

# *The Hummingbird Project*: Speed is of the essence

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*Written and directed by Kim Nguyen*

In *The Hummingbird Project*, two cousins engaged in High-Frequency Trading set out to build a straight fiber-optic cable line between the Kansas Electronic Exchange Data Center and New York Stock Exchange servers, located in New Jersey. They intend to shave milliseconds off the time it takes to make stock market trades and thus earn themselves a fortune.

Vincent (Jesse Eisenberg), a fast-talking salesman-operator, and Anton Zaleski (Alexander Skarsgård), a technological wizard, dream up the scheme to dig the four-inch wide, 1,000-mile long tunnel. Having secured the promise of financing from a prominent Wall Street figure, they quit their jobs working for hedge fund manager Eva Torres (Salma Hayek), much to the latter's displeasure. Indeed, Torres threatens the most dire consequences if the pair strike out on their own.

Vincent and Anton hire drilling expert Mark Vega (Michael Mando) as their chief organizer and contractor. To achieve the super-speed they require, the cousins inform Vega, "It has to be a straight line." "Mountains?" "Straight!" "Rivers?" "Straight!" "Swamps?" "Straight, straight, straight, straight!"

One portion of *The Hummingbird Project* (the film derives its title from the fact that, as a character explains, 16 milliseconds is "one single flap of a hummingbird's wing") is taken up with Vincent's efforts to obtain rights from thousands of landowners, drill through the unforgiving Appalachian Mountains and generally pursue the building of the line itself. On top of those challenges, he is diagnosed with an advanced illness.

Meanwhile, secluded in a hotel room and separated from his increasingly frustrated wife, Anton confronts the challenge of reducing the time it takes to convey information halfway across the country by a few

milliseconds. Eva tracks him down, intimidates the unfortunate, quasi-autistic man and eventually sees to his arrest on trumped up charges.

When crises arise, and major ones do, Vincent reminds Anton of his dream, "Country home on a hill, small road, hummingbirds." The idea is to construct the fiber-optic line, make a bundle of money and then depart the rat race once and for all. Needless to say, all doesn't go as planned.

Aside from the difficulties posed by Eva Torres and her machinations, which include plans to organize even faster transmissions from Kansas to New Jersey, certain moral or ethical problems arise.

Explaining to a waitress (Tiio Horn) what he is working on, Anton offers the example of someone wanting to buy shares "in a lemon company in Zimbabwe." By having the fastest line, "I outrun the other traders from Kansas to New York. I buy shares that sell for less than \$10. I race back and sell them to you for \$10." If he does 200,000 transactions like that every day, he would earn "roughly \$500 million a year."

The waitress asks, "But what about the farmers? ... What do they get out of this?" After Anton patiently explains that the "lemon farmers aren't relevant ... mathematically, for our business plan," she comments, "I guess I wouldn't wanna be one of those farmers in Zimbabwe who's mathematically irrelevant to your business plan."

Later, Vincent runs up against a stubborn Amish farmer (Johan Heldenbergh) who refuses to sell a one-foot strip of land to the project, even for the remarkable sum of \$230,000. The elder calmly explains to the excitable Vincent, "High speed is not our priority, and money can be a source of conflict. ... We don't believe that making things faster makes things better. ... We

believe that all this new technology makes us more distant and isolated.”

Things go badly. In the end, the cousins tend to see the error of their greedy, shortsighted ways. As Anton tells his former boss, “It’s all fake, Eva.”

In the film’s concluding moments, Anton explains he has come up with some ideas for “neutrino messaging,” which would carry information “to New York in something like 9 milliseconds.” He adds, “We would own Wall Street.” But, Vincent asks, “what do we do when we own Wall Street?” Anton immediately replies, “We burn it to the ground, and bring all the lemon farmers, roast marshmallows by the fire.”

It’s a decent enough sentiment, but the rest of the film, including the somewhat moralizing, back-to-nature tone of the Amish scenes, doesn’t do all that much to back it up or prepare an audience for it.

Nguyen (*The Marsh*, *Truffe*, *The City of Shadows*, *War Witch*, *Eye on Juliet*) born in Montreal, the son of a French-Canadian mother and Vietnamese father, is obviously skilled in the basic elements of filmmaking. His film is decently paced and told, effectively edited and well acted.

One of the problems here is that the central strand of *The Hummingbird Project*’s storyline, the construction of the 1,000-mile line, is something of a dramatic or emotional red herring. It is unlikely that many viewers will develop much sympathy for the cousins and their socially useless project (which turns out to be obsolete), intended to be at the service of such a parasitic and, in the final analysis, socially destructive economic activity as high-frequency trading. The film’s great dramatic question, as to whether Vincent and Anton will achieve their aim, simply does not arouse compelling interest.

The writer-director wants to have it both ways, to create a gripping drama around the digging of the tunnel and then to suggest at the finish it was largely a waste of time and effort. Unhappily, to a certain extent, one tends to end up feeling that way about the work itself.

Nguyen writes in his director’s notes that years before, “I was struck with this amazing premise of people digging thousand-mile long tunnels to try and shave a couple of milliseconds off of the time it took to make their stock market trades. Madness. It immediately made sense to explore if there was a movie to be made around that high concept.”

The filmmaker goes on to explain that little did he realize “how complex bringing this to the screen would be. We talked with experts of every scientific expertise you could imagine: quantum physics experts, fiber optic physicists, highly specialized tunnel digging experts who dig hundred-mile-long, four-inch-wide tunnels for a living. High frequency trading experts dealing with billion-dollar money flows on a daily basis ... Boy, what a ride.”

*The Hummingbird Project* is made with sincerity and perhaps good intentions, but the director’s remarks suggest the essential problem: one-sided concentration on the organizational-technical side of things at the expense of the social element, the actual character and social role of Wall Street trading.

Making a hero out of the Amish farmer is not helpful. The problem with the current organization of life is not “high speed.” In innumerable important fields, including medical research and treatment, communications, the production and distribution of much needed goods and services, speed is of the essence.

The appeal for a return to rural slowness, if this is seriously Nguyen’s theme, will fall on a multitude of deaf ears—in any event, it will not take place. The clock cannot be turned back in such matters. As Trotsky once pointed out, “Travel in a rowboat demands great personal creativity. Travel on a steamship is ‘more monotonous,’ but more comfortable and reliable. Besides, you really won’t make it across the ocean in a rowboat.”

The question of question, as always, is who controls the essential levers of economic life. To combine a rational social structure, free from the drive for profit and all that goes with it, with contemporary technology, that’s the task confronting humanity.



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