



HIDDEN TRUTHS: JOHN PILGER AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY

The Golden Dream

The Golden Dream (La jaula de oro)

Director: Diego Quemada-Díez

Production Companies: Animal de Luz Films, Machete Producciones, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, Eficine, Castafiore Films, Kinemascope Films, Films Boutique, Conaculta, Monex Banco, Alsea, Programa Ibermedia, Government of Spain Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte, ICAA, Chiapas Gobierno Estado, Estudios Churubusco, Bohemian Foundation

Producers: Inna Páyan, Luis Salinas, Edher Campos

Location Manager: César Bañuelos

Post-production Supervisors: Terminal,

Joakim Ziegler, Øyvind Stiauren

Screenplay: Lucía Carreras,

Diego Quemada-Díez, Gibrán Portela

Story: Diego Quemada-Díez

Director of Photography: María Secco

Editing: Paloma López Carrillo, Felipe Gomez

Production Designer: Carlos Y. Jacques

Costume Designer: Nohemi González

Music: Jacobo Lieberman, Leonardo Heiblum

Sound Design: Matías Barberis

Direct Sound: Raúl Locatelli

Cast:

Brandon López (Juan)

Rodolfo Domínguez (Chauk)

Karen Martínez (Sara)

Carlos Chajon (Samuel)

Héctor Tahuite (Gregorio)

Ricardo Esquerro (Vitamina)

Luis Alberti (man with machete)

César Bañuelos (leader of train hijackers)

Gilberto Barraza (Coyote)

Juan Carlos Medellín, Salvador Ramírez Jiménez (policemen)

José Concepción Macías (Jacinto)

Mexico-Spain-Germany-USA 2013

108 mins

Digital

Ken Loach's influence may not be so prevalent in current UK filmmaking, but turn to the Spanish-speaking world and he remains a key reference point for a number of directors forging tough, angry, social-realist works in which politics are clearly worn on the sleeve. Fernando León de Aranoa's *Mondays in the Sun* (2002), for example, followed *Raining Stones* (1993) in capturing the frustration of jobless men trying to retain their dignity in the face of long-term unemployment brought about by the collapse of industries previously serviced by working-class urban communities. Indeed, much of the Spanish director's subsequent trajectory can be mapped to concerns that have similarly informed Loach's cinema. Iciar Bollain – who played the fervent militia combatant Maite in *Land and Freedom* (1995) – is perhaps the most visible Spanish exponent of Loach's approach, prioritising location shooting, quotidian settings, continuity filming and extensive preparatory research in a body of six films that includes *Even the Rain* (2010), scripted by her partner, and Loach regular, Paul Laverty.

Now, Spanish-born Mexico-based Diego Quemada-Díez, who first worked with Loach as a clapper loader on *Land and Freedom*, follows Bollain in acknowledging a very clear debt to the British director in his own debut feature. But where Bollain's cinema sometimes brushes against the poetics of sentimentality, Quemada-Díez's aesthetics lie in an altogether more austere register. *The Golden Dream* blends *cinéma vérité* with a documentary lyricism in which narrative, mood and matter are fused to potent effect. The result is an uncompromising, acutely observed and politically infected take on the familiar tale of vulnerable Central Americans making the perilous journey across the border from Mexico to the US.

Quemada-Díez's narrative focus is on child migrants – specifically a trio of Guatemalan teenagers who offer each other support and companionship in the face of indifference and cruelty from the majority of adults they encounter on their journey. He eschews the high-action gangland theatrics of Cary Jōji Fukunaga's *Sin nombre* (2009) in favour of a more nuanced poetic approach, in which landscape is a marker for emotions. Quemada-Díez worked as camera operator on Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003), and while *The Golden Dream* rarely deploys the extreme close-ups that are so characteristic of the latter's work, there are certain aspects of Quemada-Díez's filmmaking that point to shared thematic concerns: a focus on sweeping landscapes, the identification of emotional connectivity through touch rather than words, and a dramatisation of the borders that have been accentuated by globalisation's forward march. The sheer energy of the opening sequence recalls the accelerated pulse of *Amores perros* (2000).

The adolescent Juan (Brandon López) is first viewed walking with a defiant sense of purpose through one of Guatemala City's less salubrious quarters. He says little – indeed this is a film that shuns easy explanations and gratuitous exposition. The camera observes him as he sews dollars into the waistband of his trousers and picks up his travelling companions, the smaller, less confident Samuel (Carlos Chajon) and Juan's pragmatic girlfriend Sara (Karen Martínez). Aware of the dangers a young woman faces en route to the border, Sara has bound her breasts and cut off her hair in a ramshackle public toilet and refashioned herself as 'Osvaldo'. The sequence is enacted without a single word being spoken.

The opening scene plainly demonstrates the urban poverty these teenagers are seeking to leave behind. Soldiers march with intent through the narrow graffiti-marked streets, where fragile homes are barely protected by thin slivers of corrugated aluminium and cardboard walls; locals look out forlornly from doorways or scavenge in the massive wastelands where trash is piled high. The noises of police sirens, barking dogs and crying children fuse to create a grating soundscape, and two rows of black-and-white posters on a wall show the faces of what seem to be disappeared persons, their faded faces staring out as if warning of the fate that likely awaits the film's teen protagonists.

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HIDDEN TRUTHS: JOHN PILGER AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY

I Am Not Your Negro

Sat 26 Oct 20:35; Sat 9 Nov 15:30;

Thu 21 Nov 18:30

Seniors' Free Talk: The Quiet Mutiny + intro and Q&A with author Anthony Hayward

Mon 28 Oct 11:45

Seniors' Free Matinee: The Last Day + intro with author Anthony Hayward

Mon 28 Oct 14:00

The Pilger Effect

Mon 28 Oct 18:15

The War You Don't See

Mon 28 Oct 20:35; Sat 16 Nov 18:10

Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy + Palestine Is Still the Issue

Sat 2 Nov 15:00

The Golden Dream La jaula de oro

Tue 5 Nov 20:45; Thu 14 Nov 18:10;

Sun 24 Nov 15:30

Lousy Little Sixpence + Utopia

(+ pre-recorded intro)

Sun 10 Nov 14:50

Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia +

Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror

Mon 18 Nov 18:10

Burp! Pepsi v Coke in the Ice Cold War

+ Flying the Flag: Arming the World

Sat 23 Nov 17:45

The Coming War on China

Sat 23 Nov 20:10; Fri 29 Nov 18:15

The Ballymurphy Precedent

Tue 26 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by director Callum

Macrae); Sat 30 Nov 12:20

The documentaries in this season contain distressing scenes of both violence and racism related to the events they cover

With thanks to

John Pilger, Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird, Matt Hird, David Boardman, Marcus Prince

Programme texts compiled by John Pilger, Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird, Matt Hird, David Boardman, Maggi Hurt and David Somerset

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In one of the most gruelling sequences, Sara is molested by a gang of thieves who have halted the train the trio are travelling on and robbed them of their few remaining possessions. The thieves identify Sara as an *hembra* (a term habitually used to denote a female animal), and proceed to herd her into a lorry alongside other young women, to be driven away to what looks like a grim future in prostitution. Her disappearance is both abrupt and violent; there is no sermonising or resolution, simply the sound of her screams.

Quemada-Díez's lean script (realised with Gibrán Portela and Lucía Carreras) was forged from the personal testimonies of some 600 migrants, and the film keenly positions Juan, Samuel and Sara as part of a large wave of human traffic moving en masse towards the US border. They are dwarfed by the landscape, by the large goods trains they struggle to jump aboard, by the imposing adults who seek to make money from them and by the police with batons and guns who harass them, so that the viewer is constantly reminded of their vulnerability as children. In one very moving sequence, the teenagers pose in front of a painted backdrop to have their photographs taken. Samuel waves a Guatemalan flag as he and Sara strike smug stances in front of the Stars and Stripes; Juan poses on a toy horse in a cowboy outfit, toy gun in hand, against a pastoral image that bears little resemblance to the hostile environment he encounters on his travels. The film posits Juan's materialistic approach to life – the camera repeatedly picks out his prized cowboy boots – against the more spiritual attitude of Chauk, the Tzotzil Indian who joins them on their journey. And while the film steers clear of easy messages, the macho Juan repeatedly finds his beliefs challenged by Chauk's less aggressive philosophy. It is to Quemada-Díez's credit that he is able to suggest a softening of Juan's individualism without this ever appearing mawkish.

The director withheld aspects of the storyline from the non-professional cast in veritable Loach manner, and this secures an acting register that never appears forced or theatricalised. There is something brittle in López's Juan – pursed lips and poses that point to a masculinity he never inhabits comfortably – while Martínez's observant gaze positions her within the long line of child protagonists whose physical and emotional journey functions as the backbone of the film's narrative. The camera gives the viewer the perspective of a fellow traveller, the lens working at eye level to ensure a sense of intimacy as it captures the dynamics and tensions of the teenagers' evolving relationships. It dances alongside the laughing trio as they party joyfully at a local festa by firelight; it observes Juan's furtive glances towards Chauk as Sara teaches him Spanish; it captures the expansive landscape from the roof of the train.

At every stage of the journey, the teenagers encounter hostility, danger, intimidation and harassment – they are arrested, slapped and handcuffed by police, dragged off a train and stripped of their belongings by a gang of thieves. Their position as children all too rarely inspires any kind of protective instinct in the adults they meet. There are occasional instances of kindness: fruit is thrown to them by farm workers; a man allows them safe passage through his house; a priest hands them a food package. But Quemada-Díez doesn't linger on these moments, presenting them instead just as respites along the way.

The bleakness of the protagonists' situation is underscored by Jacobo Lieberman and Leo Heiblum's music. At the end, a melancholy melodic line played by a solo cello brings the film full circle. In the opening moments we saw Juan picking up Samuel, who was eking out a living scavenging on a giant mound of rubbish. He ends the film undertaking a similar occupation, sweeping scraps from the floor of an American meat-packing plant. The irony isn't lost on the viewer but, as with so much else in this remarkable debut feature, the association is suggested rather than reinforced. In *The Golden Dream*, Quemada-Díez opts for the understated and allows gritty social realism to meet epic poetry in a tale in which the backstories of the manual labour underpinning California's economy are firmly positioned centre stage.

Maria Delgado, *Sight and Sound*, July 2014