

Absurdism in “An Elephant Sitting Still”

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In most reviews on Hu Bo’s 2018 film *An Elephant Sitting Still*, critics tend to focus on the extremities: its runtime, just shy of four hours; the 29-year-old director’s suicide shortly after the film wrapped; and the uncomfortably hyper-realistic scenes paralleling that of French Nouvelle Vague, so enmeshed in quotidian aesthetics that they appear as commentary on modern China.

Yet Hu resisted such straightforward and dramatic parcelling. In a rare interview about his moving image and literary works—*Elephant* is adapted from a short story of his—he noted mysteriously that “the truly valuable things lie in the cracks of the world.” In this light, it is important to view *Elephant* not simply as a near-flawless sociological documentary, but to also understand it as an unsolvable code, an absurdist monomyth in which its characters are encumbered by what Albert Camus described as the “confrontation between the human need” for value and purpose and “the unreasonable silence of the world.” These confrontations follow four central figures as they separately embark on an expedition from Jingxing county toward Manzhouli to see a legendary elephant, reported to be either so numb to pain or at peace (it is unclear which) that it is indifferent to spectators stabbing it with forks or feeding it.

Through protracted Steadicam takes, redolent of Hu’s mentor Béla Tarr, each character, representing a different demographic or social class, reveals their need to escape. There is the ingenuous Wei Bu, a student who, after pushing a classmate down a stairwell and killing him, becomes consumed with fear and self-hatred. He’s chased by the classmate’s elder brother Yu Cheng, a chiselled mafia type whose insensitivity to blood and gore masks a desire to divorce himself from his own life. Then there’s the coltish Huang Ling, whose untrammelled fury toward her mother and the school’s vice dean, also her lover, ends in violence. And, finally, the elderly Wang Jing, whose family requires him move from his flat into a nursing home to ease financial tensions, and who witnesses a brutal attack on his loyal dog while out walking one day.

Elephant narrates these stories using experimental cinematic devices to convey the isolating nature of the human condition. Buildings, streets, and sky are all captured in an unnatural pallid flatness, the natural light anaemic, as if to indicate the cruelty of time progressing. Repetition is used effectively: the recurrent echoey, arpeggio score by Wuhan-based outfit Hualun widens the characters’ world, punctuating the visual minutiae of their lives before a

deafening silence settles in again. Violent scenes are blurred or dampened into abstraction: dead bodies are out of focus or shunted off to the side, resembling the theatrical standards of Greek tragedy; an elephant's jarring scream is heard, but it is never seen; a dog's carcass is symbolized only by the tip of a blue bag; and the soft flame of a match hitting the ceiling joins other burn holes like a constellation of dark stars. Throughout, the film's characters are constantly alienated from one another through the simple narrowing of the camera's depth of field. While one person might be in focus, all else is a fugue of undefined colors and shapes, a visual that exhausts the audience and parallels the internal frustration of existentialism. In one scene, Wei Bu watches from afar as Huang Li interacts with the vice-dean in a café, then the scene is repeated from her point of view. Yet we never see both figures at the same time; as one comes into uncomfortably close-range focus, the other remains in genderless, amorphous obscurity.

In his statement on the film, Hu Bo references a quote from Cormac McCarthy's novel *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) as an enduring influence: "He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought that the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower." If we imagine that our four protagonists are propelled toward the elephant by this vision of empathy and beauty, then conversely we also see that the secondary characters are stalled into submission by their own apathetic ideas of compromise and the cost of survival. Ruthlessly seeking to improve their family unit, Wang Jin's daughter and son-in-law conspire to banish him to the margins of society. Huang Li's mother, a prickly salesperson who routinely acquiesces to her male clients' sexual advances, cites her own discomfort as a legitimate reason for lashing out at her daughter. In one of the most explosive confrontations of the film, she screams at Huang Li: "I'm living this messy life myself; my life's miserable, but it's not because of me. It's always been like this; I'm like this, you're like this, it's always been like this."

Close to the end of the film, Wang visits a nursing home. In one continuous long take we see the various barren rooms of the elderly, sleeping, fitfully pacing or muttering. These are the forgotten members of society who are no longer deemed industrious or productive in a capitalist world. Having understood the futility of life, but wanting to embrace it with dignity—the only solution for happiness, Camus suggests, within an absurd and unknowable universe—Wang proposes to his fellow travellers that he end his journey before he reaches the elephant, explaining: "You're looking for something else. Well the best solution is, you're right here, and you look over to the other side, you believe that it must be better than this. But you can't go. By not going, you learn to live with it here."

Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche all agreed that the void of life must be resisted, each differently exploring the means in which we can do so. In *Elephant*, the

method of resistance is guarded and complex, perhaps as indescribable as the film and as unsolvable as life itself. The final lines, preceding a lengthy wordless journey through dark forest and mountain by bus, are spoken by Wei Bu in response to Wang's suggested compromise: "Let's go and take a look."