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Now and Then: Remarkable New Doc ‘La Camioneta,’ a Masterful Miniature



Matt Brennan
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@@thefilmgoer



Spotsylvania County, Virginia and Queztal City, Guatemala are separated by nearly 3,000 miles of road, and by what would seem, at first, an unbridgeable cultural distance. But in Mark Kendall’s remarkable [documentary](#) “La Camioneta” — a brilliant microhistory of our globalized world — you’re hard pressed to consider them anything but neighbors. The film debuted at [SXSW 2012](#) and opens in limited release starting May 31.

At a mere 71 minutes, “La Camioneta” takes the shape of a [novella](#) (per Merriam-Webster, “compact and pointed... psychologically subtle”), deploying its transnational tale with the utmost economy. A sort of nonfiction film version of the literary form, it distills the poetics of an epic journey into a powerful miniature: its story of a handful of Guatemalan men who purchase, transport, refurbish, and recycle a decommissioned Virginia school bus is both a graceful, ground-level portrait of Guatemala’s working class and a *cri de coeur* from the shadows of affluence.

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According to the film’s [website](#), approximately 1,000 bus drivers and fare collectors have been murdered by Guatemalan gangs since 2006, on the wrong end of an extortion scheme whose gruesome consequences comprise the film’s Ground Zero. The ex-chief of police evades justice, while a poster pleads that “the corrupt elements of the police are NOT OUR COMRADES, they are just A FEW BAD APPLES.” Later, the camera glimpses the police dragging a man’s corpse through the doors of a former school bus, the blood soaking through his shirt a dark inversion of the vehicle’s more innocent past life.

But “La Camioneta,” like its courageous subjects, refuses to resign to the violence. Its resolute stillness — the camera peering out through a windshield, or lingering on a boy cooling his coffee with short breaths — defies chaos. Instead, Kendall, who produced, directed, shot, and edited the film, discovers unexpected beauty in an otherwise troubled existence. Hand-mixing paint and applying chrome siding, Mario, the man in charge of the retrofitting process, describes his pride in “the art of creating a *camioneta*, the time that goes into creating it.”

When Mario rests for a moment amid a rainbow-colored scrap heap of parts, leaves of grass stretching up and scraping against the hoods and tires, he is briefly at peace — a sculptor surveying his false starts, readying himself for a new project. “One man’s trash...” the saying begins, and watching this cadre of drivers fashion an object so hopeful, so bright, from someone else’s discard pile is to witness the transformation of trash into treasure. “They’re migrants, too,” Ermelindo, the buyer, says of the buses. “It’s not like we build the buses here. They come from the U.S.A.”

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All too often, though, the proverb of trash and treasure works in reverse, and if from a political standpoint “La Camioneta” neglects to make the long tradition of U.S. malfeasance in Latin America explicit, its subtle construction builds to an emotional impact that far exceeds its size. The *camioneta* that emerges when the tape and newspaper are peeled away glistens in red, white, and blue — and chrome. Its souped-up, modified Americanism at once nods to the United States’ official ideals and critiques its baleful reality, casting a shine, as the film does, into the shadows.

The film ends as it began, traversing the border. The scene shifts from children in Guatemala celebrating the new *camioneta*’s unveiling to children in the United States, smilingly blissfully — and blissfully unaware — as their school bus glides through their comfortable suburb. “On a journey, there is nothing that is written,” one of the drivers reflects in voiceover. “You always meet new people, new friends. And even if they weren’t really friends, you shared the same bus for a short time. And that makes you part of the same journey.” The journey depicted in “La Camioneta” belongs, then, not only to Kendall, to bus drivers, to Guatemalans. It’s ours, too.

“La Camioneta” premiered at SXSW in 2012. It can be seen in theatrical release this Friday, May 31 through June 6 at Brooklyn’s reRun Theater; June 7-13 at Los Angeles’ Downtown Independent; and July 2-7 at San Diego’s Digital Gym. No downloads or streams are available as yet.