

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF KINSHASA'S TELEVISION SERIALS

Explorations into the Dynamics of the Cultural Public Sphere in a Central-African Megapolis

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When we consider the hallmark of a public sphere to be the exchange and negotiation of views, opinions and interests, or even “the ability to influence, criticise, or inform governing bodies” (Barnes, 1996, p. 36) then dialogue with society's others is a prerequisite. The writings of Jürgen Habermas (1975) and Benedict Anderson (1983) have opened up a field of exciting research on the role of mass media in the construction of the ‘public sphere.’ In their wake, a whole range of researchers has attempted to refine the character and the dynamics within the ‘public sphere’ (cf. Calhoun 1991). Students of political processes in Central-African societies in particular understand the ‘democratic,’ argumentative and discursive construction of the public sphere as spelled out by Habermas to be relevant for western societies though, their findings indicate that Habermas’ definition of the public sphere is not that easily wedded to other societies where participation in the construction of the ‘common good,’ the exact definition of the ‘common good,’ and the

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media through which the negotiations take place depend on structures of power and cultural dependent rules of expression incomparable to western post-Enlightenment society (cf. Bayart, Mbembe and Toulabor 1992, Monga 1994).

Research on the public sphere(s) in post-Mobutu Kinshasa, the capital of DR Congo, brings to the fore a splintered complex of sites in which diverging social categories and leaders articulate a wide range of themes through a variety of media.¹ The best-known discursive public sphere in Kinshasa, and probably closest to Habermas' discursive public sphere, is realized around *parlementaires debout*, 'upstanding parliamentaries.' Groups of elder men assemble on pavements, near roundabouts, or on street corners where journals are spread out on cords or displayed page next to page on the ground, fixed with some stones. These men, often intellectuals and elderly people, read the articles and discuss them, often leading to heated arguments. Members of political parties attend at these meetings and they transfer the debated opinions to larger more important political bodies. Main topics of debate are the national political issues, such as the interplay between the president and his four vice-presidents, the political role of Tshisekedi, and the threats of war in the Eastern part of the country. This space is an adult masculine public sphere to the extent that youngsters and women do not feel invited to join these groups since most of them are *vieux: des intellectuels et des fonctionnaires* as one informant described them.

The young and performances

"But for us, the sacrificed of society, we do not have such a space to express our concerns." In Kinshasa today, adult men still "have the word," and children (to which the young also belong) should ideally listen to the voices of the elders. "The only way to express ourselves is

1 Nowadays, Kinshasa's media world is a highly dynamic terrain. Regularly, new local and international channels are added, and the government's strong control over the media often suspends or withdraws licenses of channel owners. In 2003, the city's population could watch 25 television channels, of which 22 were urban-local. This number had been augmented to 37 and 33 by July 2006. These numbers are significant in comparison to the total amount of television channels: researchers for the Parisian Panos institute have counted 52 television channels in 2004 on the national territory. Half of Kinshasa's channels have a commercial profile, while the others are explicitly linked with a Christian prophet or a church, in particular churches of a Pentecostal-charismatic type (cf. De Boeck 2004, Devisch 1996)

through our body," a young man contended when discussing the *parlementaires debout*. In geronocratic Kinshasa, youngsters still have to make room for the authority of their elders, both in private as well as in the public sphere. They turn to other venues to actively participate in the reconstruction of their society. The body is one of the main sites through which youngsters impose themselves in and on the public sphere (De Boeck, 2004, p. 236-241). *Nzoto ezoloba*, (the body speaks). In cultural practises such as dance and theatre the body becomes a medium through which the urban experience is expressed. More than any other site, for Kinshasa youngsters, the symbolic space of theatre (both on stage as on television) creates a separate physical and imaginary space to reflect on their experiences and to express them.

A proverb aligns children/youth with play and offers them a site to influence and even to direct their elders: "A child too can tap the drums, and the elders will dance" (*Mwana moke abetaka mbunda bakolo mpe babini*). The young dramatic artists who produce television serials use this proverb as a defense about their portrayals of their parents and older generations in their visual texts, which are predominantly performed by unmarried men and women. Already this proverb "from the village" gives the young the right to speak to the elders. Although the proverb confines the mastery of the young over the elders in the space of the dance, the young Kinshasa have monopolized the site of popular culture to vent their aspirations and frustrations. According to Mamadou Diouf, this orientation of youth to popular culture seems even to be a general African pattern. He depicts songs, theatre and other products of popular culture as "masks of the voice of African youth" (Diouf, 2005, p. 231).

What happens within these ludic spaces? During improvisation and rehearsing sessions, the company's leaders encourage new actors or rather shy members of the group to "steal the word" (*Li. koyiba liloba*). The *president* often repeats "You have to know how to steal the word" (*il faut koyeba koyiba*). On the level of acting it means that during these improvisations the actors with the most experience are talking all the time and thus set their scene, which paralyzes the new and younger members of the drama group and leaves them without any possibility to enter in the dialogue or to direct the story line. In my view, we can also relate this expression to the sphere of the serials as a whole within the gerontocratic society that Kinshasa still is: youngsters have to be cunning in order to steal the word. They are deprived from speaking about domestic and public politics. I therefore prefer to read the space of popular culture, especially during rehearsals or when the serials are

shown on television, as *disguised sites* in which these youngsters can express their voice, i.e. *capture the word*.

My understanding of the television serials, or Kinshasa's popular culture in general, as a site to "listen" to voices is profoundly influenced by other scholars who attach great value to spaces within society that are not seen as political relevant when one adheres to western-rational approaches of the public sphere. Pnina Werbner, discussing Pakistani immigrants in Manchester, argues that symbolic discourses on social identities, moral behavior and politics are created, negotiated, and elaborated in social spaces marked by gaiety, humor, music and laughter (cf. Werbner, 1996, p. 56). She introduces the notion of "fun space," which she identifies as in particular sports and wedding ceremonies within the Pakistani migrants community in Manchester. Werbner links the production of sports and dance but also movies with the struggle of subalterns as women and youth to get a voice within the Manchester Pakistani immigrants' public sphere. In Kinshasa, popular theatre too is a public zone in which, through mockery and parody, the dramatic artists distance themselves from the elder generations. In the humoristic reversal of the real, regular behavior is subjected to satire and therefore critiqued.

In a similar vein Peter Probst has analyzed theatrical performances during rituals as a space ('zone') within the public sphere. In line with Habermas' "discursive Öffentlichkeit", which has started with magazines, used by Europe's first "citizens" as a forum to discuss about common, i.e. political and economic issues, Probst has introduced the notion of "performative Öffentlichkeit" (*performative publicity*) stressing the role of the body and performances in expressing opinions on public matters (Probst, 2002). When acknowledging the political role of dance and theatre as enacted in political rallies or awareness raising campaigns on human rights, democracy and health issues, but also the serials aired on television, then we can also understand Kinshasa's television serials as occupying a "zone" within a *performative public sphere*.

The cultural public sphere

Kinshasa's serials (commonly called *maboke*, *theater populaire*, or *télédramatiques*)¹ do not so much speak out against the government

1 On all of Kinshasa's television channels, people can watch episodes of several theatre companies weekly producing an episode of their serials. Independent of the profile of

or (foreign) employers (or even missions), but, rather in line with the melodramas focus on domestic conflicts, they address the lineage elders and authority bearers in their own families. With their focus on domestic affairs, these fictive symbolical worlds constitute a unique zone of an urban 'public sphere' where the city's young and women (who make up a large part of the viewing audience) participate. Despite the absence of 'real politics' in the serials, the telenarratives discuss 'the common good,' enhance conviviality, voice societal concerns, and encourage debate, thus constituting a 'cultural public sphere' (McGuigan, 2005). Jim McGuigan contrasts the public sphere carved out by soap operas and other television programs to a 'political public sphere.' He relates the difference between both public spheres to Habermas' distinction between the life world, thriving around everyday life and personal satisfaction, and the system, with business and government as its main topics.¹³ The 'cultural public sphere' considers the emphasis upon affect and the immediacy of the everyday, in contrast to the impersonal systems of the market and the government, where cognitive and rational modes dominate the negotiations (McGuigan, 2005, p. 435). The cultural public sphere includes "mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on who we live and imagine the good life" (Ibid.). It is worth citing McGuigan's definition of the 'cultural public sphere' at length:

"The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. The cultural public sphere trades in pleasures and pains that are experienced vicariously through willing suspension of disbelief, for example, by watching soap operas, identifying with the characters and their problems, talking and arguing with friends and relatives about what they should and should

the channel on which the serials are diffused (national/commercial/confessional), all the serials are framed within the apocalyptic ideology (cf. De Boeck, 2005). Several of these troupes have an explicit evangelizing mission (like Cinema-Arc-en-Ciel, Les Evangélistes, La Trompette). Even within so-called *troupes ya mokili* (secular theatre), there is a trend towards christianization. Most of these drama groups are supervised by a Christian spiritual advisor, who not only controls the story lines but also offers rehearsal space to the troupe. The dramatic stories always end with the conversion to Jesus and the glorification of his power. The 'zone' of popular theatre thus has a high Christian profile

1 Jim McGuigan is influenced by Jostein Grispud (1992) who has studied the historical role of the melodrama in the European public sphere

not do. Images of the good life and expectations of what can be got out of this life are mediated mundanely through entertainment and popular media discourses. Affective communications help people to think reflexively about their own lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone's control on the terrain of everyday life. The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence." (McGuigan, 2005, p. 435).

The cultural public sphere is then constructed in the discourse surrounding the consumption of the serials, the conversations triggered by the looking experiences of the spectators. Both on screen and off screen talk contribute to the sphere of politics (cf. Wilk, 2002). This can easily be transferred to the viewing context in Africa (cf. Abu-Lughod, 2005).

Rendering the private public

In McGuigan's description of the cultural public sphere, however, there seems to be a rigid distinction between producers and producers of television narratives. The fabrication of Kinshasa's serials hints at a unique fashioning of a cultural public sphere, where both dramatic artists and their audience contribute to the plotline and thus merge their opinions and interests into timely documents of their understandings of society and the direction the social should take.

The generation of Kinshasa's serials takes much after the working modalities of the Yoruba artists that Karin Barber has described in *The Generation of Plays. Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (Barber, 2000). Dialogue, improvisation and a striking openness of the narratives are the main components of the preparation and performances of these mass-mediated narratives. Usually the leader of a theatre company summarizes the scenes of the first episode of a serial on a *canevas*. Their inspiration draws to a large extent from personal experiences of the dramatic artists and rumors and gossip in the city, the so-called *radio trottoir*. *Radio trottoir* both deals with public and private events and persons. This informal spreading of the word is sometimes so powerful that it mobilizes the Kinois. Everybody takes part in it and everybody is discussed in it. The whispers are spread over the streets into the compounds and back to the churches and the television screens, to the extent that social big persons sometimes have to falsify rumors

about them on television. The *radio trottoir* can be called the basis for Kinshasa's cultural public spheres, since musicians and comedians confirm that most of their inspiration for lyrics and serials is drawn from this vast repertoire of stories.

The *canevas* usually communicates in one sentence the core of the scenes, which the individual artists have to fill out themselves, through improvisation. Extensive stage directions and phrases of the characters lack. Much creativity lies in the hands of the young actors, of which the most experienced self-direct their scenes. As such, they can change the following lines of the serials. As a consequence, not only the leader of the company who initially thinks up the story lines, but also the individual comedian partakes in the writing out of the scenario.

In the first episode of these serials, different households are shown with their own difficulties. A general plot line seems to lack, the serials seem to go in all directions, for example marriage arrangements, tensions between village people and Kinnois, the quest for money, illegitimate sexual affairs, and the search for health assistance are all inserted within the first episode. Shooting problems (conflicts within the drama group that dispel comedians of playing for several weeks, or the improvising qualities of the comedians) and the popularity of some comedians affect to a small degree the continuation of certain plotlines. More significant for the direction of the plotlines are remarks of the audience.¹ Both in the content of the fictive narratives, as in the social origins of the tales, the boundaries between the public and the personal are constantly overriden, just as well as between the individual and the collective.

The episodes of the serials are diffused three times a week, so that everyone has the opportunity to see the evolution of the plotline.

1 Bogumil Jewsiwiecki has observed the same multiplicity of themes, images and even stories for Kinshasa's popular paintings and confesses that this 'visual cacophony' might be the most unsettling aspect of Kinshasa's society for one educated within an occidental world. He writes for Kinshasa's *tableaux*, but this can easily be transposed to the *télédramatiques*: « the accounts, the images are shown in simultaneity, but because their contents are usually well-known, one easily goes on from one to another, borrowing a kind of linearity in zig zag » (Jewsiwiecki, 2004, p. 261, my translation). This myriad of plotlines and of realities that intermingle may well be a characteristic of Kinshasa's modernity and is observed within conversations the city (Jewsiwiecki, 2004, p. 262). Also the sermons follow the same zigzag structure. In the onset of the sermons, pastors and preachers indicate the topic of the sermon to abandon it for a long time and only – for an outsider – to return to it as by coincidence.

Often, the actors are invited in weekly talk shows like *Théâtre de la Cité*, or *Personnes et Personages* to explain the main message of their serials. During these shows, the actors dialogue with their audience, who, through phone calls, propose adjustments of the storyline, or who venture their own private experiences that are similar to those shown in the serials. These serials become thus public visualizations of collective experiences and occupy a central place in a genuine cultural public sphere. Due to the participatory character of the audience's involvement in the unfolding of the storylines, not only the discourse surrounding the serials constitute a genuine public sphere, the serials themselves too are the outcome of collective negotiations departing from individual artistic creativity complemented with traumatic memories and future-oriented aspirations of the onlookers. An example is a conversation after the diffusion of the fifth episode of the serial 'The Open Tomb' (original title *Le Tombeau Ouvert*), there were eight to follow. The plot-line recounted how a wealthy Muluba man got involved in an extramarital affair with his wife's best friend, Luise, one of actresses, told her fellow-comedians her brother had been approached by a young *Brother of Christ* who knew that his sister was participating in that serial. After two episodes of 'The Open Tomb,' the young man had recognized his own familial problems in the story plot that was unfolding on the screen. Apparently, his brother, already married, had decided to take a second wife, with whom he did not marry however. Just as in the serial, his second wife was his first wife's best friend. But, very soon, the young man's family identified the new wife as a witch: they held her responsible for the death of her co-wife, and for the sterility of all of the co-wife's children, who were all married. At that time in the serial, the plot had evolved to the death of Maman Jeanne, Makubakuba's first wife. Luise added that her brother's friend had requested to continue the storyline in the same way as the "real" story, so that the "wicked" wife could recognize her deeds.

This example indicates how Kinshasa's audience takes part in the construction of the narratives. The serials are thus not just a product of the imagination of the youngsters, but spectators contribute in the creative process, thereby generating a concerted narrative dealing with collective experiences of trauma and crisis. Through a transfer to their own private experiential worlds and pasts, Kinshasa's viewers identify with the cathartic experience of the fictive characters. Moreover, in television's capacity of reflecting, the serials also operate as technologies of memory construction that connects those who share these expe-

riences together. Watching, discussing, and especially congratulating the actors with their work, are social practices that provide a venue for *communitas* within the city: these discursive moments unite viewers and actors in the hardships of the fictive/real pasts and presents and create unanimity when agreeing on the same values.

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