director created a character that is pregnant and her decision of being a single mother?
- ❑ How does this film explore race relations in Cuba? Are you in agreement with this portrayal? Compare and contrast the race relations in Cuba to that within the United States.
- ❑ "The tradition of *machismo* has proved a major obstacle to the feminist movement [within Cuba]." ³ How is *machismo* and sexism portrayed in this film? Do you agree with this portrayal? Select scene(s) that support your response.
- ❑ Does the last scene (1:09:11-1:12:09) give the audience a concluding message regarding the film's theme(s)? Why or why not?
- ❑ Explain whether you believe the themes that emerge from the narrative are universal, or whether they can only apply to Cuban society alone.



³ Thomas Skidmore, Peter Smith, & James Green (2014) "Key Colony, Socialist State" in *Modern Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press).