

The so-called ‘city symphony’ film has long sought to represent urban landscapes as a form of complex machinery. Humans are merely the fuel that help these machines to operate. With his film *El Gran Movimiento*, director Kiro Russo reimagines the formal structures of the classic city symphony, and recasts the Bolivian capital of La Paz as something closer to a hybrid of organic and mechanised matter. He retains the crushing sense of alienation that comes from entering an urban landscape, particularly for those who have been displaced – forcibly or otherwise – from a rural habitat. Yet he also draws on the manifold inequalities and incompatibilities that come with adapting to life in the capitalist mecca, and he focuses on those vital parts of the machine that are broken, or have been fixed using incorrect parts.

The film opens on a slow zoom into central La Paz – warm Super 16 images are overlaid with a discordant mesh of music and the sharp clamour of diegetic sound from a protest. A group of ex-miners have tramped for a week from country to city with the aim of demanding that their jobs be reinstated. From this opening scene, the sublime indifference that exudes from the looming concrete edifices that besiege the workers from all sides alerts them to the futility of their mission, despite the moderate attention given to them by the local media. One of their number, Elder, falls ill as the journey has exacerbated the symptoms of his industrial disease. The loose plot of the film then proceeds to chart the efforts of his loquacious godmother to soothe Elder’s various ills by whatever means necessary.

In its presentation of soused witch doctors and belief systems grounded in suspicion and conspiracy, *El Gran Movimiento* is at once a celebration of folkloric idiosyncrasy and a lamentation for the moments when this ethereal way of being clashes with the coldly utilitarian functions of the cityscape and, tragically, the human body. The film is as much a reimagining of tone as it is of form, presenting life as both a protracted death rattle and a joyful excuse for dance and festivities: a state in which elation and desolation exist as one. Looking at the city through a psychedelic lens – as Russo does here – can be both terrifying and transcendent, and as these two divergent ways of life jostle for supremacy, we see light in the darkness and darkness in the light. The film is as interested in the poetics of death (via Elder’s tragic fate) as it is in the death of poetry (modernism’s blind consumption of tradition). It’s not about ironies as much as it is about opposites, and the place where opposites meet.

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