

## Exchange and Circulation

### An Anthropological Perspective on Video Stores in Kinshasa

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For nearly two decades, anthropologists have identified mass media as an important field. Ethnographies of video shops and other spaces in which videos and films are exchanged are, however, rare. For a long while, the production and reception of moving images have been the privileged moments in the study of the social life of mass media.<sup>1</sup> Yet, with the current focus on mediation in the social sciences,<sup>2</sup> we can expect more research on video stores, since, after all, the video store is literally a space in between: in between producers and spectators, sellers and consumers.

In December 2009, I entered an African video store in Brussels looking for the latest novelties in Kinshasa's media world. Since 2003, I have been studying Kinshasa's soap opera production, and DVDs from the Congolese Diaspora are interesting material to remain connected with that research. Scrolling through rows of neatly displayed DVDs, I became intrigued by a new series called *La Caméra*. Excited to find a teleserial that might offer a meta-

text on local TV drama, I asked the lady behind the counter, a Congolese herself, for a copy of the DVD. She was surprised by my choice, and, although we knew each other, she tried to persuade me to buy another series, which was “hot” at the moment. All her customers bought it and, she argued, it was much better than the series I had chosen. Flattered by her concern to inform me about what was popular among the Congolese community and what was not, I told her I only wanted to buy *La Caméra*. I paid 15 Euros and left the shop with a small bag. Upon arriving at home, I noticed to my surprise that she had not given me the two DVDs of *La Caméra* but instead the DVDs of the serial she had recommended. I immediately went back to the shop and asked her to give me the DVDs I had picked out. Unfortunately, she could not find them anymore.



Such an event might seem trivially anecdotal. Yet there was much social and

cultural work going on in the encounter I have just described: there was first and foremost the economic exchange; aesthetic values were expressed; and the site was a space of curiosity, persuasion and even trickery. Such social and symbolic practices not only happen in the video store in Brussels, but also in Kinshasa, where I have started initial fieldwork on film distribution. The exchange of values and meaning and also the social spaces through which images circulate, or do not appear, have become important research topics.

### Variations on the Shop

In Kinshasa, one can enter small boutiques or shops that specialize in selling audio and video recordings on DVD, CD, and VCD. Entering such shops, one is surprised to find many people who merely “hang out” in these spaces. Often, they are not there to buy DVDs or VCDs, but to chat and to socialize. Usually, a television screen, either in the corner of the shop or installed on the counter, directs the conversation. The screens are filled with clips of local music orchestras or TV dramas, and trigger conversations on the star’s dress, the latest innovations in the music scene, and the artists’ performances. During these conversations, the “video store” transforms from a space of economic exchange (where money is the main mediator between the shop assistant and the customer), into a space where particular linguistic, aesthetic, and moral communities are given shape. Small deals are made in these spaces as well, and social relationships and identities are created or reinforced.

As the material sold in these boutiques is rather expensive, many Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa) buy DVDs and VCDs on the streets where impromptu stalls and ambulant vendors offer their wares to pedestrians, drivers, and shoppers. Such data seriously disrupts the idea of the video store as a fixed place, a shop with a counter, shelves and rows of videos.

Mongo is a thirty-six-year-old man who spends his days strolling around Kinshasa’s streets. In his left hand, he usually holds a pile of DVDs, pirated versions of American and Asian films, music videos, and Brazilian and Portuguese *telenovelas*. He also lugs a dark plastic bag in his right hand. Mongo lives in Ndjili, one of Kinshasa’s most dense areas but far removed from the city centre, and sells these DVDs to feed his four children. Usually, in

the morning, Mongo takes public transport to the city center. He spends most of his day on the main Boulevard 30. juin where the major supermarkets and restaurants are located. Mongo prefers the city center because he is convinced that the clientele of the shops and eateries are more likely to buy these films than the people in his neighborhood. Standing outside the doors of supermarkets like Peloustore and City Market, Mongo quickly selects some titles and rushes to potential customers. Depending on their demographics, Mongo quickly chooses a few films. "For the children," he says, clutching an animated feature as he approaches a mother with her babies. Expats are shown DVDs with clips of local musicians, while older men might be shown some political films.

At times, Mongo might decide to take a DVD from the plastic bag that he usually holds in his hands. Often, a pornographic film or a DVD with "forbidden" music video clips is taken out. Similar films and "indecent" images are hidden below the counter at video shops. While promoting, discussing, and selling such forbidden images, video stores (in their material or immaterial form) appear to stand outside and inside the moral boundaries of Kinois public culture. This means that multiple circuits of exchange are present in the video store, some "formal" and approved by the government, others informal and escaping government control. Here, the vendors move into a political space, and selling censored items becomes a political action.

## **Moving Images**

Twice a month, Mongo travels to Beach Ngobila. This is the local harbor where travelling merchants of the neighboring Congo-Brazzaville, who daily cross the Congo River, offer their goods to Kinois. Mongo has a privileged relationship with one particular woman, who, he thinks, sells him DVDs for a good price. In fact, a large number of the DVDs and videotapes that are sold on the streets and in shops of Kinshasa have been purchased on Beach Ngobila. The Brazzavillois merchants have obtained these goods from travels to China or Dubai. Other videos and DVDs arrive in Kinshasa via Kinois entrepreneurs who travel to Nigeria, Benin, or Dubai and bring those commodities along. The DVDs and videos have passed through various hands, have obtained various values and meanings, some of which remain hidden,

while others might be more visible. They all, however, leave traces on the objects themselves, before being passed on to customers or curious visitors. Mongo and his colleagues constitute only one particular moment in the social life of the videos and DVDs.<sup>3</sup>

Traders such as Mongo are brokers, in-betweens, social actors that bring the video images closer to spectators. In fact, vendors not only facilitate economic exchange, but they also take on multiple roles, transferring meanings and values. This is, for example, especially the case in the circulation and reception of Nigerian films in Kinshasa. These films make up the bulk of the DVDs for sale in Kinshasa's media stores and are very eagerly watched in Kinshasa's domestic spaces (living rooms and courtyards in compounds), as well as in semi-public spaces such as church and prayer groups. Thony Best, for example, imports Nigerian films on a large scale and partners with a local television channel on which he simultaneously translates the films into a mixture of French and Lingala. Furthermore, the success of Nigerian films, which even altered the aesthetics of locally produced television serials in Kinshasa, is immediately related to the establishment of an African Pentecostalist Christianity. It was a Pentecostalist pastor who brought the very first Nigerian video film to Kinshasa and showed it in his church, inserting it in predications that spread an apocalyptic understanding of life.<sup>4</sup> The lines between various categories of media brokers (the trader/the dubber) thus have become blurred, rendering the exchange of films and videos extremely complex.

## **Conclusion**

Focusing on the exchange and circulation of DVDs and video films in Kinshasa (and beyond), suggests the importance of approaching the video store as more than a fixed, material space. Instead, video stores are first and foremost social spaces. It is the human practices that surround the selling of films and images that shape and organize the "video store" because it is exactly during social interaction that videos and DVDs become commodities and become imbued with social, economic, moral, and affective values.

## Notes

- 1 On production, see Faye Ginsburg, "Aboriginal Media and the Australian Imaginary," *Public Culture* 5 (1993): 557-578; and Terence Turner, "Defiant Images: The Kayapo Appropriation of Video," *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 6 (1992): 5-16; on reception, see Minou Fuglesang, *Veils and Videos: Female Youth Culture on the Kenyan Coast* (Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, 1994); and Brian Larkin, "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities," *Africa* 67 (1997): 406-440.
- 2 See William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 345-367.
- 3 For more on the social life of objects, see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.
- 4 See Filip De Boeck, *Kinshasa. Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent: Ludion, 2004); and Katrien Pype, "Religion, Migration and Media Aesthetics. Notes on the Circulation and Reception of Nigerian Films in Kinshasa," in *Nollywood and Beyond: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, ed. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (forthcoming).

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