

This is an author version.
When citing please refer to the published article, located here:
<https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.39>

FILM REVIEW

FEATURE FILM

Kristof Bilsen, director. *Elephant's Dream*. 2014. 71 minutes. Lingala, French (with English, French, or Dutch subtitles). Democratic Republic of the Congo. Dalton Distribution. €15.00.

At the conclusion of Kristof Bilsen's *Elephant's Dream*, one is reminded of the famous comment of the Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier about Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: a work, he said, that "has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats." The glue in this case is provided by the poignant and at times haunting portrayals of three floor-level civil servants working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): Henriette, a post office counter clerk in the country's capital, Kinshasa; Lieutenant Kasunga, a chief fire officer in Kinshasa; and Simon, a train station officer at Kisantu in Kongo Central Province.

As poorly paid staff members working for nearly defunct state-owned institutions, Henriette, Simon, and Lieutenant Kasunga spend the film (much like Beckett's protagonists) stoically searching for meaning and purpose in the most abject of circumstances. Henriette's post office has no customers. Lieutenant Kasunga's brigade inhabits a dilapidated fire station. Simon's train station has no more than a few trains passing through.

Yet the parallels to *Waiting for Godot* are not entirely accurate, since there is at least some plot development. Lieutenant Kasunga and his team get called to a fire, only to find there isn't enough pressure for the water to reach the flames before it's too late. Henriette's post office is privatized through a contract with China Telecom, HUAWEI, and Standard Telecom. She is trained, given a new office and a luxurious leather chair, and is excited by the transition, although more than a year later she remains unpaid and is left asking herself, "What can I do to get out of this trap?"

The privatization of state-owned enterprises is a familiar story in the DRC today (and indeed, the world over). The Congolese power, water, and insurance companies are all in varying stages of liberalization following the break-up of long-held state monopolies dating back to the colonial era. *Elephant's Dream*, however, provides no historical or political context or commentary, a silence that saturates the film with a sense of agnosticism about the contemporary condition of the Congolese state. Whether or not it is an entity worth resurrecting is a question that remains unanswered. Perhaps most problematic, however, is the fact that the post office, the fire department, and the railway are three "extreme" cases of Congolese state-owned institutions, all of them "running on their last legs," as the film's website states (www.elephantsdream-film.com). But by portraying them in this way, the film misrepresents the more complex and nuanced reality.

There are other stories that could have been told. For example, the Matadi-Kinshasa Railway reopened in September 2015, following almost a decade without regular service. Curiously, the plans for this relaunch are not referenced by the film, despite the fact that Simon's Kisantu train station is located on this very railway line. A month later, in October 2015, the new state-owned airline company, Congo Airways, began operations that also were in the planning stage when the

film was being produced. Today it runs daily services to and from nine destinations across the DRC and has plans to expand in the near future across Africa as well as to Dubai and Guangzhou. Somewhere in between these extremes lie the national army and police, and government hospitals, schools, and universities. Drawing from this full range of cases would have provided a more complete depiction of the Congolese state today: an entity defined by conflict, contestation, and in some areas, progress. Yet instead the viewer is given examples of only stasis and decay.

This impression is reinforced by the characters' mannerisms and the film's production values. We meet the first character, Henriette, slumped behind her post office counter, gazing vacantly through the glass. Thus begins a recurring motif, as the main characters are presented throughout the film in various postures of inertia and near total stillness, looking past the camera as they deliver their monologues. By the end of the film we are back where we started. Simon is slouched on a chair, staring out across the station platform, gently singing the classic song of the Congolese rumba musician Tabu Ley Rocherau, "Mokolo Nakokufa" (The Day That I'll Die).

Recent promotional material for a screening of the film at the University of Amsterdam declared that "the documentary successfully achieves the feat of taking its viewers far beyond the habitual clichés and into the tough path of a self-reflexive voyage." However, through its own selectivity as to which stories are told and which are left out, and its presentation of the characters within these stories, the film falls precisely into this world of habitual cliché, for what is more clichéd than an ineffective and crumbling African state, no matter how empathetic that portrayal may be? In the final analysis, *Elephant's Dream* offers an all-too-easy ahistorical and apolitical snapshot of the Congolese state that is as misleading and myopic as its human portraits are masterful and compelling.

Ben Radley
International Institute of Social Studies
The Hague, The Netherlands
radley@iss.nl