

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

RED MOON

Menstruation, Culture & the Politics of Gender

A Film by Diana Fabianova
Study Guide by Jason Young

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds:

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

When filmmaker Diana Fabianova reached puberty, she found herself trapped in menstrual etiquette. She carefully hid the evidence from her father and brother first, and later on, from most of the other men in her life. And no matter how bad she felt, she pretended she was fine. The taboo far exceeded the scope of her family: it was all around her. Periods were a "girl thing." Periods were shameful. Periods were inappropriate for public discussion. End of story? Not quite. Something in her was reluctant to accept and suffer in silence. Why did the sign of what all societies consider a blessing -- women's ability to give birth -- happen to be described with names and expressions like "the curse" (in England), the "English war debarquement" (in France), and being “on the rag” (in the U.S.)?

Fabianova's *Red Moon* provides a fascinating, often ironic, take on the absurd and frequently dangerous cultural stigmas and superstitions surrounding women's menstruation. The film functions as both a myth-busting overview of the realities of menstruation, and a piercing cultural analysis of the ways in which struggles over meaning and power have played out through history on the terrain of women's bodies.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. When you hear the word “menstruation,” what exactly comes to mind?
2. What derogatory terms and phrases have you heard to describe a woman’s period?
3. Can you explain the actual biological process of menstruation? If so, what is it? If not, why do you think you can’t? Be specific.
4. Why do you think the normal biological function of menstruation is taboo? Explain.
5. What kind of sex education did you receive in school? Did you receive any at all? Explain.

KEY POINTS

- When men hear the word “menstruation,” they often get uncomfortable, find it funny, or make degrading comments. The men interviewed at the beginning of *Red Moon* offer their thoughts:
 - “It’s a terrible disease. When it comes over a woman, it’s a dangerous thing.”
 - “Very military, very unpleasant.”
 - “Bloody thing.”
- A 1953 sex education video describes the process of menstruation: “The ovum travels through the fallopian tube toward the uterus. At the same time, the lining of the uterus becomes engorged with blood and nutritive fluids in preparation for the development of a fertilized egg into a baby. If the female cell is not fertilized, it dissolves or integrates in the tube. Since the lining is no longer needed, it too dissolves away, and it flows out of the body through an opening in the hymen, which is membrane over the opening of the vagina.”
- For generations, the women in filmmaker Diana Fabianova’s family suffered from Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) and painful periods, which were then passed on to her.
- Growing up, Fabianova got the message that no man should know when a woman is menstruating.
- At any given time, 25% of the female population is menstruating.
- In Fabianova’s native Slovakia, there was a custom at winter’s end whereby menstruating girls were pulled across fields to fertilize the soil for spring.
- 80% of women suffer either physically or psychologically during menstruation.
- 150 different symptoms are attributed to PMS.
- The culture of concealment that surrounds menstruation influences women to feel shameful about their bodies.
- Throughout American history, social scientists have been enlisted to analyze and question periods for different political reasons. For example, when women were first pushing for access to higher education, a number of studies showed women were unfit to handle the rigors of intellectual life because of their periods. However, while men were fighting in World War II, studies began showing that women were very capable workers regardless of whether they were

having their periods. Then after the war, when men were returning to work, new studies again showed that menstruation rendered women unfit for efficient work – unless, of course, that work was in the home raising children.

- An early study by Alice Dan measured the moods of men and women every single day. She found that men’s moods were just as variable as women’s moods.
- Watching television commercials as a child, Fabianova believed menstruation blood was blue.
- Terrified of stains, some women double up on protection – a fear that fuels a feminine hygiene industry that grows by billions every year.
- In her lifetime, one woman uses 10,000 pads and tampons.
- Every day, three million pads and tampons are flushed into rivers and oceans.
- 20% of world pesticide production is used on the cotton in the manufacturing process of pads and tampons.
- Tampons absorb not only blood but also all the liquid in the vagina, which can lead to infection.
- For some feminists, menstruation is a political choice. They believe the birth control pill unnaturally programs women’s bodies to fit the demands of a male-dominated functioning rationality.
- Millions of women around the world have had contraceptives implanted to stop menstruation. The inventor of this contraceptive, Dr. Elsimar Coutinho, believes menstruation is neither “natural” nor “normal” because:
 - Menstruation can cause disease;
 - Animals cannot survive bleeding longer than a few minutes in the forest;
 - There is no point to an ovulation that doesn’t result in pregnancy;
 - Women don’t need menstruation to attract men.
- Dr. Coutinho also believes that women should only be allowed to menstruate once in her lifetime – just to know what it is like.
- Birth control pills can co-opt young girls’ development with symptoms like mood changes and depression.
- Sexual arousal causes an increase in blood flow for both men and women. Some gynecologists recommend masturbation as a period pain reliever – even before ibuprofen.
- Fabianova concludes by saying: “Being a woman has taken on a whole new meaning. I no longer fight my hormonal clock because it’s she that reminds me, once a month, that I have a personal, intimate connection to nature and the universe.”

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What did the video teach you about menstruation and female biology that you didn't already know? Be specific.
2. What are the messages that young girls and women receive from the culture about menstruation? How does a culture that conceals menstruation influence women to feel shameful about their bodies? Explain.
3. What are your thoughts on the feminine hygiene industry? What are the pros and cons of using pads and tampons? Aside from cotton products, what alternative methods are there for women and their periods?
4. How has menstruation been politicized throughout American history? Be sure to cite specific examples from the film.
5. Do you agree with Dr. Elsimar Coutinho that menstruation is neither "natural" nor "normal"? Why or why not? Also, do you think that young girls and women should elect to stop having their periods? Why or why not?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. In the United States, people use the phrase "on the rag" to describe a woman who's having her period. Research other terms used in the U.S. to describe menstruation, and others used across the world. Write a paper about what you find, with special attention to whether you notice any common themes in these terms.
2. Watch these two sex education videos from the 1950s:
<http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/ArchivalSexEducationVideos.zip>
 Write up your reactions to the videos. And be sure to address the following: What attitudes do these videos seem to have toward their subject matter? Are there any values embedded in how they present their material? How effective do you think these videos were in the 1950s? Could you educate children about sex using the messages featured in these videos today? Why or why not? How would you educate children about sex today?
3. Research premenstrual syndrome (PMS). What causes PMS? What are the physical and emotional symptoms? How can you test for it? How can it be treated? How can it be prevented?
4. Find studies concerning menstruation that both prove and disprove women's fitness for optimal performance in the workplace. Write a paper about these studies, and try to uncover their historical context.
5. Research how different religions have dictated what women could and couldn't do while menstruating. Write a paper that examines how women have been excluded and "kept in place" for centuries.
6. Read the following critique of Dr. Elsimar's Coutinho's book *Is Menstruation Obsolete?*
<http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/IsMenstruationObsolete.pdf>. Write a paper reacting to the critique. What is its main argument? Do you agree with it? Why or why not? How does this critique compare and contrast with the point of view presented in *Red Moon*?