

# 499: A conquistador's strange journey in contemporary Mexico

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*Directed by Rodrigo Reyes; written by Reyes, Misha Maclaird and Lorena Padilla*

The organizers of the GuadaLAjara Film Festival held virtually in December 2020 referred to *499* (2020), directed by Rodrigo Reyes, as the event's centerpiece. The film also won the Special Jury Prize in the international feature documentary competition at the 2020 Hot Docs International Documentary Festival and the Best Cinematography Award in the documentary competition at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York.

*499* is now opening in theaters in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, to be followed by a national theatrical run.

Reyes' film opens on a sandy beach where a conquistador (Eduardo San Juan Breña) swims ashore. Under the leadership of Hernán Cortés (1485-1547), the soldier had taken part in the Spanish subjugation of the Aztec Empire. As the conquistador was sailing home to Spain, his ship was wrecked, and he was the only survivor. Through the intervention of mysterious forces, he finds himself back in Mexico 499 years after his departure.

Retracing his steps, the conquistador arrives at a school playground where students and teachers are holding a parade. He strides calmly to the middle of the playground, interrupting the proceedings, and absurdly begins to claim the land for Spain and to threaten war on anyone who resists. But before he can finish his speech, he begins to choke and finds that he has lost his voice.

So begins the conquistador's strange journey. He retraces the path he had taken with Cortés from Veracruz to Tenochtitlan, which is now Mexico City. His travels take him through forests and fields, past rude cinderblock houses and through a huge garbage dump. The unfamiliar Mexico in which the

conquistador finds himself contains natural beauty alongside pollution and poverty.

Unable to speak, the conquistador finds himself listening to the stories of the "Indians" he meets. These people are not actors, but ordinary individuals who recount the violence that they and their loved ones have suffered. One man describes how his father, a journalist and activist, was murdered. Another tells about how he fled from his hometown after gang members killed his brothers. A woman relates how her daughter was beaten, raped and killed on her way to school. One man, who wears a ski mask, is not a victim but a gang member and perpetrator of violence. A recurring element of these stories is the corruption of the state and the police, who take bribes, murder with impunity and ensure that killers walk free.

The conquistador sees people working, socializing and going about their daily business. He shares a bunk in a shelter one night and eats a communal breakfast. His initial contempt for the "Indians" gradually changes to understanding. "These miserable men chasing after the promise of glory—they remind me of us," he writes in his notebook.

The conquistador's incongruous presence jolts us into seeing contemporary Mexico with fresh eyes. Breña performs with great subtlety. The conquistador's outward determination imperfectly masks his inner uncertainty, which only grows throughout his journey. He is at once dignified and ridiculous. Breña brings us not a caricature, but a living, vulnerable human being. This acknowledgment of the conquistador's contradictions is a measure of the movie's seriousness.

To evoke (and subvert) the tradition of Hollywood epics, Reyes (born in Mexico City in 1983) shot *499* in the widescreen format. He and cinematographer Alejandro Mejía establish a leisurely pace that

encourages contemplation. The camera occasionally lingers on quiet, incidental scenes of striking beauty such as waves breaking on the beach, a breeze gently bending the grass or traffic passing along a faraway street. These dreamlike shots create an atmosphere of stillness and capture the beauty that persists amid violence and pollution.

The significance of the Spanish conquest for Mexico cannot be overstated or ignored. In *499*, Reyes reminds us that the repercussions of this event are still felt today. Yet Mexico's history did not end with the conquest. One must analyze subsequent phenomena such as the development of Mexican capitalism and the Mexican Revolution to understand the poverty, brutality and oppression that Mexican workers face. Nor can contemporary Mexico be understood apart from the country's position in the global economy (i.e., as a source of cheap labor for the international bourgeoisie). Reyes has made a thoughtful and moving contribution to the debate the quincentenary of the conquest will inevitably provoke.



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