

Reflections on Elephants

A National Geographic Special

The National Geographic Society, 1994, 54 min.

Vlad ISTRATE

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract: ‘Reflections on Elephants’ is a nature documentary film produced by ‘Wildlife Films Botswana’ for the National Geographic Society. The movie was released in the United States on the 9th of February 1994. It is narrated by Stacy Keach, written and edited by the well-known south-African director of photography Dereck Joubert. The figurative language used by Dereck Joubert is surprisingly rich and blends nicely with the visual metaphors resulting in a flavory and watchable Sunday evening family film. The film captures the extraordinary journey of elephant herds through the bushes of North Botswana and their incredible capability of adaptation and understanding of the surrounding nature. Being ‘a symbol of the African wilderness’ (*Reflections on Elephants*, approximately 3’30”), the majestic African elephants ‘live out their isolation, slowly drawing life from the Earth’s opened wounds’ (approximately 3’59”) and ‘each movement is a calculated conservation of energy, each day, a tiny investment in a legend’.

Key words: documentary, elephant, film, emotions, legend

‘Reflection on Elephants’ is a nature documentary film first released in the U.S. in February 1994. Two years in the making, the movie was produced by Dereck and Beverly Joubert, both award-winning filmmakers, National Geographic Explorers-in-Residence and wildlife conservationists. They have dedicated over 35 years of their lives to study and explore the African continent. The Jouberts have made about 40 films, published 15 books and have also written many scientific papers, all of these concentrating on the wildlife in Africa with an accent on large predators and

especially big cats. They insisted, even from the beginning of their work, that the main reason behind all their activity is conservation of the wildlife and making sure that the next generations will have the opportunity to admire it.

As nature documentary films don't usually involve actors but narrators, the soundtrack of such a film is vital to creating interest and transporting the viewer closer to the action. The composer Mark Adler was in charge of the musical arrangements and the sound editors Anne Reis, Paul Schremp, Mark Linden, Jon Taylor and Beverly Joubert were responsible for pre, during and post production sound effects.

The motion picture counted on the help of senior producer Keennan Smart and Tom Simon and Nicolas Noxon as executive producers.

Narrated by the American actor Stacey Keach and well written by the Jouberts, the script really makes the difference between 'just another elephant movie' and a moving experience that can be watched with the entire family, making you wonder what and why exactly makes these benevolent creatures act the way they do.

The use of metaphors and similes goes hand in hand with the images that you see and together convey a message that makes us think and reflect on the true nature of the elephants and their inner thoughts and emotions. There are some scenes that make us wonder if this 'unlikely creature' (*Reflections on Elephants*, approximately 00'09'') has feelings that resembles the human behavior.

This exciting and touching film tells the story of the last free herds of elephants that move across the bushes of the northern Botswana, considered to be one of the last heavens of the wild elephants. The creators wanted us to be a part of this incredible journey that follows the largest land mammal through both sorrow

and joy. The viewer is turning into an eye witness of an odyssey that puts the elephant in the spotlight.

Being considered ‘the precious last reminiscence of the largest land animal in the world’ (approx. 00’17’’), the elephants ‘play away the day’ living a life that has its own pace, a life as long as our own, but with so much time, ‘time to be simply what they are’ (approx. 00’46’’).

This sense of calm and meditation can be deceptive, as we watch one small herd ‘racing against time and the drying water holes’ (approx. 01’04’’) during a whole year. Sometimes, these fragile beings are enraged as they have to fight for the little water they find, after exhausting large journeys through the majestic African landscape.

Despite their imposing stature, the elephants have proved to be sensitive, gentle creatures, that even take part in burial rituals, use language and show signs of deep understanding of the surroundings. These aspects suggest intelligence and emotions and watching their behavior makes us think about our own human condition and reflect on how our life could have been easier if we had developed a closer relation with the natural surroundings.

After the opening scene which takes place near an African waterhole, the director follows the animals on the riverbank. In the sunset, all creatures seem to relax and enjoy the peaceful moments.

‘In the midst of a swirling dance of smaller creatures, huge males live separate lives, [...] they live out their isolation, slowly drawing life from the Earth’s open wounds’ (approx. 03’50’’). The producers create this extraordinary image in order to show the watchers how important the water is in Africa and how the Earth produces and offers this life-sustaining liquid through agony and sufferings. Nothing is free and nothing is lost.

With a life expectancy of approximately 60 years, the elephants hardly ever seem to hurry, they seem to have a constant rhythm of life and some kind of archaic wisdom that allows them to observe and document their experiences. ‘Each movement is a calculated conservation of energy, each day, a tiny investment in a legend’ (approx. 04’32’’).

The close-ups and the wide angles that the photography director Dereck Joubert implied create the impression that you are observing all this wildlife adventure from the comfort of a safari vehicle and that you somehow take part in this incredible never-ending journey of the elephants which are always on the move for finding water and for fulfilling their destiny.

Herds all over Botswana are in search of waterholes, ‘traversing the corridors of their memories, ancient trails that run like long veins of light, spreading out, then converging on the scattered waterholes’ (approx. 16’32’’). Not only are the routes they follow part of their collective and affective memory, but they also seem to acknowledge and embrace the fact that they make part of a greater plan, they seem to know that traversing those particular paths they contribute to the survival and continuity of their species.

The elephant societies are led by females that raise the calves within the family. The calves are always under threat and the family members have to keep a close eye on the youngsters that are more playful and more active than the rest. These juveniles are predisposed to a high rate of postnatal mortality in the first 5 years of life.

The cameramen have managed to record an attack of a pride of lions that tried to claim the life of a young calf that fell into the water. Fortunately for the one-day old calf, its mother came to the rescue and managed to save it and to bring it back into the security of the herd.

Sometimes, sick or very old females are pressed to leave behind infant cubs that are usually doomed to a premature and violent death. ‘Innocent to the virtues of silence’ (approx. 11’42’’), a young elephant calls out to the shadows. Being attacked by hyenas, the herd decides to adopt this calf, although its condition could hold back and delay the entire process of finding water.

Here we have a very strange aspect of the elephant life and yet another key element of its intelligence: in order to save one life, the matriarch puts in jeopardy the health and the security of the whole herd, which only denotes compassion for her own kind and, of course, understanding of the danger that the calf faced if left alone. Its rescue is indeed remarkable. Facing a new challenge: starvation for sibling rivalry, the adopted calf is far from being safe as ‘only in paradise is death banned from claiming the weak’ (approx. 18’05’’).

Day-to-day activities are presented, such as: eating, fighting and the continuous struggling for survival and the challenging task of upbringing their young calves. More than a few times, ‘these huge cathedrals or ancient monoliths [...] engage in a rhythmic dance of the giants [...] and the dust hangs like smoke on a battlefield’ (approx. 31’30’’).

Although the elephants have no real natural predators, except in some isolated cases, the lion sometimes has to fight other animals in order to gain access to a waterhole.

Later on, in the picture, we have a male adult bull that is in his musth, which is his breeding phase and seems that he can do with almost everything, feeling drawn by a great vitality. Musth comes to males once a year but only when in their adulthood period, somewhere half way through their life. This time is characterized by highly aggressive behavior and accompanied by a large rise in reproductive hormones.

Another important scene of the movie is when we assist at the death of an old male, killed by the new young dominant elephant of the herd. This heartbreaking death makes us see how the life cycle works and how the strongest elephant takes charge of the clan.

At the end of the movie we witness yet another surprise: a male is investigating the bones and the remains of a dead elephant. He is very quiet, touches and smells all the remains that he can find and pays his last respects to the deceased. The mourning in the animal world is not completely new, but the behavior and the understanding that the elephants prove under these conditions make us believe that they have strong feelings and emotions that can be compared with the human emotions.

In conclusion, 'Reflections on Elephants' is a well-documented film, created by and with the help of more than a dozen experts in the field with just one goal in mind: to break the barriers of common beliefs and to attract us in this great adventure of the journey of a life time. We found all the necessary ingredients for a memorable movie experience: we have tenderness, compassion, deception, joy and happiness, poetry and even violence and aggressivity.

As we succeed more and more as a species, the elephants seem to slip further and further from our reach.

'Perhaps we need more time to understand those gentle celebrations of life and death that are like silent whispers in the moonlight' (approx. 53'01'').