

Güeros

A film by Alonso Ruizpalacios



Best First Feature, Berlin International Film Festival 2014
Winner Best Cinematography Tribeca Film Festival 2014
Winner of 5 Mexican Ariel "Academy Awards",
Including Best Film and Best Director

Mexico 2014 | 106 minutes | Spanish with English Subtitles

Opens 20 November 2015

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SYNOPSIS

Güeros is a road movie in which the travellers barely manage to leave town. A coming of age comedy which pays homage to the French new wave, it was filmed in black-and-white and in 1:1.33 Academy ratio. Being a somewhat unusual film, *Güeros* begins with a rather different kind of explosion: a water bomb bursts in a baby stroller. It is thrown by teenager Tomás from a block of flats. Since the lad is clearly too much of a handful for his mother, she packs him off to stay with his big brother who is studying in Mexico City. It's 1999. Fede, also known to his friends as Sombra, lives with Santos in a concrete tower block. They are currently striking against the strike which their fellow-students are organising at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Tomás has brought a cassette along with him; the tape is part of his father's legacy and contains the music of Epigmenio Cruz. They say his songs moved Bob Dylan to tears, and that he could have saved Mexico's rock music scene from ruin. When the trio learns that their idol is in hospital fading fast and alone, they set off in their rusty heap of a car to pay their last respects to this one-time rock star.

What they thought would be a simple trip to find their childhood idol, soon becomes a voyage of self-discovery across Mexico City's invisible frontiers.

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CREDITS

Crew

Directed by	Alonso Ruizpalacios
Written by	Alonso Ruizpalacios and Gibrán Portela
Produced by	Ramiro Ruiz
Associate Producer	Gael García Bernal
Cinematography	Damián García
Film Editing	Yibrán Asuad and Ana García
Sound	Pedro 'Zulu' González, Isabel Muñoz, Kyoshi Osawa, Gabriel Reyna
Music by	Tomás Barreiro
Production Designer	Sandra Cabriada
Costume Designer	Ingrid Sac
A Production of	Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE) & Postal Producciones

Mexico | 106 minutes | 2014 | 1:1.33 | In Spanish with English Subtitles

Cast

Sombra	Tenoch Huerta
Tomás	Sebastián Aguirre
Ana	Ilse Salas
Santos	Leonardo Ortizgris
Epigmenio	Alfonso Charpener
Isabel	Laura Almela
Furia	Raúl Briones Carmona
Pichón	Yojarth Okamoto Brambila
Aurora	Camila Lora Ruiz
Aurora's Mom	Carmen Ramos
Jesús	Alfonso Bravo
Moco	Adrián Ladrón
El Oso	Himself
Esperanza	Alicia Laguna
Woman in Despair	Sophie Alexander-Katz
Dr. Ibarra	Alonso Ruiz Palacios
Weeping Woman	Rosa María de la Fuente

THE DIRECTOR: ALONSO RUIZPALACIOS

Alonso Ruizpalacios is a Mexican film and stage director, and a writer. He was born in Mexico City in 1978. He trained as an actor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London. Previously, he studied directing in Mexico City with the renowned Polish director Ludwik Margules.

For TV he has directed several fiction and non-fiction shows, including *Ideas Planet* for Discovery Channel, *Expedition 1808* for National Geographic Channel and the award-winning drama series *XY* for Channel 11 in Mexico. He has directed many stage plays in some of Mexico's most prestigious theatre venues, including *The Kiss* by Chekhov, *Rock n Roll* by Tom Stoppard, *The Kitchen* by Arnold Wesker and Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. Alonso also works as a screenwriter for several TV fiction series.

In 2008 he wrote and directed *Café Paraíso*, which earned him the Mexican Film Academy's Ariel for Best Short, as well as awards at the international film festivals of Huesca (Spain), Guadalajara, Short Shorts (Mexico), Sapporo (Japan), and was selected at Tribeca (NYC), Clermont-Ferrand (France) and 15 other international festivals. His third short film *The Cu Bird's Last Song* also won the Ariel for Best Short in 2011, as well as awards at the festivals of Monterrey and Fastnet (Ireland).



His first feature *Güeros*, won the Development Grant from Fundación Carolina and Casa de América (Spain), as well as the National Fund for Film Production (FOPROCINE), with which the project was green-lit by the National Film Institute of Mexico (IMCINE).

Güeros won Best First Feature at Berlin Film Festival and had its UK Premiere at the London Film Festival. It was awarded five Ariel Awards in Mexico.

FILMOGRAPHY

Short Films

- 2008 *Café Paraíso*
2010 *The Cú Bird's Last Song*

Feature-Length Film

- 2014 *Güeros*

FESTIVALS / AWARDS

Winner of 5 Ariel Awards (Mexico's Academy Awards)

Best Picture, Mexican Ariel Awards
Best Director, Mexican Ariel Awards
Best First Feature, Mexican Ariel Awards
Best Cinematography, Mexican Ariel Awards
Best Sound, Mexican Ariel Awards

Best First Feature, Berlin International Film Festival 2014

Grand Jury Prize, Mumbai International Film Festival 2014

Best Cinematography Award, Tribeca Film Festival 2014

Special Jury Mention (Best New Narrative Director), Tribeca Film Festival 2014

FIPRESCI Prize, Jerusalem Film Festival 2014

Festival Youth Award, San Sebastian Film Festival 2014

Horizontes Latinos Award, San Sebastian Film Festival 2014

Audience Award, Morelia Film Festival 2014

Best First Mexican Feature Award, Morelia Film Festival 2014

Best Actor (Mexican Feature), Morelia Film Festival 2014

Guerrero Award of the Press for Best Mexican Feature, Morelia Film Festival 2014

New Auteurs Audience Award & Special Jury Award, AFI Festival 2014

Winner, Los Cabos International Film Festival 2014



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In April 1999, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) students began to strike to show their disagreement with the administration's decision to instate an enrollment fee even though the University had always been free. For the next year, all university activities stopped and thus began a period of Mexican history that is often difficult to comprehend. What started as a symbol of dissidence (it turned out to be the biggest movement since the 1968 student strikes) finished as an existential crisis for many involved. Before long, social disparities began to surface within the student movement, causing distance between the people who were involved. A lot of people found themselves not only without a university, but without a purpose in life, no beliefs, nowhere to belong.

Güeros is actually two movies in one. On one hand, it is a portrait of this peculiar stage in Mexico's history. On the other, and more complex, it is an exploration of Mexican youth who are not able to feel at ease in their own country.

The city is the protagonist, and sometimes even the antagonist. Having a population of more than 20 million people, it almost feels like a country itself, a place of high contrasts with a lot of different neighborhoods, each one of them with invisible borders. That's why I've always felt that it deserves its own road movie. The road movie is a spiritual journey of an actual trip. The "highway revolution" just as Kerouac had dreamt, opened a door for the movements of '68'. *Güeros* is also hopeful of the City's future – hopeful that the youth will try to get to know the city and be one with it, refuting the atmosphere of fear the city currently holds.

Formally, the movie also seeks to represent the concept of two movies in one. The first part focuses on the limbo brought on Sombra and Santos by the strike. Similar to the films of Ozu and Jarmusch, it's made of repetitive patterns and minimalist scenery, with long and steady shots filled with ironic humor (*I Vitelloni* of Fellini is also one of the main influences of this first part). But later on, as the friends decide to start their trip in order to find Epigmenio Cruz (himself similar to a McGuffin), the movie turns into a Road Movie. As with Godard's *Bande A Part* and Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Black Top* (main references of the second part of this movie), everything starts to take a rhythm: the characters, the bodies, their conversations, and of course, the camera. The form becomes free. This is a combination of the theme of this movie and the rupture of the stasis as the principle of maturing; the implicit growth that comes from the act of moving, doing and going.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ALONSO RUIZPALACIOS

By Carlos Aguilar, published in *Indiewire* May 21 2015

Carlos Aguilar: Was a making a film that highlighted Mexico City as a unique location your original intent? If not, how did the concept for *Güeros* originated?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: The origin of the film was the need to make a love letter to Mexico City, which is the city where I've lived my whole life. Most people who grew up there spent a lot of time in their cars. We essentially lived in our cars, we eat in our cars, we fuck there, and we get into fights there. The city and cars are very connected. It felt logical. Once I started making the film I also had this need to get to know the city better, because you can't ever get to know it fully. It's a city that has a lot of borders and it has places where you can't really go. There are certain taboos about some places within the city. Therefore, this idea of crossing these borders, to get to know the city more, and to become one with it, was one of the main objectives of making the film. Another thing was the memory of something my friends used to do to kill time when they were in the 99 protests, which was to get in one of their cars and drive without a destination as far as they could go. This idea of driving without destination and rediscovering Mexico City were part of the images I had in mind when making the film.

Aguilar: The film touches on a lot of issues within Mexican society, one of them is the class divide that is often tied to racial prejudices. It's something we are all aware of, but it's hardly ever discussed.

Alonso Ruizpalacios: That's definitely one of the themes, but I wouldn't say is the central theme. I think that when making a film about Mexico City you can't avoid portraying the class differences, the classism, and racism that exists. Often times this is not as evident as in other countries or as it was in other time periods, we supposedly have reached a certain level of acceptance or equality, but in reality there is a lot of social tension. Dealing with this is very complex because it's a sensitive topic that not even we, as Mexicans, dare to accept. It's important to start by accepting its existence. People are still racist, in a way dark skinned people dissociated themselves from the "güeros" (Light-skinned people), and vice versa, the "güeros" dissociated themselves from dark-skinned people.

I feel like our works of fiction, novels or films, have not really looked at that aspect of "mexicanness" or Mexican identity. It's something that's rarely talked about. In the US there is a tradition or openness to talk about racial issues, but in Mexico we pretend like they don't exist. When you actually show them it becomes a sensitive topic, that's why I think comedy is the perfect tool to discuss anything. Comedy has "carte blanche" to deal with any subject. There have been people that have told me the film is racist, and I react like "What?" It's absurd. Just because the film talks about racism doesn't mean it's a racist film.

Aguilar: What has been the Mexican audience's reaction so far?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: The film hasn't opened in Mexico, so the only thermometer we had was the Morelia Film Festival where the film had its Mexican premiere. Reactions were very positive. Besides winning Best Film we also won the Audience Award, which is very significant. However, it's also a film that has received impassioned negative responses. People have sent us hate mail mostly regarding the protests, some people who were part of those protests felt that the way the events are portrayed is offensive or that we are poking fun at them. I don't see it that way. Of course, there is a hint of irony in the way we look at

the events, but there are also elements that vindicate those student movements and the idea of being young and being revolutionary.

Aguilar: It seems like a great number of Mexican films, particularly those we get to see abroad, come from a very dark place and focus on the violent and political situation of the country. Your film touches on this in a comical manner, even making fun of itself.

Alonso Ruizpalacios: I think that's true. Lately, Mexican cinema has been very present at international film festivals, my film included, but I also have to say that *Güeros* is also a self-parody regarding this. You can't create a parody if you don't make fun of yourself first. The films we make in Mexico are often made thinking on their foreign potential rather than for Mexican people to enjoy. In some of these films we sell an image of Mexico, as Sombra says in the film, in which we are portrayed as cheaters, atheists, "putañero" (whoremongers), "malacopas" (bad drinkers), insecure.

Aguilar: In that sense would you say *Güeros* offers a refreshing, more optimistic, perspective?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: I do feel it's a luminous film in the sense that we made with the intention to allow ourselves to be surprised by the city. To allow yourself to be surprised is very important, it's one of the ways in which one can get out of a rut. The characters are trapped in this limbo of inactivity and routine because they haven't left their apartment in a long time. It's only when they go out and discover new things that their lives improve. I think the central theme is the change from being static to being in movement. Healing through movement.

Aguilar: One of the most enjoyable and sophisticated elements of the films is the dialogue. It's definitely hilarious and poignant at the same time. How did you manage to achieve this natural and easygoing feel while still hitting all the right emotional notes?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: I knew that I wanted a percentage of the film to be improvised and to be fresh. We knew we wouldn't get something natural if we wrote it all very rigidly. I designated a few specific scenes for the actors to improvise, but the rest of the film was very well structured. I wrote the script with Gibran Portela, with whom I had worked in theater before. In theater you get really involved in the dialogue, so for the film we really worked on it to have a peculiar rhythm. The film is a strange mix between very well structured sequences, very refined, and others much more improvised to find this freshness. For example, the part where Sombra and Ana do a scene from Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, was a sequence we improvised. We gave the actors a bottle of mezcal and got them drunk. We were shooting them as they joked around. But there were also other moments in which I didn't want them change any of the words from the screenplay.

Aguilar: Tell me about your thought process when deciding the visual look of the film. What inspired your choices in terms of the spectacular cinematography?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: Making a film is about finding the right rules that work for that film specifically. In that sense, I think among the rules we found while in the process of developing the film and then shooting it, the first one was that we wanted the camera to be very static at first to emphasize the guys' inactivity, and once they leave the apartment we wanted the camera to move more freely and to be playful. We wanted the camera to be another character that had a life of its own and curiosity, which for me represents Tomas'

curiosity as a teenager. The camera are his eyes discovering things as he sees them, how he sees the city or perhaps how he sees the events they go through as scarier than they are. What we were trying to create was a certain subjectivity from Tomas's point of view. He is an outsider that comes to Mexico City, and suddenly is immersed in the entrails of the city.

Aguilar: How difficult was it to include all these distinct thematic elements in one cohesive film: the protests, the road trip, the social commentary, among many others?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: Write the screenplay was a long process, rewriting, and rewriting again, and then cutting. Just like when I do theater, there are lots of ideas, but then we have to polish them. For this film the first version was about 160 pages, extremely long, and it took a lot of hard work to make it 100 pages and get rid of the other 60, which was very painful but necessary. Once we shot it, it became long again, the first cut was three hours. We had to trim and polish it a lot.

Aguilar: The singer, Epigmenio, is this almost mythical character that serves as catalyst for the story and as connecting point for the two brothers. Where did he come from?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: Epigmenio was inspired by one of Bob Dylan's anecdotes about going to New York to meet his idol Woody Guthrie, a folk singer famous during the 40s and 50s. Dylan learned that Guthrie was agonizing in a Brooklyn hospital as he suffered from Huntington's disease, so he decided to embark on a journey from Minnesota to NYC by hitchhiking and by train. He wanted to get to that hospital to meet woody before he died. This idea of a young boy traveling across the country to meet his idol always interested me, but I knew that I would never be able to buy the rights for that story, so I created my own with Epigmenio. It was important to me that the encounter was disappointing because these encounters are usually that way. One creates a dialogue with the artwork not with the person behind it.

Aguilar: Coming from a theater background, what was your approach with the actors for this project?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: I worked a lot with the actors, there were a lot of rehearsals, particularly with Tenoch and Sebastian, who plays Tomas. The work we did was aimed for them to establish a brotherly relationship. We would take Sebastian to play basketball or billiards with us so that they would spend a lot of time together. I told Tenoch he had to really become his brother, when we started shooting there was a lot of affection between them. Then I asked Tenoch to treat him badly, just like older brothers do sometimes. What you are looking for when working with actors are moments of truth, authenticity, and situations that involve risk.

Aguilar: Shooting in a car in one of the most complex cities in the world, how much of a challenge was it?

Alonso Ruizpalacios: It was very complicated. Shooting in a car is very uncomfortable, especially in such a small car. It wasn't pleasant, but I think that was part of the idea. Shooting on digital also allowed us to shoot a few things on the fly. We could turn on the camera somewhere and find something great to shoot. Mexico City is that way, there are unexpected things happening all the time. The film is full of lucky moments.