[Video-Making the City]

Popular Culture and Urban Life in Cameroon

Abstract: This article considers the video production of Douala, Cameroon, as part of the wider "video boom" that has occurred in Africa during recent decades, in order to analyze the multiple interrelations between visual media and urban life. After showing that Cameroonian video makers use the city's resources to compose their videos, I argue that they win over the heterogeneous audience of Douala by centering their plots on the struggle for upward social mobility experienced transversally by the city dwellers, beyond ethnic, gender, and age differences. In the central section, I look at the videos as distorted "mirrors" of reality, which spread educational "messages" among the people, in order to reform their behavior and prompt social transformation. I conclude that the videos constitute a representational space for confrontation and change, where the identity of Douala is shaped and, at the same time, transformed.

Keywords: Africa, Cameroon, Video, Urban Life, Popular Culture.

Introduction

In the last twenty years the African continent has experienced a "boom" in video production which has deeply transformed its media landscape. While in the past Africans appeared to be relegated to the role of passive consumers of foreign media products, thanks to the low cost and user friendly digital technology, they have transformed into producers. Throughout the continent they make commercial videos that quickly reach a transnational audience, due to the VCD and DVD small media, which is cheap, transportable and easy to (illegally) duplicate.[1] The driving force behind this transformation is the so-called urban intermediate sector (Barber 1987: 31), made up of students, teachers, petty-traders, bookkeepers, hairdressers, taxi drivers, itinerant peddlers, etc. looking for new ways to add to their low incomes. Although they have no formal training in the audio visual sector, they have been able to learn by doing, becoming directors, cameramen, scriptwriters and actors in order to take advantage of the possibilities offered by these new circumstances. Initially, their productions were disregarded by local intellectuals and international critics, who considered them "B movies" because of their low aesthetic and technical quality and their commercial purpose which is so distant from the political inclination of African auteur films (Garritano 2008, Meyer 2010, Okome 2010). Today, their social and cultural value has been acknowledged and they are seen as an expression of contemporary African popular art which represents, as stated by Karin Barber, «the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses. The centers of activity in this filed are the cities, in their pivotal position between the rural hinterland on the one hand and the metropolitan countries on the other» (Barber 1987: 23).[2]

This interpretative approach sheds light on the factuality of the African videos, which are not just mere

1 VCD stands for Video Compact Disc, in Africa often used instead of the Digital Compact Disc (DVD) because it is cheaper and easy to record. For a general overview of African video production cf. Ogunleye, 2008; for more on informal transnational networks of media distribution, cf. Larkin 2004, Lobato 2012, Krings, Okome 2013.

2 For the application of Barber's notion of "African popular art" to video production, cf. in particular Haynes and Okome 1998.

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entertainment, but address (and make public) urban dwellers' problems, thus participating in the making (and un-making) of social life.

In this article I will examine these dynamics closely, through analyzing the video production of Douala, Cameroon's economic capital. I believe that the complexity of this city (Malaquais 2003) will reveal, with particular clarity, the interrelations between visual media and collective life. Historically, Douala is characterized by the proliferation of fault lines - marked by ethnicity, age, gender, religion, social class and political affiliation - that creates a «patchwork of settlements» (Simone 2007: 38) with weak social and cultural integration. Since existing resources are scarce, inhabitants are pushed to continually cross boundaries and remain open to new alliances, though upon what they are based is often ambiguous and provisional. As a result, styles, meanings, points of view and experiences circulate across the city, allowing residents to take one another into account and partially visualize a shared future, despite the once-relied upon forms of authority that are increasingly unable to give significance to collective life. In this environment - where it is unclear who has the right and the ability to do what, who can work and live together, and who can talk to whom - Simone (2008) underlines the role of popular culture as a «mirroring process», namely a set of discourses and practices continually being tested and reviewed, through which city dwellers try to understand their collective existence and open new spaces for social cooperation. Video practice is part of this wider context, participating in the never-ending process of making and unmaking urban life, which reveals some possibilities, while obscuring others.

Following this approach, I will examine Douala videos as «small eruptions in the social fabric that provide new texture, small but important platforms from which to access new views» (Simone 2002: 32). The artists attach meaning to the cityscape and their experience in it through the narration of their "daily lives", engaging in precarious acts of signification that are challenged and eroded by the continuous production of new stories. After showing that the artists, like skillful *bricoleurs*, exploit the city's resources to compose their videos, I will argue that they win over the heterogeneous audience of Douala by centering their plots on the struggle for upward social mobility experienced transversally by the population, beyond ethnic, gender, and age differences. In the central section, I will look at the videos as distorted "mirrors" of reality, which spread educational "messages" and "lessons" among the people, in order to reform people's behaviors and prompt social transformation. I will conclude that the videos constitute a representational space for confrontation and change, where the identity of Douala is shaped and, at the same time, transformed.

The findings on which this chapter is based draw from fieldwork that I carried out in Douala in 2012 and 2013, using primary discursive interviews and participant observation. I have not only participated in the rehearsals, shootings, and editing of the videos, but I have also taken part in the artists' lives, spending time with them at their jobs besides video making and during their leisure time, in order to grasp the constant exchanges between fiction and reality.[3]

The Raid of Douala

In the production of their videos, the artists exploit the city of Douala to get inspiration for the plots, find props, create characters, and overcome accidents that often occur on set. Scriptwriters, in particular, borrow from the surrounding reality. Some of them use newspaper articles, television reports and radio programs about the local *faits divers*, namely happenings and gossip circulating among the population.[4] Talking about *Les aventures de Monica*, the TV series she writes for, Antoinette explains:

3 I carried out this research as part of my PhD in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Milan Bicocca and at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales of Paris. I thank Ivan Bargna, who read an earlier version of this text, the anonymous reviewers, and all the Cameroonian artists that participated in my research.

4 This is the so-called *radio trottoir*, which is the small-talk and gossip carried out by the people of the street of Douala. In Stephen Ellis's definition, African *radio trottoir* is «the popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs in Africa, particularly in towns» (Ellis 1989: 321).

> [It] is a thirteen-minute series centered on daily life, on the active life in our cities… It's simply our every day, our life…. It's a story that everyone can watch […] because it represents everyday life, everyday problems […]. I draw inspiration from our society, with my cinema I operate in the social domain, I awake people's consciousness.[5]

Other scriptwriters take from their personal and family history. This is the case, for example, of Jean de Dieu (stage name Man no lap) from the TV series entitled *Mon histoire* (2008, dir. Emmanuel Kuate and Jean de Dieu Thechebe), which tells the story of:

> A father who chooses his successor, before dying… but some of his relatives don't accept his decision, because his lazy son wants to supersede the legitimate successor. The legitimate successor, a businessman, is still very young… he finds himself forced into polygamy, because, according to tradition, if your father was a notable at the chefferie, when you replace him you must marry many wives… so, this was the story of Mon Historie. […] In the writing I was influenced by the history of my family, by what we lived.[6]

As the financial means available to dramatize these stories are generally very limited (just a few hundred euros), the aesthetic-narrative decisions tend to be influenced by economic restrictions. Usually after a first meeting - during which the director hands out the scripts or, more simply, discusses the synopsis with the actors who will improvise the dialogues - the crew starts filming. If the group has been working together for a while, the actors may be briefed about the story the same day of the shooting. This situation is particularly frequent in the case of TV series productions, when the scriptwriter sketches the plot just a few days before the shooting, without having time to gather the actors and instruct them.

This type of organization deeply conditions the video aesthetic. First of all the actors, who have generally not attended acting schools, are not really capable of impersonating characters far from their own life experience. Without rehearsals and training, they draw on their personal social knowledge to interpret the roles and improvise the dialogues, thus creating dramatizations of themselves. This situation leads to a circular process, in which the directors look for actors that play roles consistent with the video storyline in their personal lives. At the same time, the availability of actors with particular inclinations and backgrounds alters the content of the stories. This is clearly shown by Marcel, a director who asked real criminals from his neighborhood to act as aggressors in an attack in his series *Cercle vicieux* (2010): «To shoot this action I had to find real bandits because only they were able to do the right gestures and voices for the scene».[7] These dynamics are particularly evident during casting, when the crew inspects, not so much the acting skills, as the so-called "profile" of the contenders, namely their social and psychological inclinations, selecting those who "match" their characters in real life. Julie, an actress who helps select actors for the videos in which she plays, illustrates this as follows:

> An actor can't "cheat". For example, if you ask someone to play the part of a bandit, who neither looks like a bandit nor knows how to interpret the role of a bandit, you're "cheating". If you don't have a professional actor, you must ask a real bandit. He'll have the right appearance, he'll know how to behave and speak… so you won't be "cheating"![8]

Simultaneously the artists creatively use the city and its environment to shape their scenes. To them, Douala represents a huge potential set, where the shops, stalls, restaurants, streets and private houses are the locations; peddlers, moto-taxi drivers and passers-by are the extras; the goods on the streets and all the other objects at hand constitute the scenery. For example, during the shooting of *La déchéance* (2012-2013, dir. Simplice Noumo) Simplice and his actors had to shoot a scene of a corrupted politician shopping in a supermarket. In exchange for including an "advertisement" sign in a shot, an actor's acquaintance offers her shop for the filming, while a passer-by, who is there by chance, borrows his car for the frame of the politician arriving at the shop. Finally, it is also noteworthy that the artists skillfully integrate city sounds into their videos. Talking about *Dimbambe* (2012,

5 Antoinette, personal communication, Douala, July 23, 2013.

6 Jean de Dieu, personal communication, Douala, October 16, 2012.

7 Marcel, personal communication, Douala, August 9, 2013.

8 Julie, personal communication, Douala, September 10, 2013.

dir. Nathalie Thérèse Bell) - the story of a village girl who is forced to marry an older man in Douala - a boy who worked in the production recalls: «The screams of the delivery are real! While we were shooting the scene at the hospital, a woman was giving birth to her child in the very next room… so we recorded her cries and used them in the film».[9]

The artists refer to these creative practices as "bricolage". During my fieldwork, I often heard them saying: «We're forced to bricolage!» and «We're bricoleurs!». These expressions are revealing regarding a final aspect of the symbiotic relationship between video production and urban life which shows that the video makers draw on the wide-spread aptitude to *débrouillardise* and of being self-employed, typical of a commercial metropolis like Douala. Life in Douala is a highly competitive game and people must depend on their personal abilities to assure themselves a niche of activity, continuously struggling to adapt their personal projects to the opportunities offered by the environment (Simone 2007).

The scenario described so far can be understood overall by the the concept of "contingent realism", proposed by Alessandro Jedlowski with reference to Nigerian popular cinema.[10] According to him:

> The fact that the reality that is behind the camera continuously reemerges and interferes with what is being filmed gives the videos a particularly realist flavor, contingent but significantly effective. […] [Nigerian] producers and directors have often to deal with unpredictable events that can profoundly condition the production process and the contents of the videos produced. As a result of this situation, in many cases, directors have to integrate the elements that the reality "imposes" on them into the videos' narrative structure (Jedlowski 2010/2011: 162-163).

However, one should be also cautious about applying such a determinist approach to the case of Douala video making. Cameroonian directors actively rely on a style that - in their own words - "sticks to reality", as the distinctive trait of their visual language. Ebenezer (stage name Mitoumba), one of the most renowned actors, scriptwriters, and directors of Douala, clearly demonstrates this:

> If viewers don't mirror themselves in what we're doing, they don't appreciate it, understand? This is because we go beyond fiction. We want to do a believable fiction. People must think that it's real, and, appropriately, I was slapped while I was walking in a market due to the role I was playing at that time… because [in the *Foyer polygamique* TV series] I was mistreating Mado, I was mistreating my wife…. So I happened to be in a market and a woman slapped me, yelling: "Why do you threaten Mado?". This slap hurt me, but it also made me happy when I saw that that woman considered my series to be real. This is because she knows that my series is about everyday life […] she knows that it's like a mirror.[11]

In a highly diverse and competitive mediascape, videomakers smartly resort to a "stick to reality" style to distinguish and assure themselves a market. Localized plots, dialogues in *parlé camerounais*,[12] and location shooting are stylistic strategies that aim at addressing the local public, who feel hooked on stories that recall (and presume) a deep knowledge of the city life. At times a written introduction specifies the name of the Douala district where the story takes place, sometimes the scenes are shot in the congested and noisy streets, regardless of the confusion, because - a director explains - «that's how it happens».[13]

"It works like this: if you see something you dislike, you'll show it in a film"

The artists refer to themselves as "guides", "teachers", and "critics" of society and conceive their series and films as instruments to act upon reality, denounce problems and suggest solutions. As an actor says: «It works like this:

9 Patrick, personal communication, Douala, December 16, 2012

10 Cf. also the similar notion of "low-budget realism" in Haynes (2007: 138).

11 Ebenezer, personal communication, Douala, July 18, 2013.

12 *Parlé camerounais* is the vernacular commonly spoken in the streets of Douala. It is a mix of French, English, Pidgin English, local languages and other Western languages (cf. Biloa 1999).

13 Aimé, personal communication, Douala, November 11, 2012.

if you see something you dislike, you'll show it in a film».[14]

This concept of "committed" video practice is not only found in Douala, but is rather typical of African popular art in general, which - according to Karin Barber - tends to «speak of real problems and proffer serious solutions. Of course, this kind of text usually says only the things that people want to hear. But while it is true that people usually want to hear that justice will prevail and that the good will be rewarded, they do not apparently want to hear escapist fantasy» (Barber 1997: 2).

To attract the attention of the heterogeneous public of Douala, the artists need to dramatize wide-spread problems, in which each inhabitant can in some way mirror him/herself, beyond ethnic, class, age, and gender differences. To this end, they carefully observe the social reality they inhabit, imagining intersections between divergent lives, to which they give shape and consistency by visualizing them in their works. As a result, the videos show a multicultural reality, where different languages, culinary traditions, households, religions and rituals cohabitate harmoniously. Rather than being driven by different ethnic origins, conflict arises due to competing socio-economic interests. At the core of this *koiné* exists the struggle for the "acquisition of status" ("*avancer*" in the local expression), which characterizes the life trajectory of all Douala residents, struggling to find the means to become *grands* at the center of wide networks of patron-client relations, thanks to gifts and ostentatious consumption (Séraphin 2000: 117).

In the initial decades after independence, such upward mobility was guaranteed and promoted by the post-colonial State, which used to hire the recent graduates to work in the public sector. The civil servants were social heroes as their prestigious and lucrative jobs gave them power and influence, whereas their cultural capital distinguished them from the rest of society (cf. Bayart 1979: 223-224; Jua 2003; Konings 2002; Mbembe 1986; Ndjio 2008: 207-208). The economic crisis of the 1980s and 90s ruined this school-to-work path; the cuts in public spending dictated by the Structural Adjustment Program generated massive layoffs, early-retirements, employment opportunity freezes, and salary payment delays (Durang 2000). As a result, young people's chances for a sustainable livelihood have been drastically reduced since then. Socially and economically marginalized, they struggle to find the means to get married and start their own households, accessing the status of adult (Jua 2003).[15] The urgency to experiment individual paths to success - bypassing the failure of the modernization plans implemented by the postcolonial State - has led to a strong "money ethos" (Jua 2003: 21) according to which each person, singularly, has to fight for upward mobility in an environment conceived as hostile (cf. also Fisiy, Geschiere 2006; Nyamnjoh 2006). Leila, a young Cameroonian woman working in telecommunications, uses these words to capture the never-ending «money hunting» (De Boeck 1998) of the Douala population: «In Douala people wake up and go out to look for money until night. At night they go out and drink some beers at most; then they go home to sleep and wake up the next day to look for money again. This is Douala… people go to Douala to look for money».[16]

Similar to Douala residents, the characters in the videos struggle for social promotion and wealth. By experimenting different strategies, such as violence, manipulation and scams, they impersonate the Cameroonian society's state of anomie, where socially legitimate goals cannot be achieved by (morally and legally) acceptable means (cf. Merton 1970).[17] In this regard, Big Mop's path to success in the *Foyer polygamique* TV series (2006-2009, dir. *Ghislain Fotso/Edmond Fossito/Ebenezer Kepombia*) is telling. In the initial episodes he is underemployed and spends his time at home in a poor and unsafe district of Douala. During the first season, thanks to his cunning, manipulative relationships, he is able to free himself from his economic responsibility as a father and start a new family with the well-off Clarisse. Using his new wife's money, he expands his economic activity and moves to a residential neighborhood. When a friend congratulates him for his achievements, he exclaims: «Life is a ruse!», recalling the feeling of Douala youths, persuaded that success comes from personal ability rather than from

14 Juruse, personal communication, Douala, August 20, 2012.

15 While in rural areas the access to full adulthood was not guaranteed to the entire population, in the cities it was usually taken for granted (cf. Warnier 1993 and Argenti 2007).

16 Leila, personal communication, Douala, July 21, 2013.

17 For the application of Robert Merton's concept of "anomie" to the African video production, cf. Ekwuazi 2000: 137.

ascribed characteristics.

Within this general scenario, scams and family conflicts are the most common subjects of the videos. Scams are one of the alternative paths of upward mobility experimented by youngsters facing the disappearance of past opportunities. Inspired by the economic success of the *feymen* (the local expression for "scammers"), itinerant peddlers, street children and unemployed people started to commit frauds, robberies, and thefts hoping to improve their tough life conditions (Ndjio 2008). The video makers respond to this difficult situation by making videos that comically dramatize small urban crime, making it one of the distinctive subjects of their production.[18]

The TV series that has exploited the scam theme the most is *Balade dans la cité* (2006-, dir. Aimé Wafo Kamga). The episodes stage various unconnected swindles that are linked by the same narrative device: a village man called Makalaparti cycles around city neighborhoods telling the viewers what he sees. To create the plots, the scriptwriter asks journalists he knows for advice, listens to radio programs on the *faits divers* and, just like Makalaparti, the character he himself plays, «talks with people and observes what's going on».[19] In the first episodes, in a truly journalistic vein, he would describe real events and represent scammers and robbers with their actual names. After a while he resorts to made-up names, but - as he says - «the plots continue to treat social issues… they can be political stories… we've shot them… social stories, we've shot them».[20]

While revealing the influences of Nigerian melodramas and South-American soap-operas, the videos about family conflicts - especially, betrayals, incest, and untimely pregnancies - also recall local problems and concerns. The difficult economic scenario has created tensions in family relationships, leading to continuous and precarious role reconfigurations, conflicts and misunderstandings between genres and generations. Lack of jobs and low incomes have forced youths to live with their parents for extended periods. Thus they experience prolonged dependence and are seen as "burdens" by the other family members. Their chronic financial precariousness prevents them from accumulating enough to pay the required bridewealth and get married, the traditional passage to adulthood. This complex situation results in a multiplicity of unofficial forms of cohabitation, where the widespread *viens, on rest* (local expression for "common law marriage") practice gives rise to sentimental relationships characterized by unclear rights and responsibilities, social insecurity and conflicts (cf. Trani 2000).[21]

The medium-length film *Tu vas me sentir* (2009, dir. Enguérran Towa) vividly shows the link between economic hardship, family violence, reconfiguration of authority and gender relations. Kritikos attacks his wife daily. She refuses him sexually, sleeping every night by herself on the couch. Although he considers his "midnight dish" to be a right acquired by paying the bridewealth, his wife refuses because she's tired of supporting him financially. Despite his degree, he is unemployed and spends his days at home, unloading his frustration by molesting his sister-in-law. This escalation of brutality finally ends when his relative succeeds in convincing him to put aside his "graduate pride" and look for a *petit job*: «When you begin this *petit job* - he tells him - you'll see everything change. Your "dish" will grow. Even that "midnight dish" you claim, she'll give it to you a go-go!».

As spaces for reflecting on the acquisition of status and its limits, the videos recall the rich artistic tradition through which, in Cameroon like elsewhere in Africa, the social cadets - i.e. those who experience a perpetual condition of childhood, lacking the power and resources to fully access adulthood (Bayart 1979) - express their dissatisfaction with the status quo and try to renegotiate relationships of domination. Argenti has shown that Grassfields "traditional" dances and masks stage the structural violence that, today like in the past, fractures communities along age lines, where the youngsters oppose the élite of the elders. In a similar vein, Bjornson (1990) highlights that beginning in the 1970s popular novels and theater allude to social problems, representing

18 It is noteworthy, however, that the trickster character is also part of the oral tradition (cf., for example, the fables collected by Abega 2002 and Fouotsa 2009).

19 Aimé, personal communication, Douala, December 26, 2012.

20 Aimé, personal communication, Douala, December 26, 2012.

21 Such a reconfiguration of family and love relations occurs in other African countries as well. Regarding Kinshasa, for example, Filip De Boeck writes about the invention of a «new kind of marriage, *yaka tovanda* ('come and let us live together'), that is, a *marriage raccourci* or a 'short cut marriage' in which youngsters *de facto* start living together […] thereby short circuiting the gift-cycle of marriage and bridewealth transactions» (De Boeck 2005: 206). For an overview on love relations in contemporary Africa, cf. Cole, Thomas 2009.

the population's suffering and the élite's unrestrained materialism. Following the diffusion of new electronic media and, in particular, low-cost and user friendly digital technology (Ugor 2009), social cadets' possibilities for communication have increased enormously. As Onookome Okome and Stephanie Newell (2012: XII) show, «"ordinary people" in Africa are no longer "invisible and inaudible" [...]. If anything, the people may be said to be too loud». In the words of Michel, a Douala director: «[Making a video] is like going on top of a building in Douala, shut everybody up and start talking, the entire city listens to you».[22]

"The artist should teach": lessons and messages to navigate Douala

The videos, not only dramatize the daily struggle for the acquisition of status, denouncing its problems, limits, and difficulties, but also aim at changing people's behavior. The artists state that a video is "good" when it instructs the public, spreading "messages" and "lessons". For example, Marius (stage name Kalagan), an actor and scriptwriter, claims:

> To us, the artist is the mirror of society. What's society? It's us! What should we do to draw society's attention? Through our comedies, we must transmit solid messages that prevent the viewers from running into certain situations, troubles, as they usually do, without realizing it. Thanks to us, people should be able to escape all this, we must transmit a message [...] they should learn a lesson![23]

This didactic purpose is consistent with local aesthetic principles, according to which a work - be it a sculpture, a fable or a film - is "beautiful" if it is "useful", teaching a moral truth that can help the public improve its life (Bargna 2003). Generally, the videos critique the "money ethos" that guides the characters' action (like the Douala inhabitants'), through "messages" and "lessons" that call for a «domesticated agency» (Nyamnjoh 2002) against the selfish search for individual realization. Traditionally, in Cameroon, personal success is accepted if it brings some advantage to the society as a whole. According to the Pahouin population from South and Central Cameroon, human beings contain a living material (called *evu* among the Beti and Bulu, *hu* among the Bassa, *evusu* among the Duala) that - when socialized through rituals (for example, rites of initiation) - guarantees a personal realization which is beneficial to the entire community; instead, if it is not "tamed", it brings personal success to the detriment of the collectivity, turning the human being into a witch, who increases his/her power through cannibalistic feasts in the invisible world (Rowlands, Warnier 1988). Among the Bamileke of Western Cameroon - one of the regions with the highest emigration to Douala - personal accumulation is more legitimate and redistribution duties are weaker (Warnier 1993). Following the economic crisis of the 1980s and 90s, however, personal aggrandizement has been increasingly conceived as exploitation, since the every-man-for-himself behavior has not implied exacerbated individualism, but a "parasitic use" of other people (Courade 2000: 31). The belief in new types of "accumulative" witchcraft, known as *mokoagne moni*, *secte, culte, cercle vicieux*, allowing instant wealth through human sacrifices, addresses the antisocial nature of new success paths (Ndjio 2006: 70).[24] Christianity, especially in its Pentecostal version, has partially incorporated this traditional representation of accumulation, conceiving witchcraft, evil spirits, and sentiments such as greed and egoism, as creations made by the devil himself. They are aimed at dazzling human beings with the illusion of effortless success that, in the end, brings one to ruin.[25]

The characters of the videos, who achieve social mobility through scams and manipulations, are bound to similar tragic destinies and show the public that the undomesticated agency does not reward them, even though it seems tempting at a first. In *Big Heart* (2004, dir. Parfait Zambo), Selavie New Way is a sophisticated and

22 Michel, personal communication, Douala, August 22, 2013.

23 Marius, personal communication, Douala, September 17, 2013.

24 On the "accumulative turn" of contemporary witchcraft, cf. also Geschiere 1995, Fisiy, Geschiere 2006, Nymanjoh 2006. In this regard, Jean and John Comaroff (2001) use the notion of "millennial capitalism", where the popular imagination transfigures the dynamics of current predatory capitalism – a small élite accumulating wealth to the detriment of the majority of the population, increasingly poorer – in "occult economies", namely magical means to get rich quick through the destruction of other people's lives.

25 For an overview of Douala religious movements, cf. De Rosny 2004.

independent girl who spends the night with a rich man she meets in a restaurant, hoping to receive some money from him. Her plan works better than expected and she gets several thousand francs, without having sexual intercourse with him. Her greed, however, induces her to poke around in the man's bedroom, where she finds the "mystic" snake that magically assures him his wealth, in exchange for human sacrifices. Shocked, Selavie leaves the house, but she is now condemned to madness. The last scenes - in which Selavie wanders the streets of Douala in a confused state wearing tattered clothes - visualize the vacuity of the undomesticated agency, which leaves people alone, abandoned to their fate.

Both showing and condemning the money ethos, the videos express the lure of individual success that is wide-spread among the population and, at the same time, critique the moral transgressions people commit on its behalf.[26] This ambiguity reveals the anxiety experienced by young Cameroonians struggling to *avancer* in a city such as Douala, characterized by contrasting memories and morals, where once-relied on forms of authority have lost significance, without being replaced by new solid references (cf. Babina 2007; Courade 2000: 27; Mbembe 2005: 174-175; Ndjio 2006; Simone 2005: 519). The lack of clear paths and models of behavior raises both a feeling of freedom - «In Douala we're free» people say - and a sense of disorientation, communicated by expressions stated by young people such as «I'm still looking for myself», «Douala people don't know where they go or where they come from», «Douala is a mess». In this regard, the video didactic purpose represents a creative response to the sense of dismay, tracing a (moral) «map of experience» (Barber 1997: 5) that helps people navigate the ambivalent city of Douala, where excessive freedom tends to turn into abuse.

To conclude, one could affirm that the videos play a role similar to West African *self-help* literature, which - according to Newell (2011) - opens a creative space in which to "correspond" with the city, reacting to the state of chaos and lack of references of the post-colonial societies. Like these apparently flippant, popular novels about family and love affairs, Douala videos: «offer advice [...] on how to survive emotionally in urban areas, and they explore the individual's loss of control in environments populated by large numbers of strangers. Such themes are inextricable from urbanization on the continent, allowing [...] to bind the city into the pages of the texts» (Newell 2011: 18).

Conclusion

In this article I have traced the characteristics of the numerous connections between video production and urban life in a heterogeneous and fragmented city like Douala. The artists incorporate film practice into the social context and produce videos that, in their words, "mirror" reality, probing the inhabitants' everyday problems in order to propose solutions. They stage the incidents of the characters that struggle to attain status, through moral transgressions visualizing the state of anomie in Cameroonian society. Themes related to scams and family conflict are particularly important and both are closely linked to the constant lack of resources that characterize the lives of most Douala residents people. Such output not only functions to communicate the dissatisfaction of "social cadets," but also aims at transforming reality by imparting "lessons" and "messages" that criticize the ethos of money in Douala society. In this sense, the videos adopt an ambivalent position that both expresses and condemns the desire for personal success at the same time. This is done through stories of characters who fall from grace due to their "greed." Such a tendency reveals the sense of bewilderment on the part of the population facing a confusing and constantly changing social-cultural environment which seems to lack collective reference points and anchors. At the same time, it represents an answer to this uncertainty, since the didactic plots offer a moral map of experience that "captures" the city in its film texts, similar to Western Africa's *self-help literature*.

In light of what is been said, the videos are an essential part of popular culture, which is intended as a *mirroring process* through which the Douala inhabitants try to shape their collective existence, imagining shared horizons and footholds, beyond the diverging paths of their life stories (cf. Simone 2008). In this sense, they express the desire to live in more predictable environments, where the staging of a reality in which "everyone can recognize him/herself" represents the attempt to trace recurring events and regularity. Förster (2014: 37-38) calls it «habitual

26 For similar ambiguities in African videos, cf. Garritano (2013: 191-192) and Larkin (2008: 188).

agency» which is in contrast to improvisational practice, a part of daily survival and typical of post-colonized cities. Nevertheless, it has to do with precarious agreements, since the "spectral" quality of Douala (Simone 2004: 92) - with its persistent glare between real life, artifice, imagination and action which blurs the possibility of establishing meanings - also enters into the films' stories. As soon as they're finished, they already seem "incomplete" and "outdated" to the authors themselves, who are driven to make new videos in order to satisfy the constant need to activate and explore potentialities. Therefore, we can conclude by comparing the "mirror" videos of Douala with the Kinshasa mirrors about which De Boeck (2008) speaks, seeing as both represent a space for debate and change, where the city's identity gets formed and then immediately shattered in order to be put back together under a new guise: «Out of the breach of broken glass, the debris of its own pasts, the city [...] feverishly transforms and continues. In a sustained effort to recreate and institutionalize itself, the city tirelessly re-energizes an ever-growing web of plural meanings and social imaginary significations» (De Boeck 2008: 124).

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