

a study and discussion guide for the film

# The Smell of Burning Ants



**Note:**

This guide is designed for use in a variety of disciplines: gender studies; sexuality; psychology; family relations; women's studies; sociology; etc. The moderator should take time to look over the guide and choose the topics which best suit the viewer's needs.

**Description of the film:**

**The Smell of Burning Ants** is a haunting account of the pains and trauma of growing up male. It evocatively presents the inner and outer cruelties that boys perpetrate and endure. Rather than glorifying and romanticizing boyhood, this film opens up wounds to let the poisons out and facilitate healing. Without giving answers the film asks us to look at and become conscious of the ways in which boys are deprived of wholeness. Following 'the boy' through each formative sequence of his life, we see how men become emotionally disconnected and cut off from their feelings, empathy and feminine side. The sacred dismissal "boys will be boys" evolves into a chilling realization that many boys are becoming angry, destructive, emotionally disabled men. They are socialized by fear, power, force and shame. The boy in the film is carried along by the crowd, detached but feigning interest in order to fit in. What begins as the desire for acceptance during boys' play becomes self-preservation to avoid the inevitable violence inflicted on those who are different. The burning of ants is just one metaphor for the impact that this violence and its contagious effects is having on society.

**The Smell of Burning Ants** does not provide answers to the problems inherent in male socialization. Rather it evokes feelings and memories in the viewer and thereby helps him/her begin to examine his/her own experiences growing up. For men in particular, who characteristically fail to notice their own suffering, this film can be useful in penetrating the barriers to remembering and feeling their difficult childhood experiences.

**TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION ARE LISTED IN THE ORDER THAT THEY OCCUR IN THE FILM**

After setting up a context of cruelty and violence, the film is roughly divided into stages in a boy's life. Many of these stages are separated within the film by the boy looking through the camera.

- 1) The first images we see are flames that are slowed down for the beauty of the abstract shapes and to slowly invite the viewer into the world of this film. This segment ends with an explosion and the title of the film.
  - Symbolically, what can fire represent?
  - What do you think the title of the film means? *Note:* Smell is one of the strongest senses in our memories.
- 2) The next scene shows a loop of a man being pulled by the hair by another man while onlookers do nothing. This suggests our complicity in the violence that surrounds us and also the repetitive nature of violence.
  - What motivates complicity?
  - Why is repetition so much a part of the phenomenology of violence?
- 3) The burning of the scorpion follows and this can be seen as a metaphor for the way many men are raised. The scorpion is being forced to "self destruct". What seems like self destruction may really be more complex. This leads into suggestive scenes of animal cruelty while the narrator lists animals and insects that are commonly tortured by boys.
  - Discuss the dynamics of sadism and masochism.
  - Discuss the relationship between helplessness and cruelty or sadism.
  - Are there acts of cruelty you've committed which you later regretted?
- 4) The film now begins to show various ages in a boy's life. Early childhood memories of circumcision and toilet training are shown. Some of the accompanying feelings of pain, powerlessness and shame are evoked.
  - What are some oppressive child rearing attitudes embedded in the culture?
- 5) The film then brings us to the boy in school. The roles of bully, victim and collaborator are identified.
  - With whom do you identify? Were you a bully, victim or collaborator?
  - Who is a collaborator betraying?
  - What role does an "observer" play? Is he/she innocent?
  - What makes people choose their social roles?

6) The next segment deals with boys' relationships to their mothers and to their feminine sides.

*Some background information:* Many men lack positive role models. As the narrator states: "No one ever tells him what to be, only what not to be. Boys become boys, in large part, by not being girls." In most western cultures if a boy acts feminine, he is picked on and ostracized. The price paid is the denial of boys' feminine sides. Men are warned to put away womanly things, including sentiment, and to learn how to accumulate and manipulate power if they are to become men. Masculinity becomes an aspect of identity that is developed in boyhood against the structure of femininity rather than toward something of its own. Underlying much of the aggression and acting out of boyhood is a hidden protest against the forced departure from the feminine, marked as rebellion against and disparagement of the feminine.

- Can you identify masculine behaviors?
- Can you identify feminine behaviors?
- Can any of the men remember being told that a particular behavior/ activity was only for girls?
- Can any of the women remember being told that a particular behavior/ activity was only for boys?

7) Many boys are forced to deny their feelings. The narrator states "He wants to cry but he is told not to. If he cries he is called a baby. He is 7 years old and he is told to be a man."

- Can anyone relate to this?
- Are tears a sign of weakness?
- Where do the tears go and how do men/boys relate to crying in others throughout life? i.e. envy, hatred, disgust, humiliation.

8) The next segment deals with the boy's relationship with his father. This relationship is marked by fear and shame. Many fathers are just passing down to their sons the way they were raised.

- Does anyone have any ideas as to how to change this pattern?
- Discuss intergenerational transmission of violence.

9) The section that follows is a celebration of the active and playful part of boyhood. We see boys playing all sorts of games alone and with others. The boy in this film was raised in a city so the focus is on street games. *Note:* Many of the games have an aggressive nature as evidenced by their names - box ball, punch ball, stick ball, slap ball.

- Discuss the role of play in socialization.

10) The next section covers the power and protection of a mob or group.

*Some background information:* Survival involves learning strategies of power manipulation and forming alliances for protection. Boys take on attributes of the aggressors around them. This inevitably leads to treating others the way he has been treated. In many cases, this means a lifestyle of turning aggression on others as a means of avoiding the experiences of powerlessness, loss and vulnerability to injury, and as a means of avoiding the remembering and re-experiencing of his own emotional scarring.

- What are the components and dynamics of a mob?
- What are some examples of mob mentality?

11) Beginning with a close-up of an arm flexing its muscle, the film now raises the issue of competition amongst boys.

*Some background information:* By late boyhood, around 10-12 years of age, many boys are quite confirmed in their interest in violence and show clear signs of preferring one upmanship, separateness and rigid patterns of defensive autonomy to behaviors organized around cooperation.

- Are there instances you can think of when competition is destructive?
- What are some healthy forms of competition?
- What philosophies of life are learned in these games? i.e. survival of the fittest; winner takes all; every man for himself.

12) The next section could be called the title section. Here we see close-ups of ants and the narrator tells of the boy's fascination and cruelty towards these insects. The extermination of ants can be seen as a metaphor for the destruction of one group of people by another. Ants have a very complex social order. They are by nature cooperative and their behavior can be seen in part as an alternative to the destructive behavior of man.

- Discuss the historic relationship between cultures based on cooperation and mutuality versus those based on competition and domination.

13) The final segment of the film is a violent sex scene (possibly rape) and shows just one way in which adult men are violent. On a symbolic level, it is the man's struggle with his feminine side - trying desperately to repress it, gain control over it, dominate it.

The narrator then states that a child is told to smile regardless of how he really feels. This way of being "kills him" but the death is an emotional one. Many of us are taught from a very early age to deny our feelings at any cost.

- Discuss the cost in terms of male-female relationships.
- Discuss the dynamics underlying rape.

14) The final dedication of the film: *for all my brothers* is a call to begin the process of healing from the filmmaker.

- Discuss ways in which men can reclaim their feminine sides and women can reclaim their masculine sides.

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