

Associate Directors presents

# Elephant's Dream



The Republic of Congo is a country mainly represented by stories of violence, rape, rebels and crime. In *Elephant's Dream*, director Kristof Bilsen takes us beyond these usual reports and provides poetic and compassionate insight into a country in transition, as seen through the microcosm of three State-owned institutions and its public sector workers in the third largest city in Africa, Kinshasa.

*Elephant's Dream* tells the story of three public sector-workers in a rail station, the central post office and the only existing fire station in Kinshasa. Regardless of their painful working conditions, these workers show humanity, pride, humor, and above all strength to carry on in times of deep crisis.

The film depicts a country in transition, a State living on the verge of chaos. Amid this chaos, however, the film is able to provide a poetic narrative. It is a contemporary fairy tale about perseverance and dignity during times of crisis.

At times surreal, at times hopeful, this film will reveal a truly surprising perspective on lives lived beyond the everyday chaos.

a documentary by  
**KRISTOF BILSEN**

**"Elephant's Dream** by Kristof Bilsen masterfully creates a dreamlike listlessness, sad and funny, that gently hints at great historical tragedy. A beautiful film."

**Joshua Oppenheimer,**  
director *Act Of Killing* / *The Look of Silence*

# Elephant's Dream

## synopsis

***Elephant's Dream*** is a portrait about three State-owned institutions and their workers in DR Congo. The interwoven stories of a female post office clerk in the dilapidated central post office, two colleagues at the railway station, and the group of firemen in the only fire station provide insight into their daily lives and survival in the third largest city of Africa, Kinshasa.

The story of Henriette, the post office clerk, is our leading narrative that drives the film. We follow her from her non-existent job as a counter clerk in the post office until the inauguration of a new money-transfer-service of the post office in 2012 and Henriette's detachment to a tiny new office in 2013.

That narrative is symbolic for Henriette's personal development but also embodies the wider perspective of an era of *Modernization* and privatization of the Congolese State. Around this leading narrative, we construct the storylines of the firemen working in hardship at the only existing fire station in Kinshasa and the story of the guard Simon and his friendship with his colleague Nzai at the peaceful remote train station in the countryside, 3 hours off Kinshasa city.

By interweaving these 3 narratives we are let into a world that is so different from ours, yet at the same time so familiar and universal. Together with Henriette at the Post-Office, Simon at the Rail Station, and the fire brigade, we wonder how this society copes with the current situation and how it will revive. Together with our characters we feel the impact of foreign powers and see how little there might be left for the Congolese to manage themselves.

Although these three government-owned institutions are running on their last legs, the film allows for a surprisingly poetic and empathetic look at a State in decline. Yet, it also makes us witness the small but apparent moments of change and revolution, and at the same time functioning as a mirror to what is happening in the Western world.





# Elephant's Dream

An Introduction by Omar Ba

A fascinating Congo with its rich history, branded by cultural and economic plunder by the colonial administration as much as by the present political class, has been filmed by Kristof Bilsen. He chooses to reveal Congo's true richness to the viewer.

With dignity and honesty the characters take the audience along in their insecurities, fight and hopes for a better future.

The documentary *Elephant's Dream* approaches in an intimate and realistic way the characters' everyday lives. Their expectations, disillusion, hopes and dreams about a country in which they are daily confronted with a State that until now has not been able to fulfill its people's needs. Despite insecurities, they fulfill duty-bound and dignified their role in an ideal State, of which there are - until today - no signs.

As Frantz Fanon once said, the resurrection of the African continent lies in Congo: „**If Africa were a weapon, Congo would be the trigger**”.

Kristof Bilsen takes the audience along without prejudice or misplaced paternalism on an encounter with those who will bring about change in Congo. A land on its way to write its own history thanks to the resistance and hope of a people who refuse to become the image of those who want to enforce a history on them, in which they have never played the leading part.

- Omar Ba

*former president African Platform and currently consultant in Diversity Policies and Transnational Entrepreneurship*

“**Elephant's Dream** feels urgent when we see ourselves in the shoes of Henriette, Simon and the Lieutenant and find ourselves in our own hindering institutions. Here, we unite. For technology is a gift and a curse no matter where we are. Time swallows us all. And the Elephant's Dream resides as a small facet in every one of us.”

Samantha O'Connor  
Culture Journalist/Blogger  
[onewomanarmy.ca](http://onewomanarmy.ca)

# Elephant's Dream

## main locations



**A railway station where only rarely a train passes, a post office where no one delivers mail, and a fire station that is hardly equipped for firefighting. These are the primary locations of *Elephant's Dream*. Each is tied to a main character. Each has a story to tell.**

The railway station as well as the post office and the fire station were all implemented as part of the Belgian colonization until the 1960s. Now, they are merely empty remnants of history. But as the ongoing privatization of Congolese institutions questions the role of the State, these State-owned institutions are at the centre of change.

Henriette, the post-office clerk, is the first to experience this revolution as the post office is modernized by the Chinese. At first the change brings hope to Henriette and the other employees, but soon it becomes evident that previous problems such as unpaid wages are not so easily resolved in the new system. At this point the question arises who will eventually take over the National Rail Services and the fire station and at what cost?

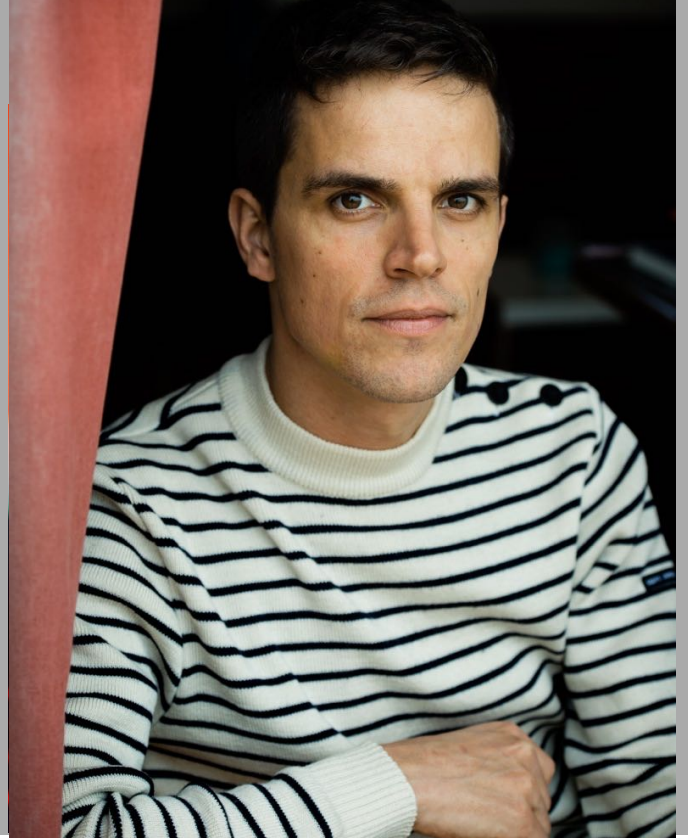


*Simon, the train station guard, has big plans to earn extra money by fixing up a car.*



# Elephant's Dream

filmmaker Kristof Bilsen



**Kristof Bilsen** (Director, Co-Producer) completed a filmmaking BA in Brussels (2002) and then worked as a cinematographer, editor and director in contemporary theatre and dance, where he collaborated with Peter Missotten, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Meg Stuart, amongst other artists, and also co-directed several plays and dance performances for youngsters.

His first documentary *Three Women*, a film about female detainees in Ghent prison, was shortlisted for the Henri Storck Prize in 2005 and shown twice on Belgian National Television. In January 2010 he was selected to attend a workshop tutored by Werner Herzog in Los Angeles. He then studied at the prestigious National Film and Television School (UK) where he graduated with top marks doing his Masters in Documentary Direction.

His previous work includes: *Three Women* (Nominated in Belgium's Henri Storck Awards), *Parallel Lives* and *The Perfect Belgian* (Best of Fest, One World Romania) and the short film *White Elephant* (Audience Award, Dinard Film Festival and Nanook Grand Prize, Jean Rouch International Film Festival).

"One of the most tender and intense films I've seen in ages – the agony and the scars of colonialism are most artfully captured in a true film d' auteur."

**Hubert Sauper**

(Darwin's Nightmare/ We come as Friends)

[www.kristofbilsen.com](http://www.kristofbilsen.com)  
[www.limerickfilms.com](http://www.limerickfilms.com)

# Interview with the director

***Elephant's Dream* is a very poetic picture of a country that can hardly be called poetic. Why did you choose to take this approach?**

As Congo is a country mainly represented by stories of violence, rape, rebels and crime, I am convinced that this film will add an alternative view to the scope; by showing the daily life of State-workers in a metropolitan city, without earning enough to make ends meet. After I made a short descriptive portrait about the Post-Office in Kinshasa (2010) I felt I needed to expand this to a feature length in order to elaborate on the complexity and the various layers present in this story, giving it the depth it deserves.

The film doesn't contain any bold political statements, but is nevertheless politically relevant. The fact that support for this film has come from so many different sources proves that, in times of global crisis, ***Elephant's Dream*** is much more universal than we could have ever imagined.

***It is a story told by the Congolese in the most engaging poetic and truthful way and from their point-of-view.***

Now everything has been filmed, it is very rewarding that we found the dramatic ingredients to build a solid narrative and yet we didn't forget about our meditative and cinematic approach.

**How should we interpret the title, *Elephant's Dream*?**

First, an elephant is a very large animal and as Congo is a huge part of Africa, you could say Congo is an elephant. Furthermore, an elephant is an animal with great memory and this film provides insight into the collective memory, the legacy of Congo. The Belgian colonization is very much embedded in this legacy. Although I never had the intention of taking stock of the colonial legacy, it is nevertheless subtly embedded in the narrative. Despite this legacy and the terrible living conditions

in Congo, people still have hopes of a better life. They have a dream.

A Congolese theatre director and friend noted: "We Congolese are actually true experts in crisis, yet this time around it might be the time for Europe and the Western world to become humble and curious towards the African Continent to see and learn from each other whilst living the day to day crisis."

**Yet, I wouldn't call *Elephant's Dream* a very hopeful film. Or is it?**

It's true that it's not a film with the typical happy ending we Westerners are used to. However, the fact that these people survive and don't lose hope in the most difficult circumstances is a very powerful message of hope. I think it shows the potential of this great country. With some goodwill, the situation could change and I think it will be the Congolese who bring about this change.

***Congo's richness does not lie in the cobalt or in its mines, but in the people themselves.***

The Congolese are very aware of their situation and strive to change it, but often remain seemingly passive. This is some kind of forced passiveness that comes from the need to be careful. Congolese dictatorship has penetrated all institutions. Not only the government, but many people benefit from the system. This entails that people themselves carry out this dictatorship. As a consequence, there is mutual supervision and distrust. People are forced to go about change carefully, but that doesn't mean there is none. Talking of reconciliation might be interpreted as naive by a western audience, but is just as much a form of contestation as a loud protest; it's just a more careful one.



**Criticism is not welcome in a dictatorship. Yet, people do speak out against their conditions in *Elephant's Dream*. Was it easy to gain their trust?**

They want their stories to be told, but are very careful to whom they tell it to. As I am obviously a foreigner, it was easier for them to speak up. However, these conversations couldn't just take place at their home or work office, that was too intrusive. The most neutral environment was a domain that belonged to Capuchin friars, so that's where I recorded all conversations. I deliberately chose to make audio-only recordings, which made the setting more intimate. A camera would have been very confronting for my narrators.

Getting access to the institutions was actually more difficult. In Congo, there is an institutionalized dictatorship and it's not easy to penetrate this system. There was a lot of red tape, power play, and even some intimidation.

**The film focuses on three characters. Why these three?**

First of all, it was very important to me that women had a voice as well. Politics are often dominated by male discourse and wanted to avoid this in my film. Second, I was not looking for people who would plea their terrible conditions and ask for help, but who could make the abstract subject of a dysfunctional, post-colonial state tangible and accessible to the audience. The fire brigade lieutenant touched me by the way he can put his almost humiliating working conditions into words. At the train station, I just fell in love with the poetic power of these two friends, with totally different characters, doing their job, which mostly consists of waiting. This just fitted so well into the atmosphere I wanted to create in *Elephant's Dream*. Finally, I think Henriette, the post office worker, beautifully embodies the modernization, the transition from the old to a new system. Whether this new system is better, remains to be seen.



“Many stories matter.  
Stories have been used to  
dispossess and to malign.  
But stories can also be used to  
empower, and to humanize.  
Stories can break the dignity of a  
people.  
But stories can also repair that  
broken dignity.”

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

# Elephant's Dream



***Elephant's Dream*** is a production of **Associate Directors**, an independent production company based in Antwerp, Belgium. Associate Directors focuses on (co-)producing creative documentaries for an international audience. The productions concentrate on social relevant issues and cultural in-depth stories. Many of the films from Associate Directors travel to the different corners of the world as they are invited by acknowledged festivals. Since 2007 Associate Directors has released more than 15 titles as (co-)producer.

Associate Directors was founded in 1991 and combines today the solid experience of both filmmakers and producers Mark Daems, Jan Lapeire and Bram Crols. They frequently participate in international and national industry panels, juries, workshops and pitching fora.

Associate Directors is founding partner of Flanders Doc, uniting documentary filmmakers and documentary producers in Flanders, Belgium. Associate Directors has built a constructive relation with international broadcasters, funding institutions and many distribution channels.

[www.adirector.eu](http://www.adirector.eu)

***Elephant's Dream*** was co-produced by Mike Lerner (Roast Beef productions) and Marion Hänsel (Man's Films). **Roast Beef Productions** has produced films in many countries from the Middle East to South America and from Central Asia to the Far East. Mike Lerner produced the feature documentaries *Afghan Star*, winner of an Audience and Directing Award at Sundance 2009 and *Hell and Back Again*, which won several prizes and was nominated for the Academy Awards. Mike Lerner is also the director of *Pussy Riot, A Punk Prayer*.

**Man's Films** was set up in 1977, by Belgian filmmaker Marion Hänsel, in order to make her first short film *Equilibres*. *The Bed* was her first feature film. Hänsel also produced all of the ten films she directed, e.g. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, as well as feature films of other directors. She has won many international prizes.

**Limerick Films** is a boutique production company and produces universal stories artfully told, screened internationally and pitched at renowned sessions worldwide: amongst them IDFA FORUM and Sheffield MeetMarket.

[www.roastbeef.tv](http://www.roastbeef.tv)  
[www.marionhansel.be](http://www.marionhansel.be)  
[www.limerickfilms.com](http://www.limerickfilms.com)



# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

**Review:** *'Three ordinary stories are combined in this quite extraordinary documentary'*

By Boyd Van Hoeij (April 28th, 2015)

**THE**  
*Hollywood*  
**REPORTER**

**Belgian director Kristof Bilsen's documentary looks at public-service workers in the Congolese capital Kinshasa, Africa's third-largest city.**

**Three employees of state-owned institutions in the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo are the nominal subject of *Elephant's Dream*, a feature documentary from Flemish director Kristof Bilsen. But between the lines of these coolly observant tales of a female post-office worker, a firefighter and two security guards at a sleepy railway station, lies a wealth of more revealing stories about everyday life in Kinshasa. Already making the festival rounds, this Hot Docs title should appeal to upscale broadcasters and outlets specialized in documentaries while turning Bilsen into a name to watch.**

Henriette works at the central post office in Kinshasa but her days are filled with waiting for customers that never show up. A telling shot -- the crisp cinematography was handled by Bilsen himself -- shows some letters waiting to be collected that have disappeared under a thick layer of years of dust and cobwebs.

At the Bas Congo stop, so few trains pass that the station has become a place where old men gather to enjoy peace and quiet and a small group of students comes to study, with Simon and his security-guard colleague Nzai having hardly anything to do but occasionally chase some poor kid from the tracks because a train might be coming ("might" being the operative word here).

At the headquarters of the Kinshasa firefighters, things are possibly even sadder than at the post office or train station, as their red trucks are parked on a square surrounded by what's left of their buildings -- which, irony of ironies, literally went up in smoke some years ago. "We will always be late," laments the most eloquent and perceptive of the employees that Bilsen interviews, Lieutenant Kasunga; there's only one actual fire station in a sprawling city of some nine million inhabitants, and there are no hydrants anywhere so they need to keep going back for water.

The first third of the film simply observes the workers during their long days of not doing much at all, while interviews are heard in voice-over as the workers complain about wages, corruption and income equality. One astounding sequence, which Bilsen films in his signature, politely detached manner of full and medium shots that lets viewers analyze what they're seeing for themselves, sees some people arrive at the post office to finally collect the first 10% of their wages from August of two years earlier.

Indeed, there's a sense that it's a miracle people manage to scrape by at all, since having a state job in DRC does not seem to guarantee any regular income. Surprisingly, for Western viewers anyway, interviewees don't seem bitter or angry about it but instead are content to have a job at all and resigned to the fact they'll get paid if and when they'll get paid. "When you wait a lot, men's minds will eventually rebel," says Kasunga, before blaming the colonial period for the attitude of the Congolese toward work. But there's no evidence on screen that a revolution will happen anytime soon.

Part of what might quell a rebellion is, of course, hope for a better future, as illustrated in the film's second half, when the grimy post office is transformed into a squeaky-clean money-transfer agency financed by Chinese and other foreign investors. Henriette, who, like many of her compatriots, is deeply religious, praises the Lord she was chosen to train for a whole year to become an employee there. But what initially might look very positive ends up being more of the same, much like the fire brigade's attempt to put down out a conflagration that Bilsen captures as well, with bumbling, clearly not very well-trained or organized firefighters using equipment that has seen better days.

Thankfully, the film maintains a semi-detached quality throughout, never overtly suggesting that that raging fire -- not to mention the firefighters' own HQ that burnt down -- have any direct metaphorical meanings. But also because of its precision editing, courtesy of Eduardo Serrano, this portrait of a handful of people trying to get by in dead-end jobs with occasional wages manages to suggest a wealth of information about the climate, atmosphere, daily struggles and modest dreams of ordinary folk in Kinshasa, the DRC or sub-Saharan Africa in general. Colonialism might be over but what has replaced it isn't pretty, either.

# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

### **Review: 'Elephant's Dream' Is a Necessary Addition to the Pantheon of Documentaries About the Congo**

By Zeta Blay (March 17th, 2015)

**Indiewire**  
**Shadow and Act**

As documentary subjects go, the Congo has long been a country ripe with compelling material. Colonization, civil war, genocide, an ongoing fight for oil and environmental conservation (most recently explored in the Oscar-nominated “Virunga”) have all created the basis for hundreds upon hundreds of harrowing true stories. These stories are captivating and important, yes, but they also operate by depicting a reality where life in the Congo is fraught with the constant threat of violence and destruction.

“Elephant’s Dream” directed by British-Belgian filmmaker Kristof Bilsen, seeks to reconcile this heightened reality with the everyday realities of living and surviving in the Congo. The film alludes to the fog of destruction subtly, but it doesn’t dwell on the physical violence and instability of the Congo’s past. This is demonstrated early on, as we watch postal worker Henriette on her daily bus ride to work in the busy, perpetually congested streets of Kinshasa. As she rides, looking out the window at one of the city’s infamously bad traffic jams, a hip hop song plays in the background, the rapper singing in French: “You suddenly left Kinshasa and your loved-ones/They chased our tribes as they once chased Christians/Now your son is considered a murderer but a genius/Aged 13 he finds peace in his M16.”

But, instead of following that often explored narrative, this documentary follows the lives of tree workers in three different areas of the public sector: the Post Office, the Railway Station, and the lone, woefully ill-equipped fire station in Kinshasa. Documenting their daily lives and daily dramas, the film probes the realities of working in a country with crumbling infrastructure and a constant lack of resources.

Perhaps to offset the bleakness Bilsen chooses a dreamy, deeply cinematic style in filming the three subjects, framing them in symmetrical, artfully composed tableaux. Henriette, the postal worker, is introduced peering blankly through the cloudy glass at her work counter, the green in her ankara dress enhanced against the faded, peeling pastel walls of the postal office. Visually, it’s all incredibly beautiful to look at, though at times an overly romanticized approach.

Luckily, whenever the film tends to drift into these waters, its once again anchored by the very subjects it follows. Henriette, railway workers Simon and Nzai, and the stoic firefighter featured on the doc’s evocative poster are, rightfully so, the heartbeat of this film, rather than visual props. Their internal monologues are played constantly throughout the narrative via voice overs, telling stories of their past and voicing frustrations about their present realities - lack of wages, outdated practices, lack of government support.

What’s important to point out, and what ultimately makes this documentary work, is that it isn’t a wholly bleak portrait. It’s aesthetic beauty does much to elevate its subjects, but so does the exploration of solutions to the many problems that the subjects face, solutions that hinge of the three workers on empowering themselves by taking matters into their own hands. In the pantheon of documentaries about the Congo, “Elephant’s Dream” is an imperfect but incredibly necessary addition.

*(Zeta Blay is a Ghanaian-born film and culture writer based in New York. She is a regular contributor to Huffington Post, Africa Style Daily, and Slant Magazine. She runs a personal movie blog, Film Memory, and co-hosts the podcast Two Brown Girls.)*



# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

**Review: "What docs to watch for HotDocs 2015"**

**By Liam Lacey**

**April 22th 2015 Hot Docs**

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL**



Kristof Bilsen's eloquent, enigmatic portrait of a city and civilization in slow collapse is set in the city of Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, focusing on three civic institutions: Henriette sings to herself and stares through the glass cage of her box-office window, Simon and Nzai hold court at the train depot, and an unhappy fireman sits on a chair at the city's sole, ill-equipped station. Each of them ruminates, usually in voiceover, about their hopes and frustrations. Shot in a series of long, perfectly composed takes, *Elephant's Dream* is suffused with an almost petrified calm. Though a rap song rails about the horrors of child soldiers, here in the city the talk is of Chinese investment and technological progress. The tone and style is that of a dream, frozen between the dark past and whatever the future might bring.



**Review: "What docs to watch for HotDocs 2015"**

**By Mark Hanson**

**April 27th 2015 Hot Docs**



TORONTO'S ONLINE FILM MAGAZINE

The capital city of the Congo, Kinshasa, is fraught with conflict and disillusion in the aftermath of the civil wars.

But while crime and uncertainty permeate the streets, many citizens just try to get by in their day-to-day lives. *Elephant's Dream* follows the happenings at three separate public service areas in the city: the post office, the railway station, and the firehouse.

Director Kristof Bilsen takes a unique approach to his depiction of the Congo.

Where other films about the embattled region have employed raw and gritty aesthetics, Bilsen films the action very much like a soothing daydream. Visually, *Elephant's Dream* looks spectacular – the shots thoughtfully composed to look like a painting, while still clearly capturing the alternating hubbub and malaise.

Since the post office and railway station have both become pretty low traffic areas, there's plenty of time to reflect on the frequent boredom of the workers. Admittedly the film drags a bit at these moments, but it jumps back to life when focusing on the fire station. Due to massive underfunding, the firefighters lack much of the equipment and resources to be able to do their job properly, which is demonstrated most frustratingly in a sequence where they can't access enough water to try and put out a burning building.

**IS ELEPHANT'S DREAM ESSENTIAL FESTIVAL VIEWING?**

While it has some flaws, *Elephant's Dream* is a promising debut from a filmmaker trying to explore the question of what happens in a war zone once the war stops

# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

### Review:

By Dr. Pam Fossen

March 30th 2015 Hot Docs



Kristof Bilsen's **Elephant's Dream** is, at its essence, a story of hope and resilience in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Through portraits of three government workers, Bilsen exposes the seriousness of that nation's crumbling infrastructure after over a century of colonization, political crisis, war and corruption. We hear a lot these days about crumbling infrastructure in North America – roads, bridges, dams, etc. – but believe me when I tell you, we've clearly got nothing on the DR Congo.

Welcome to Kinshasa, where there is only a single fire station for a city of over 9 million. They arrive too late, and the only water they have to douse the flames is what they brought with them – because there aren't any fire hydrants. The unit works out of a roofless fire station because, ironically, the place burned down a couple of years back. They eat, sleep and train out in the open air while their Lieutenant works to keep them motivated and functioning.

Bilsen's other two portraits, of Henriette in the post office, and Simon who works guarding one of the nation's train stations, are similarly fascinating. Dirt-covered mail looks like it's been sitting around for decades, and there are hardly any customers because no one trusts the mail service. The train stations aren't much busier. With only a handful of locomotive cars still operating, there's no such thing as a train schedule, and people are far more likely to be using the station to study in than to get anywhere. At least Henriette and Simon, unlike the firefighters, sometimes get paid a small portion of their monthly salary.

As interesting as a look at DR Congo institutions is, I was more fascinated (and impressed) by the perseverance and equanimity of the individuals – who go to work every day (usually without pay), and who keep moving forward despite frequent setbacks and disappointments. They have incredible spirit.

Visually speaking, there's a quiet beauty and stillness to this film that I really liked, static shots that give the audience a real feel for the pace and the environment. Despite the inherent tragedy of the country's history, it's a sincerely hopeful film, affectionately rendered. It's also good food for thought for those of us living in an era of budget cuts and inadequate infrastructure spending.

*(Dr. Pam Fossen - You'd be hard-pressed to find a film era or genre that Pam hasn't met. A hard-core film fan from way back, she has spent (or wasted, depending on your point of view) hours and hours watching movies. And with a PhD in Film and Media, she also has more than a few opinions about them.)*

# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

### Review Hot Docs 2015

By Rob Trench (April 28th, 2015)



Kristof Bilsen's *Elephant's Dream* frames the urban sphere of the Congo through the lives of three workers in the region's municipal sector. As the nation has suffered numerous severe catastrophes, the likes of which include mass violence, warring factions, and colonialism, it has been regarded as a continually devastated republic. Seeking to upend this distinction, Bilsen chooses to depict the consequences on the average citizen's state of being, yet also demonstrate a positive outlook for the future.

Despite living in an area with dwindling resources and an overwhelming disparate set of living conditions, the citizens of the Congo persevere and make the best of this situation. Through the use of static framing and verbose monologues, a deeper representation of the average individual's psychology comes into place, allowing for a poignant, sincere sense of beauty to wash over the screen. In elucidating the struggles of everyday life, an accurate, humanistic portrait of the country's underlying issues emerge, beyond what any world news report could potentially offer. In choosing to tell a familiar subject with unconventional perspective, *Elephant's Dream* becomes a striking, thoroughly intriguing meditation on making the most of what life gives us, and finding resilience amidst constant strife.

### Review:

By Tue Steen Müller

December 2014 DOK Leipzig

Is it wrong to characterize a film as lovely? Well, the young woman on the still photo is wonderful to be with, and she has been made lovely through the approach of a director, who dares to leave the main road, when it comes to a documentary from and about Congo. To give the viewer an insight to what some citizens, actually they are all civil servants, think about their jobs, primarily, and the future of their tormented country. It is fun to watch and warm in atmosphere, and reaches the audience brilliantly even if it raises some narrative problems that the director has chosen to bring comments and thoughts forward as voice-overs, stopping the flow sometimes. But by this choice he has made it possible to work with great tableau-like, composed images that you remember so well. Henriette on the still photo is waiting for the post system to be modernised, equally Simon from the railway station sits and waits as does his colleague from the fire brigade. Waiting for something to happen. It does for Henriette, things are moving, and she is the one, we follow to a religious meeting and to her home.

Bilsen (...) demonstrates an obvious talent for catching situations, create his own tone and visuals, and has a feeling for a montage, where you go from the noisy streets of Kinshasa to the quiet public service venues where something is to happen. Lovely!

(Tue Steen Müller is since 2006 free lance consultant and teacher in documentary matters all over the world.)



# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

### Review Hot Docs 2015

By Jess Rogers (April 27th, 2015)

**"The greatest gift life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing" – T. Roosevelt.**

While Roosevelt was on to something, he has clearly never had to rebuild a country.

Unlike the former US President, the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), after a decade long civil war, have been attempting to rebuild their homeland for the past few years.

*Elephant's Dream* is neither romantic, nor tragic; it is not a comedy, nor a satire; it's an honest and a real look at what day to day life is like for a country waiting to get back on its feet.

Kristof Bilsen's film follows several individuals forced to cope with the realities of their environment.

Henriette, a civil servant in a bank/post office, hasn't been paid in weeks and is trying to do what she can to actually do her job. However, in a country with no money, there's not a lot of action at the bank until businesses finally agree to upgrade their technology and Henriette is forced to learn a new software.

Simon, another hard worker in the film, is a guard at a train station in Kinshasa where trains hardly ever arrive. He would like to do work that matters, or even retire, but the structure of the organization is such that he seems fated to sit in a chair all day listening to music.

One of the best parts of *Elephant's Dream* is the way in which music is incorporated.

When driving through Kinshasa, looking at the new construction or abandoned buildings, we hear the music in the streets. French speaking singers and rappers flood the streets with melodies about daily life in DRC.

The combination of the way Bilsen captures the city, the music, and the heartfelt lyrics about living in a country that is waiting for life to begin hits home. It accurately captures what it really feels like to be in many African cities. I've lived in Libreville, the capitol of Gabon (also French speaking and not far from DRC) and in Kenya, outside of Nairobi. Both of those countries have had political stability for many years, but there is always that element of waiting.

As I said above, this film isn't trying to show a perfect view or make a political statement about corruption or poverty, nor romanticize the beauties of a majestic country. While all of these ideas appear in *Elephant's Dream*, Bilsen makes none of them the focus, but rather part of the whole. So often Africa, and each country within it, is portrayed as less than the pieces we know and more than what we imagine.

In *Elephant's Dream*, Bilsen tries to show that it's exactly the sum of its parts.



# Elephant's Dream

Press-coverage

**“Elephant’s Dream** is a beautiful, mesmerizing documentary about the Democratic Republic of Congo, which explores the place of the absurd in a severe tragedy, and how the absurd can give comfort and meaning to life. Congo’s war, with its 5 million dead, offers a particularly stark backdrop for such a study..”

**Anjan Sundaram**

(Author of *Stringer: A Reporter’s Journey in the Congo*.)

Anjan is an award-winning journalist who has reported from Africa and the Middle East for the New York Times and the Associated Press.)

# Elephant's Dream

## Press-coverage

### Review Hot Docs 2015

By Christina Strynatka (April 30th, 2015)

examiner.com

In light of the recent events in Nepal, [Kristof Bilzen](#)'s film "[Elephant's Dream](#)", which premiered at the [2015 Hot Docs Film Festival on April 28](#), takes on a new and interesting perspective. Here are two countries — Nepal and the Democratic Republic of [Congo](#) — that have had to rebuild after a history of recent civil war, with each respective nation now heading in a different direction. One has been besieged by Mother Nature, while the other is — well, it wouldn't be true to say it's achieved its goal, but "[Elephant's Dream](#)" shows glimmers that the country's on the right path.

Bilzen's documentary centres around four people: there's Henrietta, a Kinshasa post office worker who's been mired in limbo for the past year about a new training regimen that never seems to appear; rail station security guard Nzai, who just wants to retire so the government can't complicate his life anymore, and Simon, his colleague and friend; and Lieutenant Kasunga, a stoic firefighter at Kinshasa's only fire station.

The slightly detached camerawork in this [Hot Docs](#) film moves at a snail's pace, reflecting the unhurried measure of life in Kinshasa. We can see that Bilzen's characters want to do more, whether it's Kasunga commenting on how a waiting man's mind will eventually rebel, Henrietta blankly gazing out her post office window while Bilzen's camera shifts to bags of undelivered mail in another room, or Simon idly chastizing a young man for not walking fully around the railway station. These are citizens who yearn to do more with their time and talents, and yet the Democratic Republic of Congo government stifles them with unpaid wages, old-fashioned work practices and heaps of red tape.

One scene in "[Elephant's Dream](#)" really stands out as being representational of made and unmade: when a fire truck races to an emergency and the men hop off, unwinding the fire hose, it's almost pathetic to watch the smoke billowing out of the building's windows while a lone firefighter is jeered by the crowd. The hose he's grasping has no nozzle and no water pressure, and the water comes out in such a gurgle, the crowd shouts at him that he's wasting water instead of doing anything useful.

Here's a country whose citizens, like Nepal, wants to move forward but are held back by their government. As infrastructure crumbles and workers' pleas are ignored, there still seems to be movement forward. Bilzen does an admirable job in showing this by keeping the camera still in many shots and letting the action gather itself, as opposed to panning, zooming and editing each scene into just a few seconds. As a result, this Hot Docs movie features a sort of dreaminess that washes over the viewer, the kind of dreaminess you'd feel on a hot and lazy summer day when nothing moves terribly quickly.

The desire may be there, but if the circumstances don't support it, little gets done.





## Release information

***Elephant's Dream*** had its world premiere at DOK Leipzig on October 29th, 2014, in the Young Cinema Competition, screened at IDFA in Amsterdam.

Further release in 2015: DocPoint Helsinki, and won the From You to YLE Award. Further screenings at Docs Against Gravity - Magic Hour Competition (PL), Docville National Competition (BE), DOKFest München (DOK Horizonte Competition), Festival Delasalle Cévennes (FR), Addis Abeba International FF and of course, the American premiere at HOT DOCS Toronto.



### Technical fact sheet

*Duration:* 74' / 52'

*Original language:* Lingala and French

*Available subtitles:* English, French and Dutch

*recording format:* HD

*screening format:* DCP, Blu-ray

*A production of*

**ASSOCIATE DIRECTORS**

**Bram Crols and Mark Daems**

*in co-production with*

**LIMERICK FILMS**

**Kristof Bilsen**

**MAN'S FILMS**

**Marion Hänsel**

**ROAST BEEF PRODUCTIONS**

**Mike Lerner**

**RTBF**

*Director, writer, DOP:* Kristof Bilsen

*Editor:* Eduardo Serrano

*Sound recordist:* Xan Marques Canéda

*Sound designer and mixer:* Yves De Mey

*Composer & Music supervisor:* Jon Wygens

*Supported by*

**Flanders Audiovisual Fund (BE)**

**Cinereach (NY)**

**CBA/Worldview (UK)**

**Media Program of the European Union**

**associate  
directors**



**rtbfr**



**VAF  
FILM**

**flanders**



# Screening Times Hot Docs Toronto

**Tue, Apr 28, 6:15 PM, Scotiabank Theatre, Cinema 7**

**Thu, Apr 30, 5:00 PM, Scotiabank Theatre, Cinema 4**

**Sat, May 2, 7:00 PM, Scotiabank Theatre, Cinema 3**

## International sales

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