

O'BROTHER DISTRIBUTION presents a NEED
PRODUCTIONS and TRIPODÉ PRODUCTIONS production

BÉRÉNICE BEJO

MEXICO 86

A FILM BY CÉSAR DÍAZ



O'BROTHER DISTRIBUTION presents
a NEED PRODUCTIONS and TRIPODEPRODUCTIONS production

BÉRÉNICE BEJO

MEXICO 86

A FILM BY CÉSAR DÍAZ

16 APRIL IN THEATERS

Time : 1h33
Nationality : Belgium,
France Image Format :
Scope Format Sound : 5.1
Number of VISA : 154 752

DISTRIBUTION



68 Rue de la Croix de Pierre
- 1060 Saint-Gilles
info@obrother.be

PRESS RELATIONS

BARBARA VAN LOMBEEK
barbara@obrother.be
+32 486 54 64 80

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking out of a window. She is wearing a white shirt with red vertical stripes. The background outside the window is a bright, hazy blue, while the interior wall is a warm, orange-brown color.

SYNOPSIS

1976. Death threats force Maria, a Guatemalan rebel activist fighting against the corrupt military dictatorship, to flee to Mexico, leaving her son behind. 10 years later, when he comes to live with her, she is forced to choose between her duties as a mother and continuing her revolutionary activism.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I was born in 1978, during the civil war in Guatemala. My mother was involved in the struggle against the dictatorship and had to go into exile in Mexico when I was 3 years old. She did it for her own safety, but also in order to carry on the struggle. I remained in Guatemala with my grandmother. This is why I never was my mother's son. I was my grandmother's son, and I saw my mother as a friend, as a sister. I never doubted her love for me, but I needed her presence. She just couldn't give it to me.

In the 80s and 90s, the children of those involved in the struggle were sent to the so-called "beehives" in Nicaragua or Cuba. These shelters were designed to look after the activists' kids and keep them safe. The kids were also taught revolutionary principles. I almost got sent to one of those schools when my mother left for Mexico; she wanted to send me to a friendly country where I would be safe. But my grandmother did not allow it and kept me with her. The children who went to these boarding schools seldom saw their parents and were totally estranged from their original family setting.

My mother and I lived separately for many years. When I finally joined her in Mexico, I was 11 and she still lived an underground life. Her commitment had not faltered. Our reunion wasn't easy, because time and estrangement had created a huge chasm between us. Her political commitments and the armed struggle always came before family duties.

My mother's and her comrades' commitment stemmed from their need to transform the world. At the time, the atmosphere was one of genuine, true hope for deep social change. They were convinced they could build a new country, a new man, a free country where equality and justice reigned.

It deeply saddens me when I realize that this dream for social change never occurred. The causes of the civil war – poverty, social exclusion, racism – are still very much there today. They are even stronger, even more aggressive, actually. Nevertheless, I do not think all these efforts, all these sufferings and sacrifices were in vain. On the contrary, the need for social justice and change is still very much felt today. The true question is: how can we find, today, the means to make our high hopes for social change come true?

For me, making this film meant confronting the political and armed struggle as waged by my mother (and many others like her) with the simple fact of being a mother. There's a deep contradiction within the two: even though activists dedicated their lives to the transformation

of society for the benefit of its children, there was no room left in their own lives to fulfill their roles as mothers or fathers.

Making this film also meant putting into question the structure of the mother-son relationship and looking at the damage caused by the absence of one's child and how hard it can be to make up for the lost time.

I'm a father now, and I could not imagine having to part with my children. That is why, with this film, I wanted to explore the deep heartbreak experienced by this mother – my mother – in the course of this long and painful separation.

As in my previous film, the aim was not an autobiographical narrative, but to make use of the emotions inside me in order to explore this woman's and this little boy's journey together. What would they learn about each other and about themselves?

I chose to set the story in 1986, the year of the World Cup in Mexico. That year is part of my childhood memories and offers an interesting contrast between the joyous popular atmosphere and the difficulties faced by the revolutionary militants. 1986 was also a pivotal year for Guatemala: the authorities had proclaimed an amnesty law which allowed the resistance fighters to surrender without punishment, as long as they collaborated with the government. Many militants who had grown tired of the struggle returned to Guatemala. Later, we learned that the government manipulated these reformed militants in order to strike the resistance even harder.

I wanted to make an intimate film, tense with the many obstacles faced by the armed struggle in its Mexican exile. The same level of tension is felt in the relationship between Maria and Marco: mother and son had to learn about each other and how to live together. I was also interested in the terrible dilemma facing Maria, her efforts to become honest and consistent with herself, without giving up her love for her child. Probably because her boy was what she loved the most in the world.

I once asked my mother whether she would have made the same choices had she known about the harm her decisions would do to our relationship. She did not hesitate for a second and answered: of course, I'd do the same thing. Maybe it takes people like her and her comrades to change the world, but at what cost? And above all: are we ready, today, to pay such a high price in order to change our societies



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

César Díaz was born in Guatemala in 1978.

After studying in Mexico and Belgium, he joined the script workshop at FEMIS in Paris. For over ten years, he has been editing fiction and documentaries. He has also directed the short documentaries *SEMILLAS DE CENIZAS*, which has been shown at some twenty international festivals, and *TERRITORIO LIBERADO*, winner of the IMCINE prize in Mexico. *NUESTRAS MADRES*, selected for the 58th Critic's week and awarded the *Caméra d'Or* 2019, is his first feature-length fiction film.

His second feature film, *Mexico 86*, starring Berenice Bejo will premiere at Locarno Film Festival in Piazza Grande



INTERVIEW CÉSAR DÍAZ

You dedicate MEXICO 86 to your mother. Naturally, since this new feature film tells the story of Maria, a Guatemalan revolutionary activist exiled in Mexico and separated from her son who stayed behind with his grandmother, one wonders: is this an autofiction?

There's more to it than that! I don't find the concept of autofiction very interesting. On the one hand, it implies a need to stay faithful to real events, for fear of betraying your own story, and on the other hand – honestly – why would people care about my life as such? What I really want is to share the questions I ask myself with the audience. To do that, elements from my own story are just tools—tools that, of course, feed into the script, just as my memories and emotions nourish the actors—but nothing more. I truly believe that this distance is necessary. To be clear, this film is neither therapy nor catharsis. I did the therapy beforehand. To grow, heal... and build myself. Otherwise, making a film would be impossible.

Does that mean that the central question of MEXICO 86—how to reconcile armed resistance with family—has haunted you for a long time, despite everything?

Yes, this subject has always troubled me – and even more so today, as the state of the world deeply unsettles me. Why? Well, because, unlike the previous generation, we no longer have a concrete enemy. Everything is more diffuse, more insidious. Social bonds have completely fractured. Therefore I find myself with the same desire to transform society that my parents had, but without the right tools to do so. Indeed, armed resistance no longer makes sense. Ultimately, what interests me through this dual question of political commitment and family is the notion of connection. I find the mechanisms that shape human relationships fascinating, whether in society at large or within the family unit. With this film, I want to confront political activism and armed resistance – as experienced by my mother (and so many others) – with a simple reality: being a mother. There's a deep contradiction between the two. Even though these activists devoted their lives to building a better world for their children, they no longer had space to actually fulfill their role as parents.

Exactly—just like in *Nuestras Madres*, your first feature which won the *Caméra d'Or* in 2019—the mother and grandmother in MEXICO 86 take center stage, while the father is absent...

It is because I didn't have that father figure in my life, but also, more importantly, because I wanted to raise important matters through the commitment of these women. In 1986, the time in which the film is set, when men went off to make the revolution or even went into exile, no one asked who would take care of their children. Unlike revolutionary women, who, in addition to defending their country and their rights as citizens, also had to find solutions for their kids. It's deeply unfair, because at some point, it forces them to make a choice, a sacrifice. And women should be able to pursue their desires just like men! Of course, we're in an extreme case with Maria, my heroine, but it's an issue that remains relevant today. Just look at how, even today, many women are faced with the dilemma of having to choose between a career and raising their children...

This focus on women is certainly present in your story. Even though you gradually narrow it down to the relationship between Maria and her son, it is primarily told from Maria's perspective. Why is that?

We had to stay on Maria's side all the time, otherwise the film would collapse. If we had shifted to the child's perspective, we would have judged her. But by staying with her, we get to discover her complexity and the cracks behind her tough exterior. Of course, she's someone who appears hard, impenetrable, and highly disciplined at first. But it's a result of the circumstances! She knows that one wrong word or gesture could cost the lives of many people. She constantly carries a heavy weight on her shoulders, and naturally, this changes her relationship with others. But I hope that, gradually, we also understand how brave her commitment is. Yes, the injustice is unbearable for her. Yes, she feels she is part of something greater. But the price she must pay is huge. One day, maybe, we will have to defend democracy here in Europe... I certainly hope it won't come to that. But if it does, I hope we will have Maria's courage! I wanted to make an intimate film, one that conveys the tension of armed resistance in exile. A similar tension is present in the relationship between Maria and Marco: mother and son must learn to know each other, to live together. What also intrigues me is the terrible dilemma Maria faces: how to stay true to her convictions without sacrificing the love she has for her son? Probably because this child is the thing she loves most in the world.



After exhuming the bodies of the Guatemalan civil war in your first feature film, you now project us to 1986, at the height of the dictatorship. Is cinema for you primarily a way to shed light on the past, or even to contribute to a process of remembrance?

Yes, certainly. We are the result of many experiences accumulated. Take the current violence in Guatemala: for me, it comes from two things. First, justice has never been served; the military of the junta were never held accountable, there were no trials. Then, killing was so easy during the civil war, life lost its value... And it has continued. This absence of the rule of law can explain the extreme violence that still plagues the country. It's also the origin of this violence, which I wanted to tell through Maria's story. Because for me, indeed, cinema can shed light. I remember moments in my life when certain films transformed me. Before seeing *Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais' documentary, for example, I didn't understand what the Holocaust was...

Your film is far from being a documentary. It even takes the form of a thriller, borrowing some codes from espionage films with its hideouts, wigs, and multiple chases...

The film I'm making is first and foremost the one I want to see! *Running on Empty* by Sidney Lumet left a strong impression on me and inspired me. I wanted to make a political thriller in its wake, one that would allow me to get into a serious subject without being too hermetic. Plus, I wanted to step out of my comfort zone. It was a real personal challenge. For *Nuestras Madres*, I used a very documentary-like language to talk about a very concrete reality, with non-professional actors. This time, my Mexican actors, Leonardo Ortizgris and Julieta Egurrola, are very well-known in Latin America. Not to mention Bérénice Bejo, of course!

Tell us about Bérénice Bejo. Why did you think of her for the role of Maria, and how did you work together?

I was deeply impacted by *The Past*, by Asghar Farhadi, for which she won the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival. Bérénice is stunning in it. But it was after seeing *La Quietud*, by Pablo Trapero, in which Bérénice plays one of the two lead roles, that I thought: this actually makes sense! She's Franco-Argentine, she speaks Spanish, she knows what exile is like—why not send her the script? We then arranged a meeting in Paris, and we spent 3 hours together talking about our families and the things we can't talk about with them! After that, we quickly started working together, and it was very smooth. There was a world to build around Maria, and it was really comfortable on set because we only needed a few words to make adjustments, thanks to our prior conversations.

While the structure we developed during the scriptwriting phase remained the same, every scene was enriched by many aspects of Bérénice. It changed their depth! For example, we agreed on the idea of not falling into pathos, of holding back emotions. Everything had to come through in the eyes, in tiny details. It was truly a great pleasure to work with her!

And the young Matheo Labbé, who plays Marco, Maria's son? He is both very subtle and very expressive in his performance...

The reason I chose him is because, for a 10-year-old boy (he's now 13), he had something very mature about him. We worked together in a unique way on set. For instance, I forbade everyone from giving him the script. He was essentially navigating by instinct, but with great trust, because I constantly reassured him, telling him that I would always be there and guide him to the right place. We can't push children into dark areas and leave them alone. In fact, what I wanted was to work on the emotions and how his body reacted in each scene. But I always reminded him that it was work, that Marco wasn't him. It worked out really well! Moreover, he formed a strong bond with Bérénice.

You were able to shoot in both Mexico and Guatemala, but what stands out most is not so much the setting or the space, but the work on lighting, with many night scenes, dimly lit moments, and interior shots. Tell us about your work with the director of photography, Virginie Surdej, whom you're collaborating with for the second time...

I think the feeling of light being omnipresent over the frame is both a matter of production and affinity. I shot for 26 days in Guatemala, with the same team from my first film—a group of about forty people I knew very well. They are friends, so it was very smooth and pleasant working with them. However, in Mexico, where I only shot for 13 days, it was like this big industry. I was surrounded by about a hundred people. For them, it was a small crew, but I was very nervous on the first day... Luckily, Virginie, who is someone very close to me, was there. Together, we were able to look for photos and film references to find the material, color, and style of *MEXICO 86*. A year before, we had already decided where to place the camera in each scene. We also knew we would favor shadow and off-screen elements to create the tension and the constant sense of danger that's typical of a thriller.

Rémi Boubal's score, which is powerfully anxiety-inducing, also heightens this tension, especially in the action scenes. It's a very bold choice—why?

Rémi and I worked together already on *Nuestras Madres*. For *MEXICO 86*, I wanted something grander, and to dive into the codes of the thriller. He understood very well the world I wanted to build. Rémi is someone who makes a lot of suggestions, both during the shoot and in the editing process, which is amazing. Lastly, what I really like about his music is that it doesn't create the emotions for the audience; it accompanies them. He keeps his freedom!

Has your mother, who lives in Guatemala, seen your film, and what did she think of it?

At first, she didn't want to watch it. She eventually did. I know she was moved, but that's all I know. And I wouldn't want any more than that. It's perfectly fine that way: we should respect each person's reaction.



BÉRÉNICE BEJO INTERVIEW

How did your meeting with César Díaz, the director of MEXICO 86, come about?

He first contacted me. Probably because there aren't many French women who speak Spanish. But also, perhaps because I was born in 1976, experienced the dictatorship, and then exile, just like César. The connection happened quite naturally: we had lunch together... and talked for over three hours! He told me his secrets, about his birth, his father, and I shared stories about my family and childhood. We connected without quite knowing why, like two people who left their countries—him, a Belgo-Guatemalan, and me, a Franco-Argentine—both different and yet similar.

This is not your first film in Spanish, but it's the first one that directly delves into a subject (the dictatorship, exile) and a subcontinent (Latin America) that are deeply personal to you...

I had been offered other films in Argentina, on these same subjects, but I had never wanted to dive into those stories until now. I used to think my parents wouldn't go see them... But this time, it's different. First of all, I'm no longer a little girl. Then, the script moved me deeply. And finally, there was the meeting with César, our common ground. In a way, because it wasn't my story or my country, I felt protected.

MEXICO 86 is a period film that, in its own way, aims to contribute to the memory work of Guatemala, a country torn by a civil war from 1960 to 1996. What is your own relationship with the past?

I am very attached to the duty of memory and to transmission. However, I come from a family that didn't speak much about my country, Argentina. I can even say that my parents gave up on it. But I've gone back several times, and my children are bilingual. I can see that it makes my mother and father happy, even if they don't say it... Along the same lines, it was I who told Michel (Hazanavicius), my partner, to adapt *The Most Precious of Cargoes*, specifically for our family. We actually took our children to the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz. Remembering is realizing that there are signs and thus being better prepared for new disasters. At least, we can hope to avoid them. And it's beautiful to know where we come from, even if the stories are more or less beautiful...

You play Maria, the main character—a powerful role inspired by César Díaz's mother, to whom he dedicates the film. Did that connection put extra pressure on you? Did you meet her?

No, César's mother wasn't on set, and I've never even seen a photo of her. I actually think she doesn't really see the point of making this film! Anyway, the fact that she was an inspiration for the character of Maria, and that she's still alive, didn't put any particular pressure on me—nor on César, for that matter. First and foremost, she's a fictional heroine. That said... it's true that César cried a lot on set. There were some incredibly emotional moments—scenes that truly moved him. I'm thinking especially of the phone booth scene, where Maria says goodbye to her mother, fully aware that she'll never see her again...

How, as an actress, do you build such a complex character? She's both unyielding—committed to armed resistance in the name of an ideal—and fragile, an absent mother to a 10-year-old boy who's beginning to question her and rebel...

She was a character in whom I put very precise work into. First, I worked intensely on my Spanish—two hours a day for two months—really focusing on perfecting my accent. On top of that, I knew the script inside and out, so I felt comfortable going into it. I also constantly had my mother in mind—sometimes I was her, sometimes I stood beside her. Now, my mother wasn't a revolutionary like Maria; it's not exactly the same story. But all her friends were killed, one by one, and I always felt that inner conflict in her—the questioning, the pain of not having stayed in Argentina to fight. So, I built Maria as a woman who couldn't allow herself to have regrets.

Because her commitment is stronger than anything else? Would you go so far as to say she has no choice?

Let's say it goes beyond her—it's like a calling. And like everyone else, she's built up an armor over time. The moments when she's harsh are just a facade, alternating with moments when she breaks down. But those scenes always stay on a tightrope; they never tip into melodrama, thankfully. I discussed this a lot with César. He's an incredible editor—he really managed to tighten the story around the relationship between Maria and her son.

That's why, by the end, we understand that Maria has completed her journey with him—even if he leaves earlier than expected—because she's a woman who sees beyond her immediate circle.



And we also understand that if this little boy chooses to leave—chooses to sacrifice his relationship with his mother—it's to let her go and make the world a better place. That's incredibly powerful. Thankfully, there are women—and men—who think bigger, who are willing to sacrifice so that we can live in peace, in a democracy!

Wasn't your biggest challenge, ultimately, to make sure that the audience wouldn't judge or even condemn her?

Oh, exactly, and in every scene! But I really loved Maria, and I think that gave her a different dimension. Even better: it was important to me that we liked her, that we didn't think she was a bad mother. It's just that she breaks away from a conception of motherhood that is still very ingrained in our societies, or at least, she questions it.

The role of the grandmother, played by Mexican actress Julieta Egurrola, who becomes Marco's surrogate mother and his anchor, also questions the notion of motherhood. Who is the true mother in the film, in the end?

There are so many ways to become a mother today! What's important is the person who raises the child, who is there every day, who gives them rules. Their real mother, their real father, are the people who take care of them. What is very beautiful in César's film is that Marco has formed a strong bond with his grandmother, but Maria, who loves her mother so much, understands this completely. She accepts it, she is not jealous. This also contributes to her sacrifice, and that's why I don't judge her. Nor do I judge those who are not capable of committing fully like she does. Because honestly, I don't know what I would do tomorrow if we had to fight...

Mexico 86 is not only an intimate and political story, but also a thrilling film that borrows certain codes from the spy genre, with its hideouts, chases, and wigs...

Right, the wigs! At first, I hadn't planned to change them as much or even switch characters that often. But after two months of working on the script, I decided we needed to create all these aliases. We had huge discussions about this with César. For example, why doesn't Maria wear a wig when she goes to pick up Marco from school? Or the final scene, with the curly blonde hair in broad daylight. Maria fully embraces this look; she's beautiful and smiling. It was very important because it's the last image Marco will have of her. She's not a broken woman. Subconsciously, she's also doing all of this for him, and for his future...!

A close-up photograph showing a person's hand holding a pair of scissors, cutting a piece of paper. The paper has some faint, illegible text and a date stamp that appears to say "MAYO 1962". The background is a green and white checkered surface.



ARTISTIC LIST

Maria Bérénice Bejo
Marco Matheo Labbé
Miguel Leonardo Ortizgris
Eugenia Julieta Egurrola



A woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark pants, is sitting on the floor in a dimly lit room. She is holding a silver handgun in her right hand, pointing it towards the right. Her expression is serious and focused. In the background, there is a wooden cabinet with a boombox on top. The overall atmosphere is dark and moody.

TECHNICAL LIST

Director
Chief Operator
Chief Decorator
Editor
Music
Producers

Sound

Costumes
Head Make-up Artist
Head Hairdresser
1st Camera Assistant
Chief Electrician
Chief Machinist

Produced by
In coproduction with

Associate Producers
Executive Producers

César Diaz
Virginie Surdej
Pilar Peredo
Alain Dessauvage
Rémi Boubal
Delphine Schmit, Géraldine Sprimont & Anne-Laure Guégan
Bruno Schweisguth, Charles de Ville, Gilles Bénardeau
Sabrina Riccardi et Isaac Castellanos Méndez
Eva Ravina
Marie-Pierre Hattabi
Agathe Corniquet
Tim Janssens
Loco Gonzalez

Need Productions et Tripode Productions
Pimienta et Menuetto
France TV, RTBF, VOO ET BE TV, PROXIMUS, SHELTER PROD
YK Well Enterprise & Yukunkun
Forerunner

PROGRAMMATION

VIVIEN VANDE KERCKHOVE
General Management & Sales
vivien@obrother.be
+32 477 64 90 88



Downloadable material on www.obrother.be or cinemapp.pro