

CONGOLESE CINEMA TODAY :  
MEMORIES OF THE PRESENT  
IN KINSHASA'S NEW WAVE CINEMA (2008-2018)

MATTHIAS DE GROOF, ALESSANDRO JEDLOWSKI

« Cinema is a kind of collective therapy.  
It can change the reality of our country »  
Okoko Nyumbaiza<sup>1</sup>

Collective cultural memory is often shaped through films, but in Congolese cinema, this concern for the past appears to be almost absent. Does Congolese cinema really ignore the past ? Or is it rather obsessed with the present ? Congolese cinema has rarely addressed the erasure of pre-colonial civilizations caused by the colonial invasion, as Ousmane Sembène did in *Ceddo* (1977) or Med Hondo in *Sarraounia* (1986) did for West-Africa. Nor has it tried to compensate these erasures by producing a « calabash cinema » anchored in the precolonial rural world, as it happened in Malian or Burkinabe cinemas ; or expressed the need to investigate the past in order to define a way forward, as in the idea of Sankofa in Haile Gerima's Ethiopian films. Congolese cinema has hardly made any attempt at producing a re-appropriation of Congolese history through forms of anticolonial cinema as it happened in Mozambique with the films produced by FRELIMO (see *KuxaKanema*, 2003), and even films produced during the Mobutu regime and influenced by its authenticity campaigns did not try to reconfigure the country's past to accommodate the regime's ideological orientations – except perhaps for Bokakala Nkolobise's *Bakanja*, produced in 1989 by the Archdiocese of Mbandaka-Bikoro. Finally, Congolese filmmakers have

---

<sup>1</sup> Personal interview made by Alessandro Jedlowski on 18/02/2018.

hardly engaged in the use and reinterpretation of archival materials – the work of Sammy Baloji and Petna Ndaliko Katondolo being exceptions in this sense.

However, this does not mean that the cinema produced in Congo over the past few decades has no interest for the scholar looking at processes of construction of collective cultural memory. Quite to the contrary, the absences highlighted above invite the researcher to question processes of memory-making and the strategies adopted by filmmakers to represent them by looking at the silences and the shadows that inhabit Congolese films (and particularly the most recent ones).

In this essay, we will look at this issue by focusing on the new wave of Congolese film production emerged in Kinshasa over the past few years. This new wave can be traced back to the impact of the training initiative *Atelier Action*, coordinated by Congolese filmmaker Djo Tunda Wa Munga in collaboration with the Belgian film school INSAS, which took place in Kinshasa between 2008 and 2015. In what follows, we will *firstly* situate cinema in the Democratic Republic of Congo ; *secondly* we will briefly discuss the *Atelier Actions* initiative and its trickledown effect on contemporary filmmaking in Kinshasa ; and *finally*, we will explore how the new wave or this « Ateliers Action generation » remediates the past into the present by producing a cinema that – like Congolese literature – prefers to focus on immediacy, or on what we would like to call « the perpetual present » of the Congolese sociopolitical situation, as a result of the traumatic nature of Congolese history. This last part looks at memory and creative forgetfulness in contemporary Congolese cinema – a cinema that hardly narrates the traumatic past, but instead often represents the horrors of the present. In this sense, the Congolese new wave gives shape to memories of the present which perpetually glides into the past.

### *1. Situating cinema in Democratic Republic of Congo*

The history of cinema in Democratic Republic of Congo has been deeply influenced by the tumultuous political history of the country and by the numerous wars that troubled it since the declaration of independence from the Belgian colonial rule, in 1960. Filmmaking started during the colonial era, through a series of initiatives mainly led by Catholic priests and colonial authorities, who

considered cinema as an instrument of education (to western rule and culture), as well as a means of evangelization. A few Congolese were trained as part of these initiatives to reduce the costs of shipping crews from abroad, and some of them later participated in running the national television station (today named Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise, RTNC). If a number of influential personalities emerged in the period before and just after independence, such as the painter, theatre director, and filmmaker Albert Mongita, the actor and filmmaker Antoine Bumba Mwaso, and the filmmakers Ndoma Lwele Mafuta Nlanza, Roger Kwami Mambu Nzinga, and Victor Matondo Kmarka (all active during the Mobutu regime), it wasn't until 1987 that the first Congolese feature film was produced, *La vie est belle* by Mweze Ngangura. Since then a few Congolese filmmakers have emerged, including Kibushi N'djate Wotoo, Zeka Laplaine, Josef Kumbela, Monique Mbeka Phoba, and later Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda and Djo Tunda Wa Munga, but most of them were obliged by the country's political situation, or because of other more personal reasons, to operate mostly from abroad. Parallel to the slow evolution of Congolese film production, with the end of Mobutu's regime and the liberalization of broadcasting in the country, independent television production also started to develop, but mostly in the form of low-budget TV series, similar to filmed theater, locally called « maboke ».<sup>2</sup>

Despite the new wave of dynamism that has emerged over the past few years (discussed below), the industry still lacks a viable economic model, as there is no functional distribution system in place and only a very small number of projects manage to obtain financial support from local or international funding agencies. For this reason, most films (being them shorts or features, documentaries or fictions) are realized according to what people call the « lisungi » (or mutual help) production style. According to this system people help each other in achieving their project exchanging work time rather than money.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed accounts on the history of cinema in Democratic Republic of Congo, see G. COVENTS, *Images et démocratie. Les Congolais face au cinéma et à l'audiovisuel* (Kessel, Signis, 2006), G. NDOMBASI, *Le cinéma du Congo démocratique, petitess d'un géant* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008), R. OTTEN, *Le Cinéma dans les pays de grands lacs : Zaïre, Rwanda, Burundi* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1984) and the African Documentary Film Found's report (<<http://adff.org/the-report>>) ; on the history of the « maboke » genre see K. PYPE, *The Making of Pentecostal Melodrama : Religion, Media, and Gender in Kinshasa* (Oxford, Berghahn, 2012).

While forms of commercial video film production in Swahili emerged in the Eastern part of the country (particularly in Goma) for circulation in neighboring countries such as Tanzania and Uganda, cheap TV series constituted the bulk of what was produced in Kinshasa throughout the late 1990s and the 2000s. However, from the early 2000s a new generation of young filmmakers began to emerge : it represents a « new wave » in the history of Congolese cinema which is slowly but steadily transforming the landscape of film production in the country. The emergence of this new generation has been fostered by the organization of a number of training initiatives in the country by Congolese filmmakers of the previous generation, such as Balufu Bakupa-Kanyinda, Monique Mbeka Phoba and Djo Tunda Wa Munga, in collaboration with foreign partners such as the Belgian film school INSAS, the French Institute, the Wallonie-Bruxelles center and the Goethe Institute. Most film training activities in Democratic Republic of Congo are indeed sponsored by foreign institutions and cultural centers as there is no policy to frame the film sector in the country, no funding scheme to support production or training, no officially recognized association or institute that could advocate for the needs of local filmmakers or represent them at official gatherings. The intervention of foreign donors remain problematic, as they inevitably put forward their own (implicit or explicit) political agenda,<sup>3</sup> and the consequences of this situation are explicitly underlined by local filmmakers who recognize the importance of developing initiatives that can be economically sustainable and autonomous. As filmmaker and producer Moimi Wezam emphasized, « the possibility of creating truly independent and original stories is connected to our economic situation. We need to be economically independent in order to tell the stories that we want to tell ».<sup>4</sup>

## *2. The Atelier Actions initiative and its trickledown effect on contemporary film production in Kinshasa*

Among the different initiatives that took place over the past few years, the training program organized between 2008 and 2015

---

<sup>3</sup> See for instance T. HOEFERT DE TURÉGANO, « Sub-Saharan African Cinemas : The French Connection », *Modern & Contemporary France* 13, n. 1, 2005, p. 71-83.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview made by Alessandro Jedlowski on 18/02/2018.

by the Congolese filmmaker Djo Tunda Wa Munga's film production company (SUKA ! Productions), in collaboration with the Belgian film school INSAS and the King Baudouin Foundation/Fond Carlier was probably the most successful, as it managed to train at least four different generations of students, some of whom managed to access other training experience in the following years, and achieved remarkably successful careers (the best examples in this sense are Dieudo Hamadi and Kiripi Katembo). For the first three years (2008-2011) training sessions were shorter (an average of eight to twelve weeks) and the number of students lower – an average of fifteen students per year, among which six/seven people were later selected for a professional internship at SUKA !. The success of the first three years of the experience attracted the interest of new funders, giving the organizers the possibility to further diversify and strengthen the training program. From 2012 training lasted eleven months and the number of students increased to an average of twenty-two to twenty-six (a few of whom were selected for internship at the end of training). The expansion of the program was supposed to follow a gradual trajectory toward institutionalization, so as to develop a permanent training center, with three-year long training curricula in all aspects of film making. However, as a result of a number of difficulties including lack of funding, the destabilizing effect of political turmoil in the country, and lack of support from the Congolese institutions, training had to be suspended.

Most of the people interviewed for this research<sup>5</sup> underlined that the training had a major impact not only on their professional life, but on the state of cinema in Congo today. According to some interviewees there is hardly a set today in Kinshasa in which at least 50% of the crew did not participate to the INSAS/SUKA ! training. Moimi Wezam, who was part of the last generation of the program's trainees, states even that « 90% of the film projects that take place in Kinshasa today see the participa-

---

<sup>5</sup> The data included in this section of the essay were collected by Alessandro Jedlowski, as part of a research commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation to evaluate the long-term impact of the training initiatives organized by the Congolese production company SUKA !, in collaboration with the Belgian film school INSAS. This research was conducted exclusively in Kinshasa where twenty-three Congolese film professionals were interviewed over a ten-day research stay. A few more conversations were conducted with professionals based in Brussels and via Skype. Interviews were conducted in French. The research results do not apply to the situation of film production in other major centers such as Goma or Lubumbashi where film production activities also take place.

tion of people who attended the training organized by SUKA ! »<sup>6</sup> More than half of the people interviewed suggested that current increase in film production in Kinshasa can be directly connected to the impact that the production and release of *Congo in 4 Acts* (2009) and *Viva Riva !* (2011) – two films produced by SUKA ! which saw the participation of a large number of first and second generation training participants – had on younger aspiring filmmakers. The production and release of *Congo in 4 Acts*, a series of four short documentaries shot by young Congolese filmmakers who participated to the first round of training (Dieudo Hamadi, Kiripi Katembo Siku, Divita Wa Lusala, supported by crew members also trained in the program), had a particular impact as the film was the first Congolese production ever screened at the German Berlinale (2010) and later went on to be programmed in some forty-five other international film festivals, helping to expose Congolese cinema well beyond the frontiers of francophone cultural circles. DjoTunda Wa Munga's *Viva Riva !* was also screened at the 2011 Berlinale and was one of the first African films to conquer the silver screens without being labeled as such. In 2018, two films which emerged directly or indirectly from the *Ateliers* premiered at the Berlinale : Dieudo Hamadi's *Kinshasa Makambo* and Macherie Ekwa Bahongo's *Maki'la*.<sup>7</sup>

The significant rise in film production in Kinshasa during the last ten years was not only triggered by the local production and release of *Congo in 4 Acts* and *Viva Riva !*, but also by the production of three large international projects to which some INSAS/SUKA ! students collaborated parallel to their training : *Rebelle* (Kim Nguyen, 2012, nominated for the Oscar as best foreign film), *Kinshasa Kids* (Marc-Henri Wajnberg, 2012) and *Felicité* (Alain Gomis, 2017, Silver Bear at the Berlinale 2017 and nominated for the Oscar as best foreign film).<sup>8</sup> According to interviewees, the quality of these

---

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview made by Alessandro Jedlowski on 18/02/2018.

<sup>7</sup> Macherie Bahongo is a young self-thought female filmmaker whose film was co-produced by Emmanuel Lupia and his production company Tosala films. The film saw the participation, as crew members, of several INSAS/SUKA ! trainees.

<sup>8</sup> Other foreign productions SUKA ! collaborated with included : *Debut Kinshasa* (Sebastien Maitre, 2017), BBC (Dan Snow : *History of Congo*), CNN (Aja Harris : *Inside Africa*), Al Jazeera (*Baudouin Mouanda : Congolese Dreams*), TV5 Monde and IOM (*Retour à la paix*), Arte (documentary on the art scene in Kinshasa, produced by the German company Kobalt Production), Goethe Institute South Africa (*African Metropolis*), GIZ – German Development Agency (*State of*

productions convinced many aspiring Congolese filmmakers that it was possible to produce cinema of international quality standards in Democratic Republic of Congo, and attracted the youth toward professional filmmaking. The specific conditions of the local industry oriented filmmakers toward short films and documentary formats, but a few feature films have also seen the light.

Around twenty short fictions films made in Kinshasa are released every year. The most successful of them have been screened in international film festivals, helping to bring more attention toward the ongoing transformation of the local film production landscape. Among the short films which saw the participation of people who attended the INSAS/SUKA ! training program as director and/or members of the crew, the most successful include *Olongo* (Clarisse Muvuba, 2012), *Mbote* (Tshoper Kabambi, 2013), *Mosinzo* (Kadima Ngulungu, 2014), *André le géant* (Patrick Ken Kalala, 2015), *S.O.S.* (Tshoper Kabambi, 2016), *Une lettre à Praxy* (Tshoper Kabambi, 2017), *Eden* (Patrick Ken Kalala, 2017) and Nelson Makengo's *Théâtre Urbain* (2007) and *E'Ville* (2018).

Because of funding, the production of feature fiction films in Kinshasa has been relatively marginal until today (but more feature films in Swahili are produced in Goma for local and regional distribution in VCD). Patrick Kuba's feature film *Cocaïne Light* (2015), the first entirely locally funded feature film shot in Kinshasa, saw the collaboration of a large number of INSAS/SUKA ! trainees. More recently, a few other projects have seen the light : Emmanuel Lupia's *Matsbozi* (2017), Macherie Ekwa Bahongo's *Maki'la* (selected at Berlinale 2018 and coproduced by Emmanuel Lupia's company Tosalila Film), Tshoper Kabambi's *Malika* (forthcoming), Perrin Kan's *Les frères de Jesus* (forthcoming), and Keran Kam's *Demon* (forthcoming).<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the internationally recognized work of Dieudo Hamadi (*Dames en attente*, *Atalaku*, *Examen d'État*, *Maman colonelle*,

---

*Mind*), USAIDS, Search for Common Ground, DOC Society UK, KVS Brussels, and national broadcaster RTNC.

<sup>9</sup> A few of the people who participated to the training, such as Divita Wa Lusala and Kadima Ngulungu, had previous working experiences in the local television sector. After training, some of them went back to work in the production of television programs and series. Some of these productions have achieved international distribution on TV channels such as TV5 and A+. Among the television series which saw the participation of people who attended to the INSAS/SUKA ! training program as director and/or members of the crew, the most successful include : *Mpangi'Ami* (Didace Kawang Kapang), *Nda Kisa* (Patrick Ken Kalala), *Équipe* (Patrick Ken Kalala), *Moziki* (Clarisse Muvuba), *Zora* (Lengol Yohane).

*Kinshasa Makambo*) and Kiripi Katembo Siku (*Après mine, Symphony Kinshasa*), who both participated to the INSAS/SUKA ! training, several short and feature documentary films have been produced over the past few years and circulated in international festivals in Africa and beyond. Among those which saw the participation of people who attended to the INSAS/SUKA ! training program as director and/or members of the crew, the most successful include *Marché Koweit* (Paul Shemisi, 2015), *Kitendi* (Okoko Nyumbaiza, 2016), *Abalola* (Kadima Ngulungu, 2017), *Marathon* (Clarisse Muvuba, 2018), and *Bayindo* (Paul Shemisi, forthcoming).

Many of the people who participated to the *Atelier Action* program have attempted to build their own initiatives in order to provide training opportunities to the younger generations of aspiring filmmakers and created their own companies, participating to the development of the entrepreneurial environment on the basis of which the local film industry is slowly emerging. These companies include film production,<sup>10</sup> sound and editing studios and rent and technical assistance. Many of the people who participated to the training did not only continue a career in filmmaking and media entrepreneurship, but they went on to organize activities geared toward the consolidation of the local film industry in the fields of :

- Training, e.g. *FICKIN training workshops*, directed by Tshoper Kabambi ; *Image-Drama* created by Patrick Ken Kalala ; *Atelier CineCongo* by Eric Kayembe ; *Congo Film Lab* by Emmanuel Lupia and *Cinema Na Biso* by Deschamps Matala ;
- Festival organization, e.g. the Kinshasa International Film Festival FICKIN, initiated by Tshoper Kabambi ; Eric Kayembe's platform *Un cinéma pour le Congo* and Clarisse Muvuba's CINEF ;
- Distribution (cinema theatres,<sup>11</sup> online platforms and apps for the distribution of Congolese contents).

---

<sup>10</sup> Tshoper Kabambi (Bimpa Productions), Emmanuel Lupia (Tosala Films), Patrick Ken Kalala (Image-Drama), Kadima Ngulungu (Ngulungu Productions), John Mbingilay (Matrix-R), Deschamps Matala (Fixer Congo Productions), Jimmy Tisanabo (Safari Pictures), Moimi Wezam and Okoko Nyumbaiza (Lelo-Lobi NMW – together with Nelson Makengo), Keran Kam (Lynx Pro), Lengol Yohane, Michel Wetsi and Anthony Mandevo (Genjutsu), and Clarisse Muvuba's (Clarimage Films) created film production companies over the past few years.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s cinema theatres completely disappeared in Kinshasa, but things are slowly changing. Tshoper Kabambi's company Bimpa is fundraising for the creation of a network of small neighborhood cinemas, provisionally named « Cine Na Biso » (Our cinema), which will use re-adapted shipping containers as halls to reduce costs.

They also contributed in strengthening the local film sector by transmitting their knowledge to aspiring film professionals on film sets, online chats, and in other occasions, multiplying the trickling effect of the initial training.

### 3. *The question of Memory*

#### 3.1 *The Present*

The four documentaries in *Congo in 4 Acts* (2009), which belong to the seminal films of Kinshasa's New Wave, directly confront the contemporary reality and life conditions in Democratic Republic of Congo. All of them are testimonies of forms of violence being inflicted in the present, rather than remembrances of past wounds. In this sense, they express a particular urgency, which does not indulge in the need to explore the historical causes (i.e. colonialism, Mobutism) behind contemporary traumas. In these films colonial or neocolonial pasts offer little explanation for the present situation. Focusing on them would only offer a diversion and a form of escapism from what people experience in the present. These films' hyperrealist observation of injustices, thefts, rapes, ecocide, violence and other instances of Congo as a « failed state » are not just made for the sake of offering a representation of contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo ; rather they serve to build a contestatory cinema aesthetic, or un « cinéma de revendication », that, in contrast to mass media, stubbornly resists to the normalization and naturalization of Congo's predicaments. This *testimonial cinema of the present* claims the recognition of fundamental rights in a context in which they are constantly negated.

*Congo in 4 Acts* was produced by Djo Tunda Wa Munga and Steven Markovitz, who also co-produced Munga's *Viva Riva!*, a more commercially oriented fiction film in which *Congo in 4 Acts'* crew members were also involved.<sup>12</sup> Despite being produced and realized by the same people, the two films could hardly be more different from each other in style and form at first sight. However, while representational realism enhances veracity in *Congo in 4 Acts*, in *Viva Riva!* the same observational aesthetics translate into a sense of verisimilitude. The two films also share their focus on

---

<sup>12</sup> Second assistant director (Kiripi Katembo Siku), editing assistant (Divita Wa Lusala), assistant art director (Deschamps Matala), sound (Michel Kabeya).

the present, which is not a disavowal of the past, neither a form of aphasia, amnesia or oblivion.

*Viva Riva!* is more a microcosmic vision of the dynamics that have torn apart the Democratic Republic of Congo over the last decades than it is an allegory of Mobutism or colonial past. One of its only (but recurrent) references to recent Congolese history is a poster of the famous 1974 *Rumble in the Jungle*, when Mobutu invited Muhammad Ali to challenge George Foreman, with artistes such as BB King, James Brown and others – an event meant to publicize Congo's greatness to the world. In a way, the final scene – a kid with a pile of dirty money – also refers to the past as it reveals a vision of the future as the continuation of past cycles of greed and power. Franklin Boukaka's song *Le Bucheron* plays through the end credits : « I wonder, the white man left. Who is independent ? Which independence ? ». The song suggests a continuation between past, present and future, and allows Djo Tunda Wa Munga to establish such a link without being forced to explicitly represent the past – something he could have easily done, considering that he collaborated as production manager on a film describing King Leopold's reign in Congo : Peter Bate's 2003 *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*.

Patrick Kuba's *Cocaine Light* (2015) is in some ways the follow-up of *Viva Riva!*. Both are « films noir », both are set in Kinshasa, and both saw the collaboration of a large number of SUKA ! trainees. But whereas *Viva Riva!* was an international production, *Cocaine Light* is entirely locally funded. Also, if *Viva Riva!* includes some references to the past, *Cocaine Light* has none. « J'ai le désir de montrer le présent », says Kuba. « Il y a tellement d'images du passé, et elles ne sont pas racontées par nous. Les Congolais d'aujourd'hui ont des rêves qu'il faut montrer en images. »<sup>13</sup> Kuba produced and directed another fiction film the same year, *Tshibau*, which tells the story of Kapi, a woman who is falsely accused of adultery and who has to undergo a ritual of purification and reintegration in her family and society. Like the Cameroonian film *Muna Moto* (1975) by Jean-Pierre Dikongue-Pipa and many other African films of the seventies and eighties which André Gardies called films « sous le signe du clivage et de la quête »<sup>14</sup> the protagonist of *Tshibau* is a « victime de la tradition », and holds an ambiguous relation to tradition and

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview made by Matthias De Groof on 09/09/2018.

<sup>14</sup> A. GARDIES, *Cinéma d'Afrique noire francophone. L'espace miroir*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1989.

to her ancestors. In a central scene in the film which takes place in Kinshasa's national museum, she talks to the artifacts that symbolize her cultural heritage to denounce the way in which the gender discrimination of certain traditional practices has no place in modernity. In the film, we hear her say :

Je ne te reproche pas, je ne te condamne pas. Tu avais sûrement de bonnes raisons. Faire de moi un élément de décor. Me priver de la parole, dans le milieu où se trouvaient les hommes. M'attribuer un rôle d'objet dont le destin était décidé par d'autres. J'ai aussi droit d'exister. Moi, ton héritière, et gardienne de ton savoir, et de ton identité en péril qui est aussi la mienne, ne me reproche rien. Ne me condamne pas. Si aujourd'hui je ne me tais plus, je tombe. Je me relève, et j'avance. Les temps changent, et tu resteras toujours dans mon cœur. Malgré nos divergences.

In Kuba's *Tshibau*, Kapi meets Badi, the scriptwriter of *Cocaïne Light*. Badi, a character that represents Kuba himself, suffers from a writer's block. Kapi says to Badi :

Kapi : « Mon grand-père m'a toujours dit : "Quand tu sais qui tu es, tu es fort ; et quand tu sais d'où tu viens, tu sauras où aller". Quand il m'a dit ça, je me suis senti investie d'une mission de gardienne pour garder l'indice identitaire ».

Badi : « C'est une drôle de façon de voir les choses du monde ».

Kapi : « Toi tu es scénariste, c'est ça ? »

Badi : « Oui, c'est vrai. J'écris un film noir intitulé *Cocaïne Light*, et j'ai eu un blocage. J'ai du tout stopper pour trouver de l'inspiration ».

Kapi : « Et tu penses là trouver chez moi ? »

Badi : « Le beau m'inspire. Tu m'inspires ».

Badi seems to be more interested in Kapi's appearance than in what she has to say or in her mission of connecting the past and the present : *Cocaïne Light* will turn out to focus on a story that reflect a similar position. Other films that similarly avoid an open confrontation with the past, memory or history, are numerous. Michée Sunzu's *Maraîchère* (2008), Eric Kayembe's *Phantasia* (2012), Judith Kalanga's *Ma vie en dépend* (2013), Paul Shemisi's *Marché Koweït* (2013), Kadima Ngulungu's *Mosinzo* (2015), *A Balola* (2016) and *BA Ndimi* (2017), Okoko Nyumbaïza's *Feu Rouge* (2015) and *Kitendi* (2016), Emmanuel Lupia's *Matsbozi* (2017), Moimi Wezam's *Le Bout du tunnel* (2015), *Horizon B* (2015) and *Ruptures* (2018), Nizar Saleh Mohamedali's *Kinshasa – Bidon Vil* (2018) and Macherie Ekwa Bahongo's *Maki'la* (2018), are all situated in the present and reflect on the present. The dead man from the past who appears in Patrick

Ken Kalala's *André le géant* (2015) turns out to be only a dressed-up thief, fooling not only the driver of the taxi he takes a ride on, but also the researcher trying to find in this film traces and signs of Congolese past.

Shemisi's yet unfinished *Bayindo* can be considered as one of the very few exceptions to the rule.<sup>15</sup> This film shows the revivalism of animistic communities that want to restore their customs and their ancestral faiths destroyed by colonization and by the arrival of missionaries. By referring to these past beliefs, these communities wish to proclaim officially the spiritual independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A priest says :

When our ancestors died with the whip, where were the human rights ? The prophet Simon Kimbangu, imprisoned during 30 years, where were the human rights ? It has been a long time since we fight against the white people. Our fight for freedom dates back a long time. The white man divided us and ruled us. If we were united, the evil would not have infiltrated.

### 3.2 Lumumba

If Tshoper Kabambi's *Mbote* (2013) does not directly refer to the past either, Kabambi's work gradually evolved toward reflecting more closely on historical issues by focusing (even though in a relatively marginal way) on the figure of Patrice Lumumba. The assassinated first prime minister of independent Congo stands symbolically for Congo's failed independence, and in Congolese popular culture is often associated with the figure of Simon Kimbangu, Lumumba's fellow martyr of decolonization mentioned by the Priest in the previously mentioned film *Bayindo*. While Kabambi's *Bilili* (2014) includes a rather superficial reference to Patrice Lumumba through the famous Congolese singer Jeannot Bombenga's (Vox Africa) song about Congolese independence, the figure of Lumumba forms the outset of Kabambi's *Kinshasa* (2014), a film that can be seen as his *Kin Kiese*-like city-symphony. In showing the image of Lumumba's statue at the « échangeur » on the Lumumba Avenue, the film symbolically identifies Kinshasa with Lumumba. The same statue – a statue which is in fact based not on the historical figure of Lumumba, but on the actor who played Lumumba in Raoul Peck's feature film *Lumumba* (2001) – also forms the outset of Patrick Ken Kalala's *Du-*

---

<sup>15</sup> Another exception is Kalala's *La presse étranglée* (2010), which refers to the assassination of journalists during the Mobutu era.

*bious Customer* (2012). Kabambi's *Lettre à Praxy* (2017), then, fully addresses Congolese past through a letter to his daughter Praxy. He writes her about Congo's past as a story which « gêne un peu » :

Mon histoire, qui sera bientôt la tienne, est longue. Je ne saurais pas te la raconter dans cette lettre. Pas parce que je ne veux pas, ni parce que je ne peux pas, mais parce que je ne l'aime pas vraiment cette histoire. Elle est remplie de sang, de trahison, de corruption, de haine et des scènes que tu ne peux pas t'imaginer. Mais que faire ? C'est notre histoire. [...] J'espère en tout cas qu'un jour je serai capable de raconter toute l'histoire dans un long film, depuis le début, passant par les 32 ans de règne sous la dictature de Mobutu, jusqu'à nos jours. Mais bon, je t'écris surtout cette lettre, à cause des nouvelles que j'ai du pays grâce aux réseaux sociaux. Ces nouvelles me donnent beaucoup de peine. C'est dur et mon cœur s'en déchire.

We hear gunshots, and Kabambi goes on to reflect on the members of the political elite, « qui font preuve d'une immaturité digne de personnes sans intellect. A croire que le passé n'a rien appris à certains ». He then shows iconic images of colonial exploitation while we hear Lumumba's independence speech « Nous avons connu les ironies, les insultes, les coups que nous devons subir matin, midi et soir, parce que nous étions des nègres ». He further tells his daughter about a demonstration he witnessed on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> September 2016, the days of unrest against President Joseph Kabila's decision to delay the elections – when, according to Human Rights Watch, 44 people were killed. Kabambi participated to the unrest, but as a filmmaker rather than as a protestor.<sup>16</sup> In *Lettre à Praxy*, then, references to the past mostly serve to look at the present political predicaments, which are the key focus of the film.

A similar dynamic can be seen at work in the way the figure of Lumumba is used in Nelson Makengo's *Théâtre Urbain* (2007). In this short film, Elbas, the protagonist, happens to enter in a « parcelle » where he believes to see Patrice Lumumba in the face of Michel, the chief of the family he is visiting – who in reality is Lumumba's first son. Reacting to Elbas' amazement, Michel Lumumba responds : « No, it is Patrice who copied my face ! » In a Baudrillardian turn,<sup>17</sup> Michel's image is not representation-

---

<sup>16</sup> In the short *S.O.S.* (2016), Tshoper Kabambi imagines a fourteen years old boy, named Ezechiel, who commits to meet the president in order to confront him with the grieves of the population on « la loi électorale. »

<sup>17</sup> « L'image ne peut plus imaginer le réel, puisqu'elle l'est », J. BAUDRILLARD, *Le crime parfait*, Paris, Galilée, 1995, p. 16.

al, but instead becomes reality in itself, humorously reversing the « memory image » of the historical Lumumba with his « current image », as Jean-Louis Comolli calls it, through facial similarities and a similar haircut. The memory image of the historical figure, then, is replaced and substituted by the current image. Is this inversion done to acknowledge that you cannot really kill him and that Lumumba will always be part of the Congolese's present ? Indeed, multiple Lumumbas have been created without reference to the actual one. Fabrice Kalonji Malabar's *La Voix* (2013), for instance, follows a man who is called « God's envoy » and who sells newspapers in the streets of Kinshasa while preaching Lumumba's message. He shouts : « Tue Lumumba, tu auras 1000 Lumumbas ! ».

Nelson Makengo's latest film *E'Ville* (2018) is set in an old Gécamines sport circle, today abandoned. In this place of memory and desolation, inhabited by ghosts, the fragments of the Democratic Republic of Congo's history are reconstituted through the narration of an intimate story : that of an open letter from Patrice Lumumba to his wife Pauline, written shortly before his assassination. In this letter, read aloud by Eriq Ebouaney, the actor who played the role of Lumumba in Peck's film of 2001, we read « Le colonialisme belge et ses alliés occidentaux, [...] ont corrompu certains de nos compatriotes, ils en ont acheté d'autres, ils ont contribué à déformer la vérité et à saper notre indépendance ». These words, which run along images of colonial ruins, reverse the often-heard discourse which considers independence as the cause for the country's failure by suggesting instead that it is precisely the failure of independence (or the lack of a true independence) which is the reason for the country's perpetual state of dilapidation.

There is a spectral dimension to this film's representation of the past, and what is spectral is not the past itself, but what « could have been » – the past conditional. More importantly, what is addressed here is not this spectral, conditional dimension, but the actual real predicaments of the country. Not Patrice, but Pauline, who stands for what remained despite the assassination. Pauline stands for Congo, the Congo of nowadays. Furthermore, Patrice – who is not the subject of the film, but the point of view behind it – makes promises (or, better, prophecies) about the future : « Je sais et sens dans le fond de mon être que tôt ou tard mon peuple se débarrassera de tous ses ennemis intérieurs, qu'il se lèvera... [...] L'histoire prononcera un jour son jugement... »

In this sense, even a film which extensively uses references to the past and which focuses on the aesthetics of the ruins is after all a film mostly concerned with ongoing discussions about the present and the future of the country, a future in which, as Patrice Lumumba wrote, « l'histoire prononcera [...] son jugement, mais ce ne sera pas l'histoire qu'on enseignera à Bruxelles, à Paris, à Washington ou aux Nations Unis ; ce sera celle qu'on enseignera dans les pays affranchis du colonialisme et de ses fantoches. L'Afrique écrira sa propre histoire et elle sera, au Nord et au Sud du Sahara, une histoire de gloire et de dignité ».<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. *Remembering the present*

Our brief overview of the films produced by the Kinshasa's new wave – a generation historically tied to the *Ateliers Action* initiative – shows that they generally do not engage in a direct, straightforward representation of the past, and even when they do, they mostly refer to the past as a narrative device to talk about the present. The analysis of the Kinshasa new wave shows that for this generation's filmmakers to talk about « memory » is not simply a way of *re-presenting* the past. Rather, the films function as memories « in action » ; they are works that memorialize the present. « Never forget the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> September of 2016 », Kabambi writes to his daughter. The Sankofa-motto, « if you don't know where you're coming from, how do you know where you're going ? », is altered here into a rather more urgent call : « if you don't know where you're standing now, how can you know where you're going ? » Both documentary and fiction films (the latter are more often made for Congolese audiences than for the western festival circuit) show the horrors of the present to make the spectator conscious about the socio-economic conditions of the country. By doing so, they invite the spectator to take a position within the arena of politics. Conversely, more entertainment oriented films reshape the dreams of Congolese audienc-

---

<sup>18</sup> It is important to underline that multiple imaginations of the « future » emerged in relation to both the new wave and the visual arts scene in Kinshasa over the past few years. However, their analysis goes beyond the scope of this article. Suffice here to mention a few afro-futurist films such as *Perinium* (2013) or *Lobi Kuna* (2018) ; afro-futurist art-videos such as *Postcolonial Dilemma : Parts I-III* (2010-2014) or *In the Making* by Dinozord (2014) ; and afro-futurist music clips such as *Capture* by Baloji (2015) or *Malukayi* by Mbwana Star (2015).

es through « cautionary tales ». In a sense, conceived as forms of « active memorialization », both kind of films can sometime function sometimes as antidotes to historiography (in this case, the writing of contemporary history or « histoire immediate »).

Much of the literature in memory studies contrasts memory to historiography, and underlines how historiography is often « at odds » with collective and/or cultural memory. While history is a representation of the past, memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, something like a bond that ties us to the eternal present, writes Pierre Nora.<sup>19</sup> With its particular use of memory, the Congolese new wave reveals something that escapes easy definition. It is not the lack of serious work by Congolese or other international historians – a lack which would then have to be substituted by the creation of memory through cinema. Neither it is the fact that these historiographies are corrupted by censorship or State-ideology (although that problem exists) – violations of truth which then would have to be subverted by cinematic counter-narratives. These films do not intend to suggest either that official history has supplanted collective memory ; they do not pretend to say that cinematic memories are more immediate (rather than mediated), and therefore more « authentic », « real », « unalienated » and « pure » by contrast with History conceived as an objective knowledge – a position that would hardly be possible to defend today since no representation escapes the artificiality of language (Barthes, Derrida...), not even the realism of « testimonial cinema » which witnesses unfolding traumas.

In our opinion, by not dealing with the past but only with the present, the new wave reveals first and foremost the impossibility of historicizing trauma (the trauma of colonialism, Mobutism...), as trauma can never be fully be integrated into understanding.<sup>20</sup> Cinema offers something historiography is incapable of, while still offering the possibility of memory : the possibility of inhabiting the processes of memory-making itself.

But can cinema « represent » trauma at all ? Doesn't trauma defy representation as such ? When the traumatizing event is situated in the past (the trauma itself is always in the present), it can-

---

<sup>19</sup> P. NORA, « Between Memory and History : *Les Lieux de Mémoire* », *Representations*, n. 26, Spring 1989, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> C. CARUTH, « Introduction » to « Part II : Recapturing the Past », *Trauma : Explorations in Memory*, C. Caruth Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 153. Caruth adds, « trauma thus seems to evoke the different truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence » (p. 153).

not even be integrated into a completed story. It cannot become a « narrative memory »,<sup>21</sup> as it haunts the present. It cannot be rendered as past. As Kolk and Hart observe, the traumatic memory cannot be transformed into a story, positioned in time, with a beginning, middle and end, as it would be in more common forms of « narrative memory ». For instance, the collective trauma of the murder of Patrice Lumumba disrupts and disjoins time in the narratives about the iconic political figure.<sup>22</sup>

To the contrary, when the traumatizing event is situated in the present, it can at least be recorded. This is what *Congo in 4 Acts* attempts to do, representing trauma without making an attempt at explaining or understanding the traumatizing events. The historicization of trauma would be insufficient because inevitably reductive. Testimonial memory is thus the privileged medium for representing trauma in the films by the Congolese new wave because, in representing trauma without assimilating it into historical narratives, testimonial memory refuses to exorcise or to heal the trauma let alone to disavow, sublimate or aestheticize it – and in doing so it avoids the risk of negating the trauma, but instead it recognizes it in all its incommensurability.

Secondly, the traditional modes by which the Congolese society transmitted and conserved group memories has declined and eroded though as a result of colonialism and cultural alienation. Memories of precolonial times or anti-colonial struggles, for instance, are distorted or even erased by the « forgetting machine » of cultural colonization.<sup>23</sup> As Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, « Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it ».<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> B. A. VAN DER KOLK, O. VAN DER HART, « The Intrusive Past : The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma », *Trauma : Explorations in Memory*, 1995, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> M. DE GROOF, « Lumumba's Iconography as Interstice between Art and History », dans *Mediating Past, Present and Future of D. R. Congo's Historical Narratives on Art in a Global South Dialogue*, *Art@'s Bulletin* 7, n. 1, 2018, p. 38-44 and M. DE GROOF, *The Iconography of Patrice Lumumba in the Arts*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> A. CÉSAIRE, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), Paris, Présence africaine, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> F. FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), tr. C. Farrington, New York, Grove, 1968, p. 210.

The general avoidance of the past in the Kinois new wave cinema does not necessarily mean that this new wave has not yet started a « struggle over collective memory ». In fact, the duty of remembering, recalling and reconfiguring – a tool in all anti-colonial struggles – starts with remembering the present. The new wave of cinematic memorialization of the present (through both fiction and documentary forms) forge collective identities, albeit preserving contradictory, fractured and competing narratives open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting.

*Résumé* – Quelle est la place de la mémoire culturelle dans le cinéma congolais contemporain ? Cet article tente de répondre à cette question en se concentrant sur la façon dont la mémoire est thématisée dans les films produits par la « Nouvelle vague » de cinéastes congolais à Kinshasa, en grande partie issus du programme de formation Atelier Action (2008-2015). Les auteurs affrontent, dans un premier temps, l'histoire du cinéma en République démocratique du Congo ; d'autre part ils situent et contextualisent le travail de l'Atelier Actions et discutent de ses retombées sur le cinéma contemporain à Kinshasa. Pour finir, ils analysent comment cette nouvelle vague relie le passé et le présent à travers la création d'un cinéma qui – à l'instar de la littérature congolaise contemporaine – embrasse l'écriture de l'instant et donne vie à une impression de présent perpétuel. L'oubli créatif est ici le résultat de l'impossibilité de raconter les traumatismes du passé au moment où l'on est confronté aux horreurs du présent. Les films de la nouvelle vague congolaise de Kinshasa représentent ainsi les souvenirs d'un présent qui glisse constamment dans le passé.

*Abstract* – Where to locate cultural memory in contemporary Congolese cinema ? This article makes an attempt at answering to this question by focusing on the way memory is thematised in the films produced by the « new wave » of Congolese filmmakers in Kinshasa. This new wave has emerged largely from the training program Atelier Action (2008-2015). In this article, the authors firstly introduce the history of cinema in Democratic Republic of Congo ; secondly they situate and contextualize the work of Atelier Actions and discuss its trickledown effect on contemporary filmmaking in Kinshasa ; and finally, they explore how this new wave mediates the past in the present by producing a cinema that – like contemporary Congolese literature – embraces the writing of immediacy, and produces an impression of perpetual present. Creative forgetfulness here, result from the combination of the impossibility of narrating the traumas of the past while facing the horrors of the present. The films of the Con-

golese new wave from Kinshasa thus represents memories of the present which perpetually glides into the past.

*Les auteurs* – Matthias De Groof est chercheur à la *Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies*, docteur en Études de Cinéma et Cultures Visuelles (UA & KUL), Sciences Politiques (UCL), African Studies (UMU-Uganda) et Cinéma Studies (UA, NYU). Son doctorat interdisciplinaire (Anthropologie, Philosophie et Cinéma) surmonte les oppositions traditionnelles entre le cinéma africain et le film ethnographique d'une part et le cinéma africain et les idéologies de la Négritude de l'autre. Après son Fulbright / BAEF scholarship à NYU (Tisch School of the Arts), il étudie le cinéma postcolonial belge en tant que *Chargé de Recherches* du Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique - Flandre (FWO) à l'Université d'Anvers (ViDi), et enseigne la Philosophie de l'Art à l'Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts d'Anvers, le « World Cinema » et « Curating & Exhibiting » à l'Université d'Anvers. Son travail scientifique a été publiée entre autres dans *Third Text*, Columbia University Press, Black Camera, HJFRT, Visual Anthropology et Image [&] Narrative. Il combine ses recherches académiques avec des activités artistiques. Son travail artistique (photographie, film et vidéo) a été présenté entre autres à IFAA, au Festival du Film de Rotterdam, Media City, le San Francisco Art Institute et à la CINEMATEK. <matthias.degroof@uantwerpen.be>

Alessandro Jedlowski est collaborateur scientifique du Fond National pour la recherche scientifique Belge (FRS-FNRS) au Centre de Recherche en Information et Communication de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgique). Au cours des dernières années, sa recherche s'est concentrée sur l'analyse des aspects économiques et politiques de la production cinématographique au Nigeria, en Ethiopie et en Côte d'Ivoire, et sur les interactions entre les industries médiatiques africaines et celles des pays du Sud tels que l'Inde et la Chine. Il a publié de nombreux articles dans des ouvrages collectifs et sur des revues internationales telles que *African Affairs*, *Media, Culture and Society* and *Television and New Media*. Plus récemment il a dirigé la publication des ouvrages *Mobility between Africa, Asia and Latin America : Economic Networks and Cultural Interactions* (Zed Books, 2017) et *Cine-Ethiopia : The History and Politics of Film in the Horn of Africa* (Michigan State University Press, 2018) et d'un numéro spécial de la revue *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (vol. 29, n. 1) sur les interactions médiatique entre Afrique et Chine. <alessandro.jedlowski@gmail.com>

