
FILM AND VIDEO REVIEWS

Elephant's Dream. Directed by **Kristof Bilsen**. (2014). 72 minutes. Colour. Distributed by Documentary Educational Recourses.

Set in Kinshasha, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Elephant's Dream* succeeds in many ways to communicate a sensitive portrait of the everyday reality in a conflict-ridden city. Belgian director Kristof Bilsen follows three civil workers and builds the film's narrative through their stories — accompanied by a quite humane portrait of the city. The film follows Henriette (a post office clerk), Simon (a railway station employee) and 'the Lieutenant' (a fireman) through their daily struggles, frustrations, joys and, significantly, *idleness*.

The director's choice to follow and narrate the stories of three civil servants, in a city in which public infrastructure and state institutions seem to be lying in ruins, does not aim to present merely yet another tragic portrait of state failure, corruption and destruction. The film does not fall for the narratives of violence and destruction that usually dominate filmic representations of the Congo, and chooses instead to look at the city's complex lived reality — which might appear chaotic from the outset. The film is not detached from the largely ruined urban infrastructure of Kinshasha; yet, in attempting to document the inhabitants' lives among those 'ruins', it offers a critical and substantial political commentary of the city's post-colonial present.

The filmmaker has employed a quite longitudinal approach to his filming, as he has been following his characters over a period of three years. In so doing he has managed to document not only change in

the characters' lives (for example, Henriette) but also to capture and appreciate their daily idleness. He often assumes an observational approach in his filming, positioning the protagonists within the pace and the place of their environment. Shots of old letters amongst dust and cobwebs eternally waiting to be picked up, or of old men enjoying the peacefulness at a train station overgrown with long grass, communicate the sense of idleness in the working environments of the three civil servants he follows.

The *Elephant's Dream* is cinematically haunting — with beautiful, dreamy and surreal shots; however, they often verge on romanticizing the places and situations they portray. While this in fact might be seen as a weakness of the film, over all it does anything but romanticize the lives of its protagonists and of the city. The filmic approach in fact functions as a counterweight to the vilifying lens of destruction that usually is employed by films on the Congo or Kinshasha. By contrast, the *Elephant's Dream* offers a picture of the reality of living and working amongst what to an outsider might seem like simply ruins and chaos, and this is precisely its strength.

This film might be of great interest for scholars of conflict-ridden and post-colonial urban realities, as a carefully crafted study of how life goes on, and what it looks and feels like, in a largely destroyed city, but also as a reminder of the fact that *it does go on*. Far from exoticising the city, in employing an almost anthropological sensibility to its approach and through its keen interest in the people's everyday lives, the film may be seen as another small but significant step towards de-colonizing ways

of looking at African cities.

Christos Varvantakis
University of Sussex, U.K.
c.varvantakis@sussex.ac.uk

Leaving Greece. Directed by **Anna Brass**. (2013). Colour. Produced by Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film.

In the Greek port city of Patras, three adolescents attempt freight-hopping, not the old fashioned way on trains, but by jumping on trucks, hoping to catch a ferry to Italy. They are refugees in Greece, not permitted to remain nor allowed to leave. Unable to pay smugglers, they turn to Patras, a symbol of hope and repetitive failure, and for years have unsuccessfully attempted to leave Greece. The documentary is about the three friends, Reza, Kaka and Hossein, who move between Lesvos, Patras and Athens in an effort to leave Greece; but it is also about much more than that.

Leaving Greece is a metaphor for leaving a constant state of waiting. When the departure will be, if it will ever arrive, is unknown. Many of the shots could be from yesterday, a month ago or a year from now. It does not matter for the three friends who are stuck in a rut. When asked what he does with his friends, Kaka, the punky philosopher of the documentary remarks ‘We don’t experience anything new. So we don’t have anything to talk about’. Greece is for him and his friends a place where time stands still, not allowing for the creation of a past or a glimpse into the future. The dream is to move on, to have a dream.

Condemned to wait — even if on the beautiful beaches of Greece — takes its toll. The torture of waiting, sitting and senselessly waiting some more, nothing but

waiting and repetition is terrifying. ‘We’ve wasted so many years already’ says Kaka. Hopeless, he even registers for voluntary deportation, but changes his mind at the last minute. Reza, Kaka and Hossein are suspended lives in a purgatorial state in the theatre of the absurd, senselessly waiting, waiting for something to happen, but not knowing whether anything will ever happen. Europe’s purgatory extends from Lesvos to Patras, testing the patience and courage of these youth, desperately hoping to exit Greece.

Leaving is not easy. It requires courage to leave. Scared, beaten, afraid of police and strangers, they rely upon friends to dissipate their fear. ‘You need guts’ Kaka reminds us, ‘once I’m on the road, I realize how scared I am’. He starts wondering whether ‘maybe the fear is the reason we cannot get out’. Some are able to overcome their fears again and again, and attempt a thousand failures, others remain on the island in hope of gathering the courage for one more attempt. Time only enters the documentary in the love story of Anna and Hossein, and the reunion between Kaka and Hossein.

This film provides a sensitive engagement with unaccompanied youth, by allowing them to speak. It is an indictment of border politics, but it is also a film of hope, strength and friendship. Caught in the world of their elders, Reza, Kaka, Hossein and Anna resist divisive political rhetoric, and rely again and again on trust, friendship and love, whether successful or not, they have not lost hope — yet.

Tugba Basaran
Centre d’Etudes sur Les Conflits, Liberté
et Sécurité, Paris, France
basaran.t@icloud.com

Night Café. Directed by **Ligia Dabul**. (2011). 10 minutes. Colour. Produced by Núcleo de Estudos Cidadania, Trabalho e Arte (NECTAR), Fluminense Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Le café de la nuit by Vincent Van Gogh (The Night Café, 1888) is one of the best known paintings from the period in which he lived in Arles. In several letters, Van Gogh describes to his brother Theo the emotions he wanted to express with the colors and choice of subject. Through these letters this image gained a three-dimensionality that has stimulated interpretations in other media: texts of art criticism, animated films, music and now a short film.

The film *Night Café* was directed by Ligia Dabul in 2011 and is part of the work of the *Núcleo de Estudos Cidadania, Trabalho e Arte – NECTAR*, a study group on citizenship, work and art, at the Fluminense Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFF). Named after Van Gogh's work, the film is the result of an investigation of using filmic language as a research methodology in sociology and anthropology. The movie is an experience in which the research interests of the director and her students combine to produce a kind of ethnographic event. In this event, Van Gogh's artistic production is the starting point for understanding the everyday reality of a bar and its patrons in the 21st century.

Instead of merely conducting a simple interpretation of the painting, the subjective intentions of the artist or a representation of a context of production and reception, the film, along with Van Gogh's painting and texts, becomes a research device. The short film inspires reflections on the

classifications that contradict reality and fiction in film, a subject as old as filmic production itself. Although these classifications are used in the academy mainly as a starting point for interpretations that mark disciplinary boundaries, they build social realities.

Using Van Gogh's letters, as well as an art book with the reproduction of the painting, to elicit reactions from people in the bar, the film challenges disciplinary boundaries and raises interesting methodological issues. The strategies chosen to present this study are consistent with the dissatisfaction that this and other borders pose for an ethnographic film produced by a research group whose main subject of interest is art as social life. Framing, focus, composition and colour, which are important for the composition of the artist's painting, are some of the elements that are also used to construct the film composition.

The rhythm of the painting comes largely from contrasts between red and green. In the film, the rhythm is produced by a contrast between the painter's senses of the night and the bar and the ways these senses can be perceived in the reactions and responses of the people in the bar, as well as in details, which are also in red and green, on the walls, floor, desk, chairs and tables. Light and shadow alternate in the construction of a language that refers less to Van Gogh's nineteenth century than to a twentieth century TV series.

Filming in the bar, near the University, thus becomes a social situation involving different forms of reception of art work — the director's subject of interest — and a confrontation between subjectivity and otherness that is expressed through the

social uses of space and time. The use of Van Gogh's writings presents the painter's intentions about the painting and allow a direct dialogue between different times and spaces, making the people in the bar his informants and interpreters — of the work and of themselves as well.

In 9 minutes and 32 seconds, *Night Café* also confronts continuities and discontinuities in the meanings attributed to art, morality and aesthetics, which unfold at the bar tables, and in conversations and glances among the clients and between them and viewers, who are also part of this film production context.

The observer's participation was established in modern art, such as Van Gogh's, by a vertex outside paintings. In the film it is the people in the bar gazing out of the painting that completes the vertex of the triangle. Observers are both external to and part of the film composition. Included in the depiction, they are essential for the interpretation of and the very existence of the film, transforming the possible classifications of the final product. It is no longer merely an ethnographic film produced by researchers to present the reality experienced by their research subjects. It is a way to present film as a means to transform the everyday lives of the bar goes on any given night. The film thus dialogues, creatively and responsibly, with the sociology of art and culture, but also with filmic production to blur the boundaries that insist on separating producers, observers and research subjects.

Patricia Reinheimer
Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
patriciareinheimer2007@gmail.com

Bruit qui apporte l'argent. Directed by **Konrad Pilot** (2013). 41 minutes. Colour.

Bruit qui apporte l'argent (Noise that Brings Money) profiles a blacksmith and workshop owner in Maroua, Northern Cameroon. He and his workers, who include young apprentices as well as seasoned artisans much older than himself, produce pots, kitchen utensils, wheelbarrows, stoves and other items using 'recycled' scrap metal. The film is largely observational, but a partial narrative develops around the most elaborate of the workshop's products: an 'improved cook stove'. The improved cook stove uses an electric fan to deliver air to charcoal or wood burners to increase fuel efficiency. We follow the *forgeron* as he promotes this invention, a process that brings him into contact with various governmental and non-governmental entities.

The struggle with the logics, vocabularies and requirements of these organizations is one of the more interesting dimensions of the film. In a scene near the end, he stares forlornly at some documents he must fill out to obtain a patent, having been coached about the importance of saying that the invention helps fight desertification and benefits women, to tick the right boxes in the development discourse. The challenges of navigating these environments contrasts with his mastery of the embodied skills of his profession and his capacity for 'low-tech', experience-driven innovation. This contrast is reflected in the inversion of dominant and submissive roles and the extent of *prise de parole* in different settings. In the workshop and in several scenes in the home, the artisan is primarily depicted in monologue,

putting silent employees (and one customer) in their place, or discoursing on the nature of women (who he says ‘always want money’) in the presence of his wife, who manages a clever repartee. Meanwhile, when visiting an NGO and other offices, the artisan remains largely silent.

Although the film endeavours to give voice to the artisan and place him at the centre, this effort is handicapped by the reliance on French as a medium and the limited exploration of the processes of apprenticeship and innovation. The title, *Bruit qui apporte l’argent*, reflects this twofold shortcoming. First, although it is a phrase the master himself uses, it has an unsophisticated ‘pidgin’ ring to it. How different would the artisan sound expressing himself in Fulfulde? Second, in using the word ‘bruit’ he appears to be referring not to the undifferentiated din that emanates from the workshop, but to the differing pitch and timbre of pieces of metal when struck during the work. The dominance of medium- and wide-angle shots does little to distinguish different gestures, making it difficult to get beneath the noise to the subtleties of different sounds. It would have been interesting to learn more about the terms of apprenticeship and the processes of learning and innovation through which the artisan has forged his authority and success. Was he himself an apprentice? Did he benefit from a technical training programme that was part of a development project? Is he in any way connected by kinship to the blacksmithing profession, a sign of its persistence as a stigmatized professional specialization of certain lineages in northern Cameroon? Late in the film we see an improved cook stove being made, we do

not learn where the idea came from or what prototypes or iterations it has gone through.

Thus, although the film focuses almost solely on the artisan’s perspective, the recounting of workshop life is somewhat superficial and the narratives the artisan provides are at times stylized and oversimplified.

Jamie Furniss
University of Edinburgh, U.K.
Jamie.Furniss@ed.ac.uk

Messages Musicaux- Le Sénégal en transformation. Directed by **Cornelia Strasser**. (2013). 72 minutes. Colour. Produced by Cornelia Strasser, Rolf Schmid, FAMA FILM AG.

This documentary depicts how musical expression, as a central cultural habitus within social networks, can intersect with the establishment of hegemonies, hierarchies and revolts. This is the case of traditional singers and current revolutionary subjectivities. Even if the distinction between traditions from the past and modern practices seems obvious, the film shows that both can coexist in Senegal today, without contradicting each other. To understand how, we probably need to focus on the process of permanent ‘transformation’, as the subtitle of the film indicates.

The film juxtaposes Awadi, a pan-Africanist rapper and Facoly, an R&B singer, with three different old-style singers. Known as *griots*, these traditional singers transmit messages to their own society to declare their loyalty to the tribal or ethnic élites to whom they were and are still attached, and thus redefine hierarchies within the broader and highly complex social network. One of the three griots is a

woman, who is committed to singing and transmitting the glory and the morals of the Muslim religion, by expressing her devotion to a local Sufi saint. The three act as *porte-parole personae* who are in charge of redefining and maintaining the values, morals and principals on which people will base their path-dependent lives. In opposition to the *griots* the two other singers are self-reflexive about their role and status as singers within this society. The rapper Awadi sings to motivate and urge revolt among his compatriots by promoting a pan-African dream; while R&B singer Facoly shapes a strategy for personal life, free of restrictions and obligations imposed by highly conservative religious interpretations. Her music is targeted mostly at Senegal women in an effort to have them reconsider their obedience to traditional responsibilities and morals.

The juxtaposition of the narratives of these singers seems like a safe multivocal technique to follow given that the visual ethnography project faces a deeply complex environment traversed by multiple hegemonies, which are established as 'traditions'. These include African empires, the European colonial past, conversion to Islam, submission to unequal Western modernity, the self-realization of the devastating effects of globalization, which has caused intense precariousness in suburban regions and a lack of security for migrants. The film manages to resonate the confusion and complexity under which people in Senegal and the surrounding African countries live. In addition, by portraying the local habitus of musical messages that invest in vocal and embodied expressions through singing and dancing, we sense the presence of joyful lives and

happiness even amidst deep poverty. We are pleased to discover that contradictions can coexist without polarizing one category against the other. We see the R&B singer having an open discussion about her life with the female griot, who is defending conservative religious values, without risking a conflict. This exchange can be perceived as an excellent example of good practices of tolerance, within a deeply heterogeneous environment. For all these reasons, the film is a valuable source of ethnographic data, presenting comparisons and reflections about the impact of musical habitus on the management of differences and hierarchies within a deeply heterogeneous African environment.

The film manages to translate the local situation through the use of sound and dance accompanied by the lyrics and the powerful embodied experiences of the protagonists. The juxtaposition of the characters clearly expresses a visually pleasing ethnography project. However, the safeness of the juxtapositions at times becomes a trap that reproduces stereotypical distinctions between past and present, tradition and modernity, men and women. While these may only be triggered in audiences' perceptions and are not necessarily intended by the ethnographer, she could have gone deeper into the souls of her characters to avoid this problem. Perhaps by showing contradictions within the narratives of the protagonists, the ethnographer and the audience can enjoy the charm of their ambiguity, reflect productively and re-inscribe their own lives. A device that could be helpful may be the use of fragmentary visible or vocal interventions from the filmmaker, and it is a pity we do not notice her in the film at all.

Such self-reflective devices are always useful, to avoid any exoticism. Moreover, to be engaged and exposed alongside our interlocutors and protagonists is not only a professional challenge; it can also provide a fruitful trans-individual experience of mutual empathy and understanding.

Fotini Tsibiridou
University of Macedonia-Thessaloniki,
Greece
ft@uom.gr