



Center for Latin
American Studies

VANDERBILT  UNIVERSITY



LA CAMIONETA

A FILM BY MARK KENDALL

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Thoughts from the Filmmaker

I've long been interested in how people define and seek to transcend the boundaries of their own individual and cultural worlds. I studied anthropology in college and was most interested in exploring the psychological elements of ritual and how individuals develop different cultural expressions to reflect and reaffirm their own understanding of their relationship to the universe. I slowly began gravitating towards documentary filmmaking over the course of a few years because I saw it as a craft that would allow me to synthesize my interest in human stories with my background in music and emerging interest in photography. Looking back on it, it was a more holistic and expressive way to explore the types of themes and ideas that had interested me for a long time.

My first short film, "The Time Machine," tells the story of a watchmaker from Honduras who works in Grand Central Terminal. Set amidst the din of Grand Central where punctuality reigns supreme, the film explores his understanding of his craft, revealing the contrast between his public duty to keep New Yorkers running on schedule and his personal desire to live a life free from the shackles of time.

My most recent film, "La Camioneta," follows the physical, economic, geographical, interpersonal, and spiritual journey of one decommissioned American school bus from the United States to Guatemala, where it is repaired, repainted, and resurrected as one of the brightly-colored *camionetas* that bring the vast majority of Guatemalans to work each day. Moving between North and South, between life and death, and through an unfolding collection of moments, people, and places, the film quietly reminds us of the interconnected worlds in which we live.

While remaining very socially-engaged at their heart, these films imply as much as they inform, evoke as much as they assert, and stray in certain ways from the norms of documentary realism. And while they are very different in content, in form, and in style, each film is inspired by my interest in individuals' attitudes towards their work and my desire to create an immersive experience that is just as much a reflection of 'the world' as it is a reflection of the way I interpret it.

In the winter of 2009, I set off on a six-week bus trip through the heart of Central America that would take me from San Jose, Costa Rica all the way up to Austin, Texas. During my time in Guatemala, my principal form of transportation was the *camionetas* – decommissioned school buses from the United States that had migrated south and had been repaired, repainted, and repurposed for public use.

Immediately recognizing them as old school buses, I started up a conversation with one of the drivers who told me that the *camioneta* we were riding on had originally come from a school district in Tennessee – just 20 miles away from where I was living at the time.

In that moment, I found myself thinking about the old school bus I used to ride to basketball games in high school. Where was it now? Is it driving around somewhere in Guatemala? Who had bought and repaired these buses? How did they bring them to Guatemala? And who had put so much time and energy into carefully decorating them?

It was a moment that I would return to again and again over the next year, and eventually I felt the need to make a





Thoughts from the Filmmaker

film. Originally, my idea was to follow one out-of-service school bus through the entire journey it took to become a *camioneta*, which seemed like the perfect vehicle into exploring more personal stories about migration, exchange, transformation and connectedness.

The first key was finding someone in search of an old school bus that was destined for Guatemala and figuring out how to link up with that person before the purchase is made. My initial research pointed me to the 422 Bus Auction, and my time there eventually led me to Mingo.

From that point onwards, most of my casting decisions were left primarily up to fate. I didn't know where in Guatemala the bus might end up, who might be its new owner, or what route – if any – it might end up joining after being repaired and repainted. Some buses never leave the junkyard and others are scrapped for parts.

I rode all the way through Mexico and down to Guatemala on the bus with Mingo, spending up to 16 hours a day on the highway and sleeping either in roadside motels or sprawled out on top of the spare parts piled up in the back of the bus. When we finally arrived to his destination, Mingo introduced us to his brother-in-law, Geronimo, who ran the junkyard where the bus would sit for the next few weeks awaiting a buyer. When Ermelindo began showing interest in purchasing it, Geronimo introduced us and mentioned that I'd come down on the bus and was interested in following its journey. That organic process continued throughout the course of production, as the bus was my guide, slowly revealing the complexities of its relationship with its environment and carrying me along from one place to the next.

One makes a film for its own sake—much less as a message than as a testament to what one has seen, what one has felt, and what one cares about deeply on a very personal level. I'm as much concerned with the viewer's imaginative contribution to the film as with what the film itself can show, as the cinema itself is its own *lingua franca* and explanation can easily displace other modes of understanding. As a result, one of my intentions was to create an appeal to the viewer that was both visual and visceral.

When it all began, I wasn't sure how the journalistic elements of the story would interact with the more conceptual ideas I had for the film. In many ways it was a journey of faith, and I think that's one of the elements about the production process that became a very visceral feeling in the film we ended up creating.





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WRITER

Claire González

Assistant Director of Outreach
Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS),
Vanderbilt University

PRODUCTION & BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Edward F. Fischer

Director
CLAS, Vanderbilt University

Avery Dickens de Girón

Executive Director
CLAS, Vanderbilt University

REVIEW AND EDITING

Mark Kendall

Filmmaker, La Camioneta

Elizabeth Murphy

Graduate Student
CLAS, Vanderbilt University

Chelsea Williams

Graduate Student
CLAS, Vanderbilt University



Introduction



Sometimes in life, we find that the end is, in fact, only the beginning, and that life can take us to places we never imagined. Mark Kendall's documentary *La Camioneta* is a passionate, if unexpected, illustration of this truth. Every day dozens of decommissioned school buses leave the United States on a southward migration that carries them to Guatemala, where they are repaired, repainted, and resurrected as the brightly-colored *camionetas* that bring the vast majority of Guatemalans to work each day. This film follows the physical, economic, geographic, interpersonal and spiritual journey of one such bus from the United States to Guatemala, which unfolds beautifully with careful and deliberate intention. As a tool for public engagement, the film encourages viewers to contemplate the contrasts and connections that emerge from the scenes as well as those embedded within the visual language of the film.

This guide is intended to facilitate a dialogue, and is designed for people with an interest in using *La Camioneta* to engage groups in a thoughtful conversation about the material presented in the film. The questions for further exploration are written in such a way that invites people to bring their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences to the material, which allows for a wide range of audiences to think about the issues in the film more deeply. Don't feel the need to devote equal time to every section—to make the most of your time together, focus your energy only on those sections that are most relevant to your needs.



Relevant Groups & Partners

La Camioneta is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Civic, fraternal, and community groups
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries
- Cultural, art or historical organizations, institutions, or museums
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Film studies, Latin American Studies, and Spanish academic departments or student groups at colleges, universities, and high schools
- Groups that have discussed films relating to Guatemala, flows of migration, or U.S./Latin American relations
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Central Themes section
- High school students



Central Themes

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Anthropology | • Guatemala | • Modern Maya |
| • Arts & arts education | • Guatemalan culture | • Public transportation |
| • Catholicism & Evangelism | • Human rights | • Social and economic justice |
| • Democracy | • Immigration & Migration | |
| • Faith and faith-based | • Institutional impunity | |



Context: *Intervention and Immigration*



Intervention and Immigration

The vast movement of people and goods between Guatemala and the United States (documented and undocumented)—and with them, the exchange of social, political, and religious ideas—has significantly affected the politics, economies, and cultures of these two American neighbors. This flow across traditional social and geographic boundaries has as much to do with individual choices as with larger, sociopolitical forces which shape the environments in which people are situated.

Over time there have been different drivers for migration from Guatemala to the United States, ranging from poverty and natural disasters (such as the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala), to political and ethnic persecution during the Civil War, and more recently, gang violence. From 1967–1980 (while Guatemala was in the midst of the Internal Armed Conflict), close to 109,000 Guatemalans emigrated to the United States. As of 2013, Guatemalans are the sixth-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the US, accounting for 2.2% of the US Hispanic population overall. Remittance flows to Guatemala have increased steadily, and those who have spent time in the States often incorporate “American” design and materials into the construction of their homes, making it clear on quick glance who has gone North.

The changing nature of trends in this migration has also been influenced by changes in the US economy, trade, and immigration policy. As for the movement of goods, the Dominican Republic–Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) implemented in the mid-2000’s sought to increase trade between the United States and Central America (including Guatemala), but has been criticized for its potential adverse effects on these economies, as well as its failure to address issues including environmental concerns, labor rights, and access to pharmaceutical products.

Additionally, the increasing presence of Central American and Mexican gangs in the US and Guatemala over the past decade has contributed to problems of drug and firearms trafficking throughout the region. Illicit drugs flow into the United States (their primary market) and firearms flow out of the United States and into Guatemala, often arming organized crime groups against police and civilians.

Owing to these and other diverse factors, the movement of people and goods across borders constitutes a complex political, social and economic issue in these countries and throughout the modern world.

**Context: Mobility in Guatemala*****Mobility in Guatemala***

The *camionetas* have become deeply embedded in Guatemala's consciousness; as a cheap form of transportation that caters to those who can't afford taxis or cars, the *camionetas* function as a sort of mobile community center, complete with *cumbia* music, street vendors, and time to spend with neighbors traveling in the same direction. As featured in the film, most of these vehicles are decommissioned school buses from the US and Canada, which have been repaired and are often repainted with colors, designs, and stickers that reflect the tastes of the owner or the driver. These buses serve as the primary mode of transportation for people, livestock, and goods and thus connect small towns, villages, and communities throughout the country.

Some routes have fleets of buses that are owned entirely by one business or family, while others are comprised of a collective of buses owned by a group of individual owners. In either case, drivers usually rent the bus from the owners and are required to pay them a quota each day. Although they have regular routes, drivers stop for passengers anywhere along the road or whenever a rider shouts "*Baja!*" to get off the bus. Drivers typically have an "*ayudante*," or helper, who collects fares during the bus ride and encourages passengers to board. The fares are collected exclusively in cash, which has made them susceptible to extortion from organized crime in recent years. Nevertheless, the *camionetas* are often so full that some passengers must choose to sit on top or hang out the back door.

Within smaller cities and towns, tuk tuks have also become a favored mode of transportation in recent years, sometimes replacing walking for short-distance trips and errands. Smaller than golf carts, these vehicles are essentially three-wheeled motorcycles with two rows of seats that offer customers a taxi-like service. Tuk tuks originated in India as auto-rickshaws and are commonly found in other parts of Asia. The tuk tuks found in Guatemala are mostly made by the Indian company Bajaj.

More modern forms of transportation are also becoming more common in urban Guatemalan streets. With the aim of alleviating traffic and pollution, as well as providing a safer alternative to the widely-feared *camionetas*, Guatemala City has recently implemented a "bus rapid transit" system called Transmetro. The idea began in Bogota: essentially an above-ground subway, these highly-modernized buses travel in designated lanes and only stop at specified shelters that one enters only with a prepaid card. Police are posted both on the boarding platform and within the buses, and a network of security cameras monitors all on-board activity. While the Transmetro and the similar Transurbano have become widely popular, there are some who remain skeptical of the business interests that may lie behind their development and wonder what place, if any, the *camionetas* have in Guatemala's future.



Context: Vulnerable Institutions of a Fledgling Democracy



Vulnerable Institutions of a Fledgling Democracy

The disruption of democratic government in Guatemala commenced with the CIA-orchestrated coup that overthrew Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz in 1954. Árbenz had implemented land reforms that expropriated lands from the powerful United Fruit Company – an American corporation that traded in tropical fruit, primarily bananas. United Fruit responded to this perceived threat by using its influence to stir suspicions within a Cold War-era US government of communist sympathizers gaining hold in Guatemala.

In the 36 years that followed, Guatemala found itself in the throes of a Civil War (the “Internal Armed Conflict”) that left over 200,000 dead, nearly a million in exile, and its civic and social institutions in disarray. The Peace Accords – themselves the product of a 7-year negotiation process spanning three government administrations – were finally signed in 1996, but the process of attempting to piece together a country ravaged by nearly four decades of internal conflict has proven to be complex and difficult to implement.

As a result, Guatemala’s democratic institutions currently stand on shaky legs. People are distrustful of politicians, some of whom have been accused of fraud; of the justice system, which has failed to prosecute many serious crimes (the vast majority of murders go unpunished); and of police officers, many of whom are ex-military and are viewed as susceptible to bribery. Another major barrier to progress in democratic institution-building has been the rising presence of gang and drug trafficking activity in Guatemala. It is within this backdrop of a climate of impunity that various forces – both domestic and international – continue to operate in the country’s shadows.

Nevertheless, the Peace Accords have been transformative for Guatemala by laying the groundwork for fundamental changes in the Guatemalan legal and political systems, arranging for demilitarization, and creating a framework for civil and human rights discussion and reform. One international body working to strengthen the rule of law in Guatemala is the UN-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG. Guatemala’s first female Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz has worked tirelessly to prosecute perpetrators of mass human rights violations, and built the case against former president Efraín Ríos Montt, who was tried in 2013 for genocide and crimes against humanity. Additionally, groups such as the Historical Clarification Commission and Impunity Watch work to study and document the human rights violations of the Civil War, and pave the way for greater accountability as a necessary pillar of a peaceful democracy.

**Context:** *Guatemala and the Modern Maya**Guatemala and the Modern Maya*

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranks Guatemala 131 out of 187 countries in terms of overall human development. It ranks toward the bottom on the World Bank's list of "Middle Income Countries," and Guatemala is marked by some of the highest rates of inequality in the world. Depending on how one measures, between 65% and 80% of the population live in poverty. And by any measure (income, land holdings, education, lifespan), Maya peoples are the most deprived. There are a number of contributing factors to this extreme poverty, including the colonialism dating back to the Spanish conquest of 1518, the widely-documented acts of genocide during Internal Armed Conflict, and the historically racist attitudes towards indigenous people that have both guided and remained in the wake of these events.

In Guatemala, the Maya make up about half of the total population. There are more than 21 separate Mayan languages spoken in this small country (the largest language groups are K'iche' and Mam). Women's traditional dress—known simply as *traje*—varies in style from one community to another, and there is a fairly rapid pace of fashion trends. In rural areas, Maya families largely depend on subsistence agriculture, growing corn and beans, crops which are historically central to Mayan identity. Yet many areas suffer from land shortages, and workers are forced to migrate for seasonal labor on sugar and coffee plantations.

Maya culture has changed dramatically over the centuries, yet the Maya have always adapted and shown significant cultural resilience. Despite the poverty and inequality, modern Maya peoples are also firmly engaged with global systems. Cell phones are almost ubiquitous even in rural villages. Most small towns have internet cafes, and the youth actively communicate via text messages and Facebook. The public transportation industry, as seen in the film, is one way for modern Maya to supplement the income earned from farming traditional crops and is generally seen as a way to move forward economically and socially. There is now a growing class of upwardly mobile Maya who do not feel that they have to give up their culture to get ahead economically.



Opening the Conversation



Opening the Conversation

After the film has ended, give everyone a few minutes to reflect on what they've just seen. To maintain a sense of continuity, it's best if people don't leave the room between the end of the film and the beginning of the discussion. You might want to try giving everyone a general question or two and some time to write down their answers before beginning the discussion. Here are a few you can use to open up the conversation:

- If someone were to ask you what this film was about, what would you say?
- What did you learn from this film?
- How would you describe the relationship between the people and the bus in this film? Is there a particular characteristic or quality that guides or mediates that relationship?
- If you could ask anyone in the film one question, whom would you ask and what would it be?
- In what ways is this film similar to, and different from, other documentaries you have seen?
- Describe a moment in the film that you found particularly moving. What was it about that moment that you found so compelling?

**Further Exploration:** *The Bus***1. *The Bus***

- What feelings did the opening sights and sounds of the film evoke in you? What did the music communicate about what you were seeing and hearing?
- “When you die, your body dies. But your being doesn’t die. Your being, your energy, lives on inside of everyone. We are all parts of something larger that keeps on living, aren’t we? Parts of a ‘being.’ It’s the same for a bus, isn’t it?” Keeping in mind this quote from the beginning of the film, describe the bus as a character in the film.
- “For me, life is a journey. Everything carries you along. All you know is that you’re going towards a place and often you don’t know that place. But it all depends on what you believe life has to offer you. It’s a different bus for every person.” Reflect on this passage citing examples from the film as well as your own life.
- At one point Ermelindo remarks, “How can I pay off the bus if I don’t put it to work?” Describe the challenges facing young entrepreneurs such as himself who choose to work in the public transportation industry. Where does he find strength?
- Were you surprised by the closing images of the film? Why or why not? What feelings did they provoke in you?

**Further Exploration: Styles of Representation in Visual Media****2. Styles of Representation in Visual Media**

- The filmmaker includes one news report in the film. How does this report contribute to your overall understanding of violence on *camionetas*? How do the contrasting styles of the film and the news report compare with one another?
- The filmmaker also includes depictions of sensationalized stories about violence in the newspapers that are used during the painting process at the conversion workshop. How does the presentation of these images differ from the ones the film uses to explore the same phenomenon?
- Describe the use of landscape in the film. How does the visual language of the film reveal issues of class and power dynamics?
- The filmmaker includes a shot of a sign at the police station that refers to “A Few Bad Apples.” How does this shot complicate the role of the police in the film? And how does the presentation of the police in this film differ from other ways you have seen the Guatemalan Police presented in visual media?
- There are many different ways of representing violence and its effects. What role do conversations, gestures, body language, and facial expressions play in contributing to your understanding of how the effects of violence are actually embedded into the fabric of lived experience?

**Further Exploration:** *Faith***3. Faith**

“For me, life is a journey. Everything carries you along. All you know is that you’re going towards a place and often you don’t know that place. But it all depends on what you believe life has to offer you. It’s a different bus for every person.”

- From what you see in the film, where do those who are trying to cope with losses find comfort? From where do they draw strength?
- Briefly recount the story of St. Christopher as told by the priest in the closing scene of the film. Why do you think that many *camioneta* drivers have taken him on as their patron saint?
- Looking back on the entire film, are there any parallels to the St. Christopher story that appear at other points in time? When do they occur, and what makes them seem similar or related?

**Further Exploration:** *Mobility and Migration***4. Mobility and Migration**

- The filmmaker and Ermelindo have a conversation about the flows of migration. Ermelindo notes that the buses are “just like us.” Within the context of the conversation, why is this observation meaningful?
- Ermelindo reflects on the changing dynamics of his community in Rosario Canajal and the increase in the number of villagers who are crossing the border now due to the lack of employment opportunities coupled with a climate of institutional corruption and impunity. And what kinds of realities await those who succeed?



Next Steps



Here are some ways to stay engaged:

- Take a trip to a school bus lot in your community, and make note of any ways that LA CAMIONETA leads you to see the bus in new ways. Consider what its appearance and design tell you about your community, and think about what a bus might look like if it reflected your values.
- Considering current U.S. policy related to immigration, write letters to your political representatives stating your views on changes which should be made.
- Consider U.S. policy related to Guatemala. Write letters to your political representatives based on what changes you think should be made.
- Consider the Guatemalan government's attempts under the leadership of Otto Perez Molina to address the violence and assess the appropriateness of methods currently being used.
- Connect with the Guatemalan community in your own city. Find ways to become involved in local projects related to civic engagement.

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**About Vanderbilt CLAS**

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