

ARUBA Study Guide

AUDIENCE

- Grades 7–12

Although the film features an 11-year-old boy, it requires a certain maturity in terms of viewing, analysis, and discussion. If using it with students in the primary division, preview the film before screening and see the note below. This guide is intended for use in junior high and high school classrooms.

- Family Studies, Social Sciences, Media Literacy, Urban Studies, English, Language Arts, Equity Studies, Sociology, Guidance & Health Education, World Issues

Note:

Some students will find the depiction of domestic violence, bullying, and possession of a handgun disturbing. It might be advisable to notify parents and school counselors. Preview the film before screening. See suggestions for Facilitating Discussion below.

THEMES

Aruba is an excellent resource for critical thinking on:

- representations of minority youth
- urban poverty
- domestic abuse and bullying
- the politics of family
- systemic discrimination
- filmmaking and media
- social change

BACKGROUND

- In an interview about *Aruba*, director Hubert Davis advocates the need for “intelligent urban films” that offer a different perspective from the conventions of urban comedies and Black Entertainment TV. *

“Right now there's so much that doesn't reflect that — not smart or cinematic. That's why I liked Spike Lee in his early work because he was just so fresh, so different from anything else that was out there.”

The new perspective Davis offers in *Aruba* makes the film a powerful educational resource, but can also make it challenging to teach. Attending to the film's narrative and visual elements as well as the content will trigger good discussion and critical reflection.

- Aruba* takes an unflinching approach to the myths and realities of urban marginalization. Through the eyes of 11-year-old Milan, we witness the cycle of abuse, poverty, and isolation that engulfs both his own life and his mom's. Milan is, however, a silent witness and leaves it to us, as viewers, to flesh out the emotional and interpretive script of what we see.

It's as we come up against our own perceptions, especially media-fuelled images of violence and inner-city youth, that the film does its best work in terms of critical thinking.

“I worked in Vancouver with at-risk kids in a bit of a run-down neighbourhood. I would see kids get picked up by their parents and know what they were going back to — not a good situation. That's what really inspired me, as well as stories I remember from when I was a kid.”

By keeping us at a distance and by playing on the ambiguity of what is visible and invisible, *Aruba* refuses to sensationalize Milan's life and avoids casting him as a victim. It also refuses easy answers. At the end of the film, we are moved by Milan's ingenuity, but we are also aware that inner strength alone will not undo the deep systemic structures of abuse.

- Davis keeps the visual narrative of the film close, and compels us to look. What might at first seem familiar becomes strange. The scenes at home and at school, and Milan's solitary route between the two, play out as vignettes that are at once stylized and real.

“I'm interested in the projects, and the unnatural living conditions of people there. It's paradoxical because they're really beautiful to look at, but at the same time what's going on there can be pretty scary. When I used to go down to Chicago, I found those spaces kind of quiet, actually. The same thing when we were shooting in Regent Park. There's an eerie kind of calm to them. It's not the gritty, fast image you get from cop shows.”

- Aruba* opens an important space for critical reflection on social issues, film, media, and representation. In addition to *Aruba*, Davis has also directed the documentary *Hardwood*.

FACILITATING DISCUSSION

- ☞ **Let students know they can leave the screening** if it triggers pain or anger. The film contains graphic depictions of domestic abuse and bullying.
- ☞ **Work with the idea that *Aruba* is a drama** rather than a documentary. As Hubert Davis says below, he's experimenting with form and content to challenge perceptions and representations of inner-city youth:

*There's a real need for intelligent urban films. Right now there's so much that doesn't reflect that—not smart or cinematic. There are a lot of urban comedies, and Black Entertainment TV, mainstream stuff. Not to put that down—it is what it is—but that's why I enjoy what I do. I'm just trying to find a different perspective. **

- ☞ **Use a media studies approach** to discussing the film. This approach should help students to locate their personal responses in a wider social context. The activities in the guide focus on how the film asks us to:
 - question our assumptions
 - identify the underlying causes of our reactions
 - posit alternative actions
- ☞ **Set the film in comparative context.** Certain activities in the guide ask for comparison of *Aruba* with related films. Focusing on how different filmmakers treat similar topics encourages critical thinking and allows students to insert their own point of view. In this sense, all students become filmmakers.
- ☞ **Bring ESL students into the discussion.** At the same time, question assumptions. Will immigrant students be expected to identify with what is depicted in the film?



Davis and star A.J. Saudin on set

PRE-SCREENING IDEAS

These can be done as a whole class or in groups. Distribute a handout with all the topics and assign one topic to each group. Provide time for report back.

1. Describe your usual route home from school. What do you see? What do you think about? Then read the comment below by the director of *Aruba*, Hubert Davis. If you live in a high-rise project is he right? If you don't, what's your perception of public housing and how did you learn it?
*"I was interested in the projects, and the unnatural living conditions of people there. There's an eerie kind of calm to them. It's not the gritty, fast image you get from cop shows".**
2. Describe a time when you survived a difficult experience or had to make a tough decision. What happened? What did you do? What strategy did you use?
3. Hubert Davis, the director of *Aruba*, wants to make "intelligent urban films". What do you think he means? Are there simple or predictable films about inner-city life and kids? Describe a film you've seen on this topic.
4. Why do people bully?
5. What do the phrases "kids at risk" and "families at risk" mean to you? What are the risks? What are the causes?
6. What do you know about Aruba? Use your group time to find out about Aruba's history and culture from the Internet.

POST-SCREENING IDEAS

1. Responding to Emotions

The film will be emotionally powerful for many students. The following two activities suggest ways to work with emotional responses that build gradually into whole class discussion:

Writing

Ask students to write down their reactions right after the screening. Writing creates a quiet and personal space and gives everyone a chance to respond.

Ask them to talk about their writing with a partner. Then ask each pair to contribute one idea or question to a whole class discussion. Or take the lead by asking: “Which parts of the film had the most impact on you and why?”

For the next class, ask students to elaborate on their writing based on the group discussion. Elaboration could also be artistic. Assign senior students comparison of a related piece of reading online or in print.

Role-Play

Before the screening, divide the class into groups. After the screening, ask each group to choose a scene from the film to role-play and to build on as they wish. Limit the amount of time; keep the pace moving. When time is up, groups present their pieces.

Ask students in the audience to stop the role-play they are seeing at any time and enter into it. This means the role-play evolves in new directions as other characters and outcomes become possible. The stories start to become their own.

2. Analyzing the story

The film encourages critical thinking by using ambiguity as a narrative technique. Ambiguity is created through the sequence of scene cuts in the film, through Milan’s position as a silent witness, and through the stylized look and feel of many of the scenes. The following activities suggest ways of working with these ambiguities:

Discussing the plot

Anticipate that questions about discontinuities in the plot will come up in discussion. For example:

- What did the teacher discover in Mark’s knapsack?
- Who stole the money jar?
- Why did Milan take the gun?
- How did the cops know to look for drugs when they came to Milan’s apartment?

Use the different responses to explore with students how their interpretation of the events is shaped by preconceptions they may have about the character and what he or she would do.

For example, imagining that Milan will use the gun to retaliate against the boys who are bullying him at school might call up stereotypes about youth of colour and urban violence or beliefs about Milan's entitlement to self-defense. By leaving the motivation and outcome open, the filmmaker encourages us to challenge habits of thinking that unconsciously connect race, gangs, and poverty, or that oversimplify expectations of urban youth.

Scripting the narrative

Anticipate that students will have different interpretations of what happened in the film. Given that dialogue in the film is sparse and that we are mostly dependant on body language and staging to infer what characters are thinking, ask students to do one of the following:

- choose a scene from the film and describe in writing what's happening
- choose a character in the film and write what's happening from that character's point of view
- write the missing dialogue in a scene that is silent or has little spoken dialogue

This is a good way to open critical reflection on a range of topics and perspectives: wife assault, bullying, family dynamics, schools, living environments, etc. Use the writing as a basis for small or whole group discussion, performance, oral presentation, further research, or video production.

Analyzing film techniques

Questions on the film as a whole:

- Why does the film start and end in the way that it does?
- Are there any striking uses of perspective in the film (seeing through a character's eyes, camera angle, etc.) How does this relate to the meaning of the film or a particular scene?
- How and when are scenes cut? Are there any patterns in the way the cuts function?
- How and why does the filmmaker remind us that we are watching a film?
- How are the scenes staged and why? (film-within-a-film, realistic or stylized, close or wide-angle, framing)
- How does the music affect our understanding of the film?*

Looking more closely:

Pre-select several key scenes or sequences from the film or ask students for selections. Analyze how the visual and aural components of the scene or sequence help to create the narrative of the film. For example, in the sequence that moves the action from the classroom to the school washroom where Milan is bullied —

- Why does the filmmaker insert a smaller frame into the scene where the teacher is talking about the pledge money? Why doesn't he just cut directly from the classroom to the washroom?
- Like this sequence, many scenes in the film are shot through doorways and corridors. Why?
- Why does the scene in the washroom appear natural and stylized at the same time?
- What is the function of this sequence within the larger narrative of the film?

** (For useful websites on sample shot techniques and scene sequence analysis, see Resources)

3. **Discussing Bullying**

Schools

- Given the constant threat of being bullied, why does Milan continue to go to school?
- Is he safe at the end of the film?
- In the opening scene, several students look on as Milan is viciously beaten. What could they have done differently? How could they have supported Milan? What could they have done to stop the bullying from getting worse?
- In the washroom scene, a teacher interrupts an act of bullying. At the same time, Milan didn't tell his classroom teacher what happened. How involved do you think teachers should be? What's your own school like? How can reporting be made safer?
- Compare *Aruba* to *It's a Girls' World* (65 min), a documentary that explores teenage girls' bullying at school.
- "People have such low expectations of minorities. They always think *we're* going to do something bad." (Youth Radio, *Race and Shootings*)

Almost every aspect of Milan's life is touched by violence. Yet he doesn't respond with violence in return. What do you think of the ending of the film and the solution he arrives at?

'Gangs and guns'

- "But the gun's registered" (comment in the film by Harold, Milan's mother's boyfriend)

In 2005, a white teenager was caught in cross-fire between rival gangs in Toronto, Canada. The public outcry and subsequent police investigation prompted extensive media attention. It also brought charges of racism from Toronto's black communities.

Assign group research on the following topics (**see Resources**). Create a roundtable with representatives from each group to debate: "How can we make our school and neighbourhood safer?"

Post the results. Assign one of the outcomes as an action strategy for the class to implement as a group:

- **youth violence** — is it a race issue?
 - **gun control** (the federal gun registry in Canada; lobby groups and the Second Amendment in the U.S.) — is it a viable solution?
 - **media representations** — how does the media contribute to youth violence?
 - **‘safe schools’ programs and zero tolerance** — are they working?
 - **juvenile court** — is the system too punitive?
 - **social programs** — are young people of colour and youth living in poverty being overlooked?
- “African American youth are not passive victims of social neglect” (Resources: *Toward a Politics of Relevance*). Would you say this comment applies to Milan? What statement do you think the filmmaker, Hubert Davis, is making about urban youth?

4.

Discussing Domestic Abuse & the Politics of Family

Aruba is at its most powerful in its depiction of isolation – not only in the physical environment, but in the emotional and psychological effects of systemic abuse. Combine discussion here with the earlier section in the guide on analyzing film techniques.

- Early in the film, Milan pauses for a long time at the door to his mother’s bedroom. What is he thinking? Why did the filmmaker choose to frame the scene this way?
- When Milan arrives home from school and witnesses his mother being beaten, why does he remain still? Why does the action appear staged? Does it solicit an emotional response?
- If you could talk to Milan, his mother or her boyfriend, what would you say?
- How would you describe the relationship between Milan and his mom at the end of the film? Could there have been a different outcome? Write or role-play a two-minute sequel to the film or an alternate ending.
- Fathers are supposed to be nurturing. Yet Milan’s real father is absent and his mother’s partner is abusive. Milan is invisible to his own family as he is also to his community and his school.

Compare ***Aruba*** to the film ***Khaled*** (85 min). The same age as Milan, Khaled lives in Toronto public housing with his mother. His story is based on a real-life tragedy.

- How is Khaled’s father both present and absent in the film? How is this similar for Milan?
- How do you feel about the bonds Khaled and Milan have created with their mothers?
- The director’s main goal for his film was to “bring to the screen a wonderful character”. Would you say that the director of *Aruba* had the same intention? Are both films making the same statement?

→ The director of *Khaled* describes his young protagonist as having “different layers of outsidersness.” Is there also strength in ‘outsidersness’? What can Milan and Khaled learn from each other?

- Domestic violence spans all social classes regardless of race or culture. As with bullying, there are deeply ingrained taboos on reporting abuse. Find out about resources in your community for women and families in crisis. Contact shelters to ask how they are working to make reporting safer and reduce women’s isolation.

5. **Discussing Urban Geography and Public Housing**

- The director of *Aruba* speaks about the “unnatural living conditions” of life in the projects and “the eerie kind of calm there”. How does he communicate this in his film? What other techniques does he use to convey a sense of unease and isolation?
- Public housing began in the United States in the mid-1930s and in Canada in the mid-1940s. Find out why these times are significant and what motivated the architectural design. How have needs and perceptions shifted? If you were in charge of urban housing in your own city or community, what would your priorities be? Put your ideas on a leaflet. Send it to city leaders.
- Compare *Aruba* to the documentary *The Boys of Baraka* (84 mins) which also speaks to the impact of inner-city housing on black youth. The documentary follows a group of 12-year-old boys from the ghettos of Baltimore to a boarding school in rural Kenya.
 - Are both filmmakers making the same statement?
 - Why do you think the director of *Aruba* chose to make a film rather than a documentary?

RESOURCES

Hotlines

- Kids Help Phone (Canada): 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca — *info on bullying; volunteer opportunities for high school students*
- National Youth Crisis Hotline (U.S.): 1-800-448-4663

Youth, Race & Poverty

- “Reena Virk: The Erasure of Race” (1997) — *what the media didn’t say*
<http://www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda/articles/virk.htm>
- Open letter on youth gun violence, race, and poverty — Regent Park Public Housing
<http://www.catchdaflava.com/GovernmentResponsestoGunViolence>
- “Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism” (2006) — “*African American youth are not passive victims of social neglect*”
<http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>
- Youth Radio — *big range of spoken & written stories by youth on race, poverty, gun violence, drugs; good for prompting stories in class (U.S.)*
<http://www.youthradio.org/society/index.shtml>
- “Bronx Youth Speak on the Top Five Issues Affecting Youth Today”, 2005
<http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/media/file/ExecSummary1222.doc>
- Fact sheets on family violence and abuse (Canada)
<http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/factsheets.html>

Gun control & Gun rights

- “Guns & the Constitution: 3 Lessons for High School Students” — *well-researched, various perspectives (U.S.)*
<http://www.teachablemoment.org/high/guns.html>
- Federal Gun Registry debates (Canada) — *up-to-date media articles; multiple viewpoints*
<http://www.wednesday-night.com/gun.asp>
- “Reducing Youth Gun Violence” — *good backgrounder (U.S.)*
<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pathways/safeschools>
- “Juvenile Justice: A Century of Change” — *good overview of state differences (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, U.S.)*
http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojdp/9912_2/juv1.html

Bullying

- <http://www.bullying.org> — “where you are not alone” — *strategies for positive actions against bullying (Canada)*
- <http://www.bullybeware.com> — “taking action against bullying” (Canada)
- Stop Bullying Now — *for middle school students (U.S.)*
<http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/index.asp?area=main>

- National Association of Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE)— *student-initiated; good fact sheet on school violence; anti-bullying strategies (U.S.)*
<http://www.nationalsave.org>

Schools

- Zero Tolerance — *key studies; good research site for teachers & students*
<http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/issues/zerotolerance/studies.html>
- “Mix it up”— *stories & strategies to help teens (and teachers) break school and community divisions* (Southern Poverty Law Center, U.S.)
<http://www.tolerance.org/teens/about.jsp>
- “A Teaching Resource for Dealing with Controversial and Sensitive Issues” (2003)
Toronto District School Board (curriculumdocs@tdsb.on.ca)
- “Keep Schools Safe” — *helpful links on school violence (U.S.)*
<http://www.keepschoolssafe.org/students/school-violence.htm>

Film Analysis

- “Guidelines for analysis of film sequences” — *excellent*
http://www.essex.ac.uk/filmstudies/current_students/Guidelines_for_analysis_of_film_sequences.htm
- “Film analysis: visual style” — *visuals of shot techniques from well-known films*
<http://www.tcf.ua.edu/classes/Jbutler/T440/VisualStyleIllustrations.htm>

Films and Documentaries

- *It's a Girl's World* (2004) Director: Lynn Glazier. National Film Board of Canada
- *Khaled* (2001) Director: Asghar Massombagi. Khaled Productions Inc. Dist: Mongrel Media — the director's comments come from a *Studio 2* interview on the DVD
- *The Boys of Baraka* (2005) Directors: Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady. Loki Films. Dist: THINK Film Inc.
- *Hardwood* (2005) Director: Hubert Davis. Co-production National Film Board of Canada

CREDITS

* Bailey, Cameron (January 21, 2006). "Tank Tops, Ghetto Architecture and The Beastie Boys: Day 3". NOW: Toronto

Picture of Hubert Davis and A.J. Saudin: Jag Photography, *Playback*, Jan. 23, 2006

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Written by Arleen Schenke (arleen.schenke@utoronto.ca) for the National Film Board of Canada