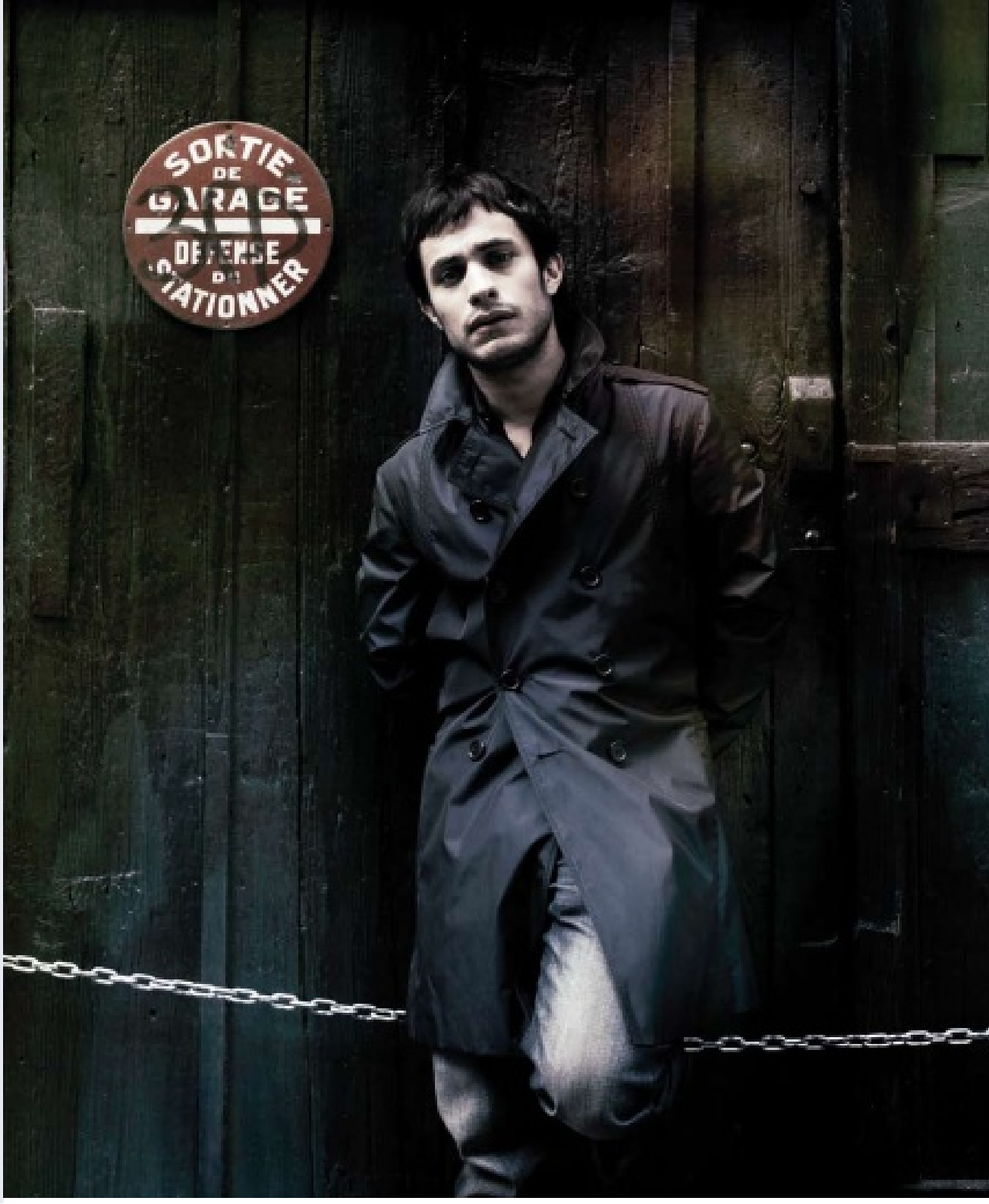


Photography: Kurt Iswarienko, also for Opus Reppco and Iswarienko.com. Styling: David Thomas for OpusReppco.com. Hair/Assistant: Marc Cohen.

# GÆL

*garcía bernal*

Written by **Gregg LaGambina** Photographed by **Kurt Iswarienko**



Up above Madrid, in a room with a cart of picked over lunch, a ruffled copy of *El País*, a half-empty coffee pot, and beams of midday sun slicing swaths of carpet like a cake, sits a man who acts. Here is a man whose work in life is to pretend. But, just now, he's stowed away a secret, something he's written down, closed, and hidden for later. What is it?

"Ah, no, no. I can't. I can't talk about it because I don't know what it is," he says. "It sort of has a shape. It might not be anything. I really have no idea. Like always, it's better to put it down on paper and later they become a play, a story, a film, or just a diary."

The green eyes below the messy perfection of his dark hair, conspiring with his perpetual three-day beard, would give him the look of a poet in any age but this one. With poets melting like ice caps beneath the klieg lights that shine upon actors, Gael García Bernal still scribbles like an ancient, like a monk in the dark looking for anything that might be true or useful. He's an actor, yes, but not for the reasons you might think.

"Doing *Amores perros*—for many of us, it was our first film. I had no idea that film was going to become what it became," he reflects. "At that point, it was all about doing things for oneself, for personal growth, and having an experience. I want to maintain that kind of privilege of being able to do things for that reason. And, also, to be faithful and responsible to the great fortune which is to be able to do what one wants. That is a huge privilege. It's a very lucky one."

Actors often wax on (and on) about awareness. But the awareness they speak of is, ironically, detached and limited to the tiniest space—a film set—and the awareness of their fellow actors, an awareness of a pretend place, removed from the world, unreal and unused outside of their character's fictional lives. They are concerned only with their "craft." For Bernal, it's all one thing and everything. For him, the best-case scenario is that his film teaches him things about himself that he can carry back with him into the world.

In *Blindness*, the film based on the novel by Portuguese writer José Saramago, Bernal portrays a blind man and the self-proclaimed King of Ward Three. He is also an asshole with a gun who rapes women. His character—and others in the film who suddenly succumb to a mysterious epidemic that robs them of sight—are what prompted Dr. Marc Maurer, president of the National Federation of the Blind, to condemn the film, saying that it depicts the blind as "incompetent, filthy, vicious, and depraved" and that "we are not helpless children or immoral, degenerate monsters." Yet that evaluation runs contrary to what Bernal took away from his own experience making the film.

"Being blind is an imposition that allows you to create a huge amount of other sensory advantages that people that see don't have," says Bernal, describing the workshops he endured blindfolded, often for a full day, to prepare for the film. "And that's essential for acting. I would even go further—that it's essential for just enjoying life. You become much more...you develop a more acute sense of energy. You feel much closer to this other side, which has nothing to do with optics. You see clearer when you're blind, in a way."

With lazy ease, anyone can stretch the metaphorical playfulness between blindness and seeing to its breaking point. (Something the novel does not do and the film does a little.) But Bernal has a generosity with his ideas that give them weight. He plays his life like a go-between, with his work in films constituting only one

part of his larger aspect. Like any good actor, he is unselfish. There's a sense of duty about it. He learns it, his first instinct is to share it and

"Definitely it is a duty," he says of his curiosity. "It is a responsibility," he says of his curiosity. "It interests me and I don't know where it is. I put my finger on it. I think just living in Mexico, it happened when I was growing up, from

the artist's uprising to...I mean, I remember brands were available in the stores. I remember there was a Mars bar and 3 Musketeers. I wonder if they changed for good or for

"Evolution has to happen. I guess it's a change that is going to happen. I guess I cannot say that it was a specific thing. I also have parents that are very committed in some way or another. It was always to defend my point of view, too."

As a testament to his point of view, maybe yours. He's been recruited to manage the social activist site. Its goals are yet apparent. "It's still in diapers," he admits. It compels him to perform, to scribble, to evolve. He has an online community of shared stories of the things he will mine to make a documentary. It has been created to help with our research and understanding of 'resistance.' Gael and I talk about it as well as the 'feel'...[and] direction of the

"There's a lot of road ahead with amazing points of view and is being posted. Some of the stories have been shared with people who are trying to experience the act of resisting. Maybe there's even a better way to develop, to construct. We all understand it. Can you make them better? **IT'S FOR EVERYONE.**"

**TUALLY STUMBLE UPON S**

**HAVE TO RESIST AND THIS**

**PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WO**

**WAY. IT'S ALSO FOR PEOP**

**INSPIRED BY THESE STORI**

**THEM IN THEIR OWN LIFE."**



Wool jacket by SPENCER HART. Cotton button-down shirt with grosgrain collar and wool vest by LANVIN. Cotton-denim jeans by DIESEL.



Cotton button-down shirt with grosgrain collar and wool vest by LANVIN.



You can watch Bernal discuss things like Albert Camus, rebellion, and indigenous cultures with *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* author Naomi Klein at Resist, among other conversations with intellectuals and authors sympathetic to the ideas of the project, like noted linguist and activist Noam Chomsky. In a clip entitled “The Threats to the System Are Those Who Can’t Be Bought,” Bernal tackles a wide range of issues, bouncing from the sexism inherent in the notion that a female was at fault for humanity’s banishment from Paradise to how language and different agendas can redefine the terms of freedom. But what’s most striking is how Bernal—this beast of a persona born to us in front of cameras—ignores the mediantirely and stays locked into the ideas he’s trying to unwind with the help of friends and scholars. He is not there to be seen, he is there to learn, to share, to discover, and maybe even solve. He never looks into the camera. It might as well not be there. He’s working.

“I strongly believe in work. When someone works, they are constructing, they are building something, whatever it is. Work in its most simplified level. But, work, along with education, allows you to be free. A person that does things for themselves, for their family, for their community, for everyone—I strongly believe in that. Work can also be mental, you know? Maybe it’s a bit pragmatic, or cold, to see it that way, but I think that rigor with oneself is what excites you to try to change things and make them better.”

We have drifted far away from the films Bernal has made. It’s impossible now to bend this back around to look at some of the work he’s done as an actor. That has gotten away from us because it truly is only one part of who Gael García Bernal considers himself to be. We’ve drifted not by design, but because this is how he navigates his very life. Even a simple question about how he’s one of the few international personas to crack the usually xenophobic American psyche turns into a discussion about walls, both real and metaphorical.

Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, Bernal has made Mexican films that miraculously found large audiences up north in the States. Both *Amores perros* and *Y tu mamá también* gained a foothold in America, creating international opportunities that any of his peers would openly envy. So, naturally, talk turns to curmudgeons like Lou Dobbs who want to build a wall to close off Bernal’s country from ours.

“Building a wall is completely contrary to what everything the United States says they want to defend. Semantically, it’s a huge hypocritical metaphor. But it’s a real one. That’s the problem,” he says evenly, without anger. “It has been shown in history that walls serve no purpose, that ultimately they are great things to destroy. Walls do not communicate. I think what we are heading into and what we are realizing is that communication is the most necessary tool for human beings to evolve.”

Soon Bernal will be 30, and soon he will be a father. In the face of global economic collapse, worldwide terrorism, walls both old and new—these

things do not shake his belief in humanity. Even when pressed about impending fatherhood, he can’t look at his own situation without applying it to larger ideas.

“You do whatever you can to prepare yourself, but at the same time, the unknown is the unknown. All one can say in my situation is that you become the happiest person that you’ve ever been. Ultimately, that’s the only thing you know for sure.

“We’re gonna go through a huge, interesting time now, in all aspects, not only personally,” he continues, turning now to a discussion about the global economy. “It’s a moment of changing points of view. I guess the only thing I would recommend is to remain calm [laughs], to drink water, to enjoy the things that are there, that are straight in front of you that you can enjoy a lot.

“Right now, let’s say there’s going to be less money going around, and less brands, but we’re going to realize we didn’t need them to begin with. **BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, WE’RE GOING TO REALIZE TO**

**HAVE LESS MONEY IS GOING TO LEAD US TO ENJOY OTHER**

**THINGS THAT ARE THERE. THAT MEANS PLAYING A LOT,**

**HAVING FUN, WRITING, READING—THINGS THAT DON’T**

**COST MONEY. EXPERIMENTING WITH THINGS, LIKE GOING**

**WITH YOUR FAMILY SOMEWHERE, EVEN TO A PARK. IT’S**

**LITTLE THINGS. WE’RE ALL GOING TO LIVE IT. IT’S IMPOR-**

**TANT TO RISE UP AND BE THERE FOR THAT CHALLENGE**

**AND ENJOY IT. TO NOT BE SCARED ABOUT IT. ON THE CON-**

**TRARY, THIS IS A GOOD TIME. OF COURSE I AM OPTIMISTIC.**

**I’D BE SILLY IF I WASN’T.”**

The occupational hazard of acting, of pretending, is to lose a connection to the things that are true and useful. Whatever it is that Gael García Bernal scratched into that little book of his this morning in Madrid, may turn out to be useless or untrue by tomorrow morning. But, the very act of doing it, taking the time to scribble it down before it passed him by—that is the essential thing.

“I’m trying to do things for myself all the time. But sometimes you can’t, so when you get those little moments, that’s when you do them. I am never bored.” ☒

Styling: DAVID THOMAS

Opposite: Taffeltrenchcoat by DIOR HOMME. Cottonbutton-dawnshirt with round collar by SPENCERHART. Cotton-denim jeans by DIESEL.

