

# As Thick as Thieves

## An Interview with Alonso Ruizpalacios and Gael García Bernal

by Bedatri D. Choudhury



Gael García Bernal photo © by Robin Holland

When one speaks of Mexican films, one can barely escape the conversation around the three amigos—Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón—the friendly giants, as it were, of Mexican cinema. As audiences, this presents us with an anomaly: we are not quite used to film industries in which people are actually friends, get along with one another, have each others' backs, and work together toward the singular ideal of making better films and taking them to places all over the world. It is a camaraderie unlike the toxic bromances of male friendships in Hollywood. These Mexican filmmakers, even though their home bases keep shifting, are rooted in an identity they cherish and intend to preserve. It is essentially a national identity that their films aim at creating and preserving, but this idea of nationality is subtle enough to not become a jingoistic assertion of one's politics and geography. For many years, Mexican cinema has proved over and over again that there are no lines that divide the country's cultural and national identities. They go hand in hand to constitute a body of cinema that has become the country's most significant cultural ambassador, even as it struggles to create a strong viewership at home—a strange condition Mexico shares with Chile.

It is no surprise, then, to see Alonso Ruizpalacios making *Museo* with one of his best friends, Damian García, as the cinematographer, and another good friend, Gael García Bernal, playing the film's main protagonist, Juan, as well as serving as executive producer. Four years ago, Alonso Ruizpalacios made *Güeros*, a film about Tomas, a young boy who is a handful for his helpless mother. When he is sent off to Mexico City to live with his brother, a new world opens up for him. As he traverses the bustling, highly political metropolis, he becomes seeped in its music, drama, and people. A heartwarming coming-of-age story, for which García Bernal was the associate producer, *Güeros* won the Best First Feature Award at the Berlin International Film Festival.

In *Museo*, Juan is a lazy, out-of-work veterinary student who, with his cousin and friend Benjamín (Leonardo Ortizgris), decides to steal some rare Mayan artifacts from Mexico's National Anthropology Museum—an act that will drastically change the course of their lives. Based on a true museum heist that took place in Mexico during the 1985 Christmas holiday, *Museo* is a fascinating revisiting of history through a coming-of-age narrative blended with a road trip traversing Mexico City, Palenque, and Acapulco. Earlier this year, *Museo* won the Silver Bear for Best Screenplay at the Berlin International Film Festival.

**The director and star of *Museo*, friends in the collegial community of Mexican cinema, discuss taking a true-life heist and adapting it more broadly into a tale that illuminates the nation's culture and cultural heritage.**

When it comes to national and cultural identities, museums are strange places, given the often unusual stories they establish about a country's history and identity. They are essentially sites of power, which present a one-dimensional perspective on history, often told with a complete erasure of violence. On the other hand, they are also indispensable institutions that educate generations about the past from which their present-day lives have developed. With *Museo*, Ruizpalacios has made a film that is distinctly Mexican, and one that reminds the country, and the world, of Mexico's glorious past. At the present time, when the Mexican and broader immigrant community in

the United States are being continually attacked and demeaned through negative stereotypes, *Museo* is a deeply political film that subtly complicates the narratives of imperialism and its co-opting of histories. Ruizpalacios,

with a first-rate screenplay and an able cast, has delivered a film noted for the artful presentation of its political perspective. Of course, in order to do this, Ruizpalacios knew he would be able to get by with a little help from his friends.

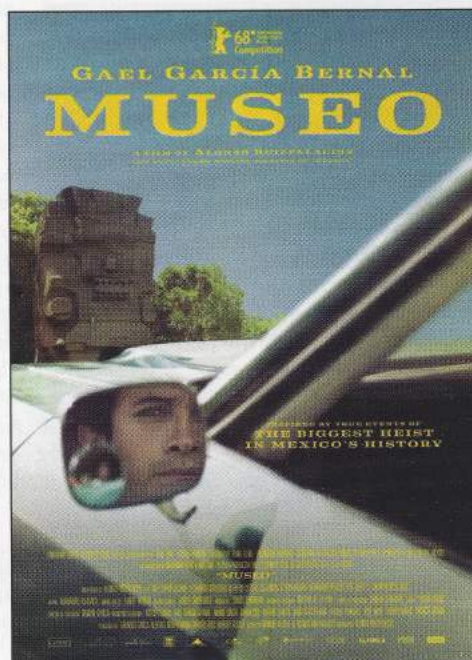
Cineaste caught up with Alonso Ruizpalacios and Gael García Bernal shortly after the film's North American premiere in September at the Toronto International Film Festival.—Bedatri D. Choudhury

**Cineaste:** The film is very much a negotiation with the idea of a singular history. Clearly, it is a larger conversation between the ideas of a nation state and the idea of a national cinema.

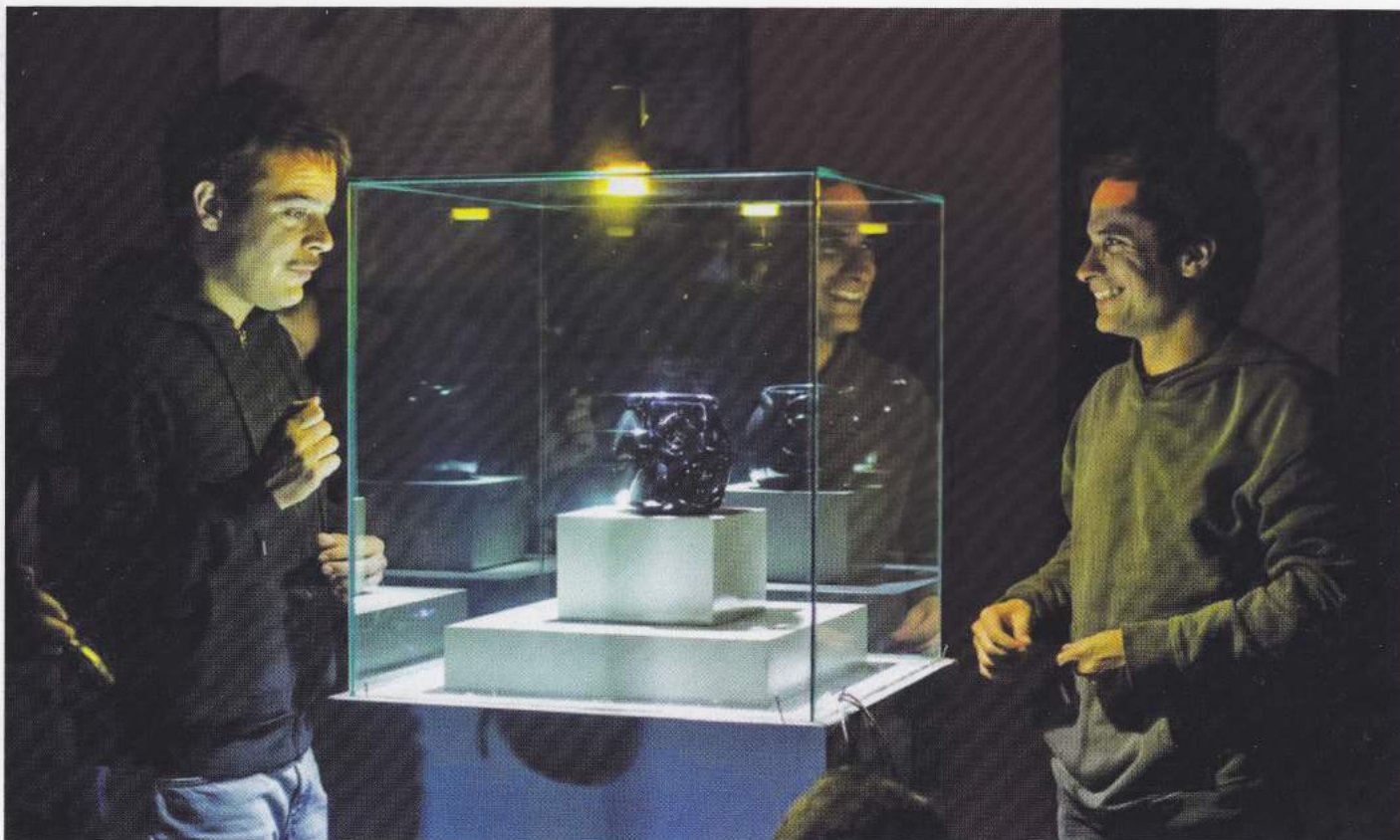
**Alonso Ruizpalacios:** There is a constant strife between the ways history is depicted through archaeology and anthropology, and it is also a very political act to privilege one kind of history to construct a national identity. There is always a struggle between an official identity and a personal identity that speaks to the ideas of personal belonging and familial histories. It is a theme I also looked at in *Güeros*—that sense of what it is that makes a Mexican a Mexican. What is it that we tell ourselves to feel Mexican? This film obviously develops that conversation.

**Cineaste:** What do you think about museums, and Mexican museums in particular?

**Ruizpalacios:** At the end of the day, museums are both great things and terrible things. They are somewhat of an imposed perspective, an official point of view to which people need to adhere. But, at the same time, they are concentrated efforts to preserve the past. They are an industry that requires a nuanced expertise and talent. Mexican museums make up Mexico's collective memory, so they are important.







In Alonso Ruizpalacios's *Museo*, friends Benjamin (Leonardo Ortizgris, left) and Juan (Gael García Bernal) succeed in stealing numerous Mayan artifacts from Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology.

**Gael García Bernal:** Mexican museums are not imperial museums because they were made to make Mexicans aware of and to reflect upon their past. They were made to invoke a realization of what lands we stand upon, whose art we practice. Basically, the idea was to make people proud of their heritage. So, yes, museums are a tool to create the nation state but they were also necessary for a newfound nation that was for the first time functioning as a single entity. And, dare I say, they were successful because the Mexican cultural identity is unique within the larger Latin American identity.

**Cineaste:** Much like Mexican cinema, then?

**García Bernal:** Mexican cinema, like the USSR cinema and Indian cinema immediately after the Partition, was meant to serve a very specific purpose of creating a national identity to be proud of. Mexico was known throughout the world for its cinema—its films were often the first introductions of the country. There is also a downside, obviously—the stereotypes of the cactus and the sombreros were all projected through that early cinema. It's a part of the whole political process of creating a cultural heritage; the people behind the first formative films were also people who were involved in establishing these museums.

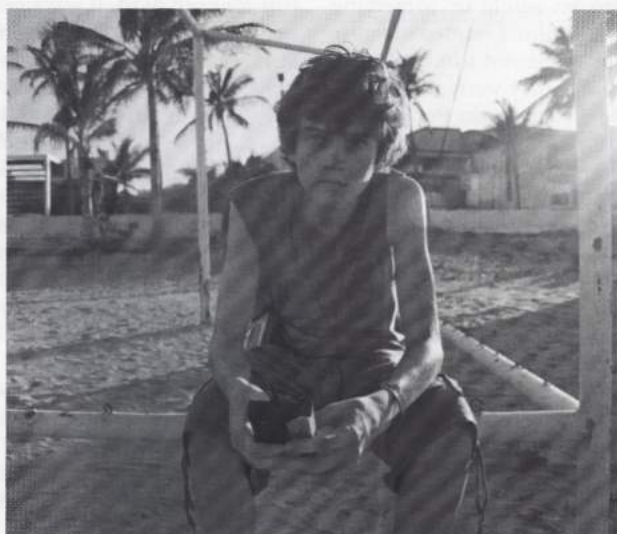
So, yes, there is clearly a strong connection there. The creation of a visual history for Mexico did not happen in short spurts but as a widespread, concerted effort. It all came out of the same arts movement, one that was very visual and tactile, and that aimed to create a new

cultural identity. This desire to find a new, independent cultural vocabulary was a big part of the Mexican Revolution. People on one side of the country did not know what the other side looked like; so this new unifying culture was very important in order to create a national identity, as in India and most other colonies.

**Cineaste:** There is also a very distinct openness, a cultural cosmopolitanism to that identity, in spite of the insistence on the Mexicaness of culture.

**Ruizpalacios:** Oh, yes! As you see, the boys in *Museo* talk about David Bowie and Nick Drake. Getting the music rights was perhaps the most difficult part of making this film! [Laughs] There is always a conversation between cultures, which is something we have grown up with, so it had to be in the film. You really can't build a wall around these things, right? For an average Mexican youth growing up, their perspectives, their ideals are informed by a crazy number of sources. We listen to stories from our varied mythology, we read Carlos Castaneda, so there is always a misguided sense of jingoistic national pride, but we're also listening to Pink Floyd and David Bowie. It is at once a diverse and a very confused period of growing up. That is universal. Mexican kids, American kids—they're all the same in some ways. They listen to progressive rock and think they're the coolest beings on earth. That sameness needed to be depicted in today's political climate.

**Cineaste:** The film is based on an actual incident that happened in 1985. What made you choose this story?



In *Güeros* (2014), Tomás (Sebastián Aguirre) is sent by his mother to live with his older brother in Mexico City.





Juan (Gael García Bernal) and Benjamín (Leonardo Ortizgris) try to sell the stolen Mayan artifacts to a British art dealer (Simon Russell Beale), who tells them no one in their right mind would buy such “hot” stolen items.

**Ruizpalacios:** I was working on something else and the editor of that project pointed me to a friend of his, who was working on this script. I vaguely remember reading about this incident in the news but, when I revisited it, I thought it would make a fantastic story for a film because it almost sounds unreal. I couldn't let it go. I rewrote bits of it with Manuel [Alcalá, the film's co-writer], did a lot of research, and revisited what really happened. There was a lot of misinformation about the case in the public media, so we had to depart a little and take some creative liberties in making *Museo*.

**García Bernal:** Crime is a genre that fascinates people around the world, especially things like art heists. When people heard we were making this film, they shared what they remembered from that time. They knew about this incident and had been engrossed in the news reports.

**Cineaste:** Why did you agree to do the project? You are also the executive producer of the film!

**García Bernal:** It's fascinating to wonder about and then try to get into the minds of such “criminals.” Everyone in Mexico was wondering why two boys from good families would do something like this. I guess that's why I wanted to do this film. I wanted to figure out why. They didn't need the money; they were not from unloving families. It's crazy how methodical and naive they were at the same time! It's almost like *Kung Fu Panda*—when Viper asks Po, “What's the next step?” and he says, “Honestly, I didn't think I was gonna make it this far.” Alonso asked me to do the film, and barely gave me the choice to say no! Joking aside, Alonso had such a clear vision of what he wanted out of this film that it was really inspiring to work with him toward realizing that vision. The story, of course, is fascinating, but the questions the films asks are more fascinating.

As for being the executive producer, it's something I did long after agreeing to act in the film. I wanted to support it in every way I could.

**Cineaste:** Both of you seem to have a fascination for coming-of-age dramas. For example, Alonso, you made *Güeros* that was about a teenager growing up in Mexico City.

**Ruizpalacios:** Oh, yes, it's probably my own Peter Pan syndrome there. There is a connection between Tomas of *Güeros* and the boys in *Museo*; they have the same unsocial issues, problems with their parents, in spite of having absolutely perfect, loving families. Film critics will probably just read into this as my—and Gael's!—refusal to grow up. I am really moved by those stories and I gravitate toward them.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is one of my favorite books and everything I make probably goes back to Salinger. The process of growing up is very moving; it's very traumatic and I guess I am still processing that trauma today...and I'm forty! Making films and telling stories like these, I guess, is my way of dealing with that fascinating process of growing up—leaving one's family home and resisting all the changes that life throws at you. The heist and all that suspense is great for *Museo*—it's a lot of fun. But what really spoke to me was these kids not being able to grow up and take that significant step toward being responsible adults.

**Cineaste:** Gael, you, of course, acted in the contemporary coming-of-age classics *Y Tu Mamá También* and *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

**García Bernal:** This almost feels like speaking to a psychiatrist! [Laughs] Maybe what drives me to do coming-of-age films is because it's fascinating to go back to living and reliving the freedom that youth allows you. I had the freedom to choose to do whatever I wanted to do in my life, with very few actual restraints. That holds true for both of us. It was so exciting to be young and to do whatever one pleased. So, doing these films helps us relive that period of our lives when we didn't have to worry about finding jobs or earning money. We are both parents now, and it is such a relief to be able to constantly revisit youth and the many stories it inspires. It is so exciting to be contrarian, rebellious, and fueled by radical anger!

**Cineaste:** The women in the film have smaller roles but there is nothing toxic about the masculinities depicted in *Museo*. Was that conscious?

**Ruizpalacios:** The film is coming out of a practice that has nothing toxic about it, so there is no toxicity for it to reflect. I made this film with friends, out of what Truffaut called “the sheer joy” of making films. So, yes, friendship is the key here and the rules to it are super simple: there is a lot of love and support both on- and off-screen, so there is no place for toxicity.

**García Bernal:** That's how we make films in Mexico. We support each other and create the space for each other to make films with complete creative freedom. There is no manifesto. I guess the trust and respect we give each other is reflected in the trust and respect our characters give one another. ■

*Museo* is distributed in the United States by Vitagraph Films, <http://vitagraphfilms.com>.