

a Cinema Guild release



Opens in theaters August 20

2020 / 88 min / 2.35:1 / DCP / 5.1 / Color
In Spanish and Nahuatl with English subtitles

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BOOKING

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Press Materials:

http://www.cinemaguild.com/theatrical/499_press.html

SYNOPSIS

To reflect on the 500-year anniversary of the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 2021, director Reyes offers a bold hybrid cinema experience exploring the brutal legacy of colonialism in contemporary Mexico. Through the eyes of a ghostly conquistador, the film recreates Hernán Cortés' epic journey from the coasts of Veracruz to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the site of contemporary Mexico City. As the anachronistic fictional character interacts with real-life victims of Mexico's failed drug wars and indigenous communities in resistance, the filmmaker portrays the country's current humanitarian crisis as part of a vicious and unfinished colonial project, still in motion, nearly five hundred years later.

Provocative, unique, and strikingly cinematic, *499* mixes non-fictional and performative elements with elements of the road movie to show how past traumas continue to affect contemporary reality. While linking these seemingly disparate histories of violence, the film confirms Reyes as one of the most potent voices in American independent cinema.

CREDITS

Director: Rodrigo Reyes
Producers: Inti Cordera, Andrew Houchens
Screenwriters: Rodrigo Reyes, Lorena Padilla
Executive Producers: Steve Holmgren, Carter Logan
Co-Producer: David Felix Sutcliffe
Consulting Producer: Su Kim
Lead Actor: Eduardo Juan Breña
Cinematographer: Alejandro Mejía, AMC
Editors: Andrea Chignoli, Daniel Chávez Ontiveros
Music: Pablo Mondragón
Costume Designer: Adriana Ruiz "Clarisse Monde"
U.S. Distributor: Cinema Guild

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Mexican director Rodrigo Reyes has won awards for his films around the world, screening at Morelia International Film Festival, BFI London and the Museum of Modern Art. His work has received the support of The Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE), Sundance and Tribeca Institutes as well as many others. His films have screened on America ReFramed and Netflix, and he is a recipient of the prestigious Guggenheim and Creative Capital Awards. In 2020, his latest film, *499*, won Best Cinematography at Tribeca Film Festival, the Special Jury Award at Hot Docs as well as the Special Jury Prize at EBS International Documentary Film Festival and the Golden Frog for Best Docudrama at Energa Camerimage.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Anniversaries are incredibly powerful opportunities to bring history to life. Many countries with a colonial past, including the United States, are in desperate need of confronting their own histories of exploitation---not because this past is gone and resolved, but precisely because it's alive and well. We can only re-imagine and rebuild our universe once we exorcise our ghosts.

499 represents the unique chance to take a journey into history, to spark a reflection on the lingering legacies of colonialism and the effects they have had on the multiple, ongoing struggles across much of the post-colonial world.

Too often, the history of colonialism is shrouded in legend, portrayed as epic adventures of heroism or a tragic clash of civilizations. With *499*, I want to pull back the curtain and reveal the continuing repercussions of conquest and domination in modern Mexico.

Colonialism de-humanized both sides, oppressor and the oppressed; I wanted to address this dialectic honestly. I want to look the conquistador in the face and confront him with the truth. Can a conquistador listen? Can he learn and reflect and see a window into a different self? If we can't make room for this possibility, how can we transform our world?

I think this is why Franz Fanon was so interested in the psychology of the torturers and soldiers who were pushed to do the dirty work of the colonial enterprise. We need to look at the difficult characters of our histories, those who are easily labelled as the villains but who are actually part of our conflicted and contradictory identities. If we cannot have compassion without foregoing justice, how can we ever truly change?

I would go so far as to say that after so many Hollywood films, all the *Apocalypse Now*s and *Lawrence of Arabia*s of the world, we have not really come to understand the perspective of these characters; the foot soldiers of empire.

Listening to the voices of the oppressed is perhaps one of the most transgressive acts of giving up power. By forcing him to bear witness, *499* is neither lionizing nor celebrating the conquistador. Instead, the film is systematically de-constructing him, tearing him apart, piece by piece. By breathing life to this ghost, I want to push the Conquistador into the light and watch his worldview melt away. After listening to the stories of victims and survivors, the conquistador cannot avoid questioning himself. In his paradoxical journey, we can perhaps find hope that humanity is not condemned to repeat the horrors of its history, and another world is indeed possible.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR RODRIGO REYES

What sparked your interest in making a film centered around the 500th anniversary of the Spanish Conquest?

This film is deeply influenced by my father, a history teacher who brought me along on museum trips with his students when I was just a kid. Walking through the National Museum of Anthropology, I became fascinated by the universes of indigenous civilizations. I was lucky. From very early on, my father taught me that history remains alive, like a palimpsest; the legacy of the past exists just below the surface, like tendons of a giant mechanism that endures over time.

In Mexico, the conquest is the biggest moment in our historical imagination, a traumatic and cataclysmic event that continues to send shockwaves through to the present. With the approach of the 500th anniversary of the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, I started thinking about the echoes of this event from the sixteenth in our current era. I realized there were clear links between contemporary reality in Mexico and the most egregious and violent facets of the Spanish conquest.

The colonial project continues, and the question is: why? Why is it that long after the Spanish have left, Mexico continues to perpetuate this exploitation? The tools have changed form, but their essence remains the same: a society where people are abused and taken advantage of; where some lives are worth much less than others; where there is a marketplace organized around an economy of violence.

The idea of a trans-temporal Conquistador meeting modern Mexicans suddenly made a lot of sense. It seems a reasonable, and even necessary image, in a context where ten women are murdered each day with almost complete impunity, where sixty thousand people have been disappeared by organized crime, often in collusion with the government. The nightmare of the present calls for imagination. We need a creative solution to come to grips with the madness sweeping through my country.

Why did you decide to combine fictional with nonfictional elements in your film?

I was looking for another way to portray reality, one that was not afraid to use all the tools of cinema to dig deeper and cut beyond the limits of reportage. I didn't want to make a film full of academic experts. Who knows better than the real people who are living with the worst consequences of the colonial nightmare? Who better than them to confront this history?

The cinematic image has a unique magical power. Suddenly, on-screen, centuries commingle and the conquistador walks the earth again, confronting the stories of survivors. This felt so much more provocative and enriching than taking a traditional approach. What better witness to the lives of the real people portrayed in the film than the Conquistador? He is the one that needs to learn the most.

Visually, the use of anamorphic lenses and a classic narrative style helped to bring both worlds together, past and present, into a single universe. It also served a greater

purpose—to decolonize the epic gaze. Although I love big Hollywood period pieces, they are told in the language of imperial grandeur. Widescreen is the format of epic, important, and almost exclusively white and western stories. With the help of cinematographer Alejandro Mejía, the film worked hard to appropriate this language and take it out into the streets, beaches and mountaintops of Mexico, and subvert the gaze of empire.

The legacy of the Conquest of Mexico is vast and complicated. When you add the layer of modern Mexico, it becomes impossible to neatly summarize this perspective. Our task as directors is not to register the facts, but rather to dig deeper, to get at a poetic truth, instead of focusing so much on providing easily-digested information for audiences.

Colonialism has different impacts on everyone. That is why I love the idea of an anonymous conquistador so much, a wanderer lost in the world who serves as a link between contemporary Mexico and our colonial past. The conquistador is fiction, but he has to find his place in the real world by listening, for perhaps the first time, to the stories of the real people impacted by new modes of violence. He is a ghost, a vessel for the audience to experience this incredible journey and arrive at their own conclusions.

What about the characters, the real people? How did this collaboration come about?

Every one of the real people featured in the film agreed to participate and collaborate with the project only after I shared the thesis at the heart of the film.

I tried to be as transparent and honest as possible with my perspective and why I felt that their stories were necessary to the project. I shared my core ideas with them: “The violence that you have endured and have been impacted by is connected to an older, original violence from the Conquista. That violence has transformed itself into new forms, but the essence remains the same.”

The attacks against journalists echo the burning of religious texts and erasure of indigenous myths. The exodus of migrants reflects the diaspora created by the taking of ancestral lands. The wave of feminicides killing women across Mexico is akin to the enslavement and rape of thousands of indigenous women.

And most importantly, with regards to the conquistador: “This man was sent here to listen. For the first time, he must keep quiet and bear witness to the pain and truth of the victims. This is an opportunity for him to decolonize himself through his meeting with you.”

Only when the real people agreed to this thesis did we proceed to enter their spaces with the film. This was critical, because after all, they are the true experts, the ones living with the consequences of this cycle of violence.

I also was open to their creative input. How would you like to interact with the conquistador? What would you like him to learn about your story? This is why the interactions in the film are all different and unique, each with its own approach to the presence of the conquistador, because each real person was deeply involved in the building of their scenes.

What does the 500th anniversary of the Spanish conquest mean to contemporary Mexico?

Mexico has a particularly fraught relationship to its colonial history. Whitewashed, contorted, and disguised for nationalistic and patriotic purposes for centuries, the narrative of my country's history has been fundamentally tied to the structures of power.

For those who doubt the enduring presence of our dark history, just take a look at our world today. In many countries, power refuses to listen to the claims of the oppressed, all while fighting like hell to control our interpretations of the past.

The humanitarian crisis in Mexico has reached a fever-pitch, even more intense than at the time the film was produced. And yet, much like the conquistador, the central government is trying to minimize the scope of the crisis and undermine the voices calling for justice and accountability.

And yet, in spite of these obstacles, there is a massive social movement brewing around critical issues that are included in the film: the search for disappeared people, attacks against women (feminicides), indigenous and immigrant rights, as well as attacks against journalists. The real people appearing in the film are a living testament to the brave and honest struggle that lies ahead.

Mexico is plagued with contradictions, deeply rooted in the unresolved traumas of its past. Much like the United States has refused to acknowledge and address the legacy of slavery, Mexican society desperately needs to have a conversation around colonialism and the ways in which its processes have been perpetuated to this day.

In Mexico, we are incredibly proud of our indigenous past, yet continue to value and celebrate whiteness in the present, ignoring the native communities surviving in resistance today. We are in dire need of an exorcism of the ghosts that blind our worldview.

Our characters, the real people featured in the film, are caught up in this movement and are seeking new platforms to expand their efforts and push for effective transformation of policy and societal attitudes. In that sense, we hope to use *499* to support their efforts by sharing their struggles with a new and broader audience.

DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

Memories of the Future (2012)

Purgatorio: A Journey into the Heart of the Border (2013)

Lupe Under the Sun (2016)

After the Raid (2019, documentary short)

Abuelos (2020, documentary short)

499 (2020)

SELECT FESTIVALS & AWARDS

WINNER – Best Cinematography, Tribeca Film Festival 2020

WINNER – Special Jury Prize, Hot Docs 2020

WINNER – Special Jury Prize, EBS International Documentary Film Festival 2020

WINNER – Golden Frog, Best Docudrama, Camerimage 2020

Official Selection, Morelia Film Festival 2020

Official Selection, IDFA 2020

Official Selection, Mostra de São Paulo 2020