Listening to the Aesthetics of Popular Culture: Hermeneutics and Power in Congolese *Rumba*

In the last fifty years, Congolese popular dance music (also known as "Congolese rumba") has become something of a *musica franca* for much of sub-Saharan Africa. As Congolese like to say, the captivating sound of their music, firmly grounded in Africa's encounter with Afro-Cuban culture, has "colonized the rest of the continent", but the music has gone through a series of important aesthetic changes since it first emerged in the urban colonial centers of the Belgian Congo. Despite this rich history, limited research has been done on the subject and very little has been published on Congolese popular music from the point of view of aesthetics. By tuning in on local conversations about certain aspects of the music's structure and form, this text attempts to understand how Congolese popular dance music transcends the ugliness of an ongoing political and economic crisis that has become increasingly acute since independence (*la conjoncture*) and how this particular expression of beauty enables us to better understand the relationship between aesthetics and politics more generally. The perception of "noise" in the analysis of popular music reveals more about our inability to understand non-Western aesthetic criteria than about popular music per se. Drawing from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the metaphor of listening is used to argue that the difficulty of hearing music from someone else's point of view should not be used to justify a retreat into the self.

Rubrique : Article

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In the last fifty years, popular dance music in the Democratic Republic of Congo (also known as "Congolese rumba" and "La musique zaïroise") has become something of a *musica franca* for much of sub-Saharan Africa. As Congolese like to say, the captivating sound of their music, firmly grounded in Africa's encounter with Afro-Cuban culture, has "colonized the rest of the continent", but the music has gone through a series of important aesthetic changes since it first emerged in the urban colonial centers of the Belgian Congo. Despite this rich history, limited research has been done on the subject and very little has been published on Congolese popular music from the point of view of aesthetics. By tuning in to local conversations about the music's structure and form, this text attempts to understand how the analysis of popular culture, in this case popular music, makes it possible to better understand the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Taking inspiration from the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, the metaphor of listening is used to argue that the impossibility of hearing music from someone else's point of view should not stop us from trying to listen.

Popular Culture and Noise

The anthropologist Johannes Fabian describes his first night in the field and his first contact with Congolese popular music:

> I was in bed in a room at a mission in the middle of Dendale township [in Leopoldville], trying to get some sleep. Around the square where the mission's building lay loudspeakers from what seemed at least four different bars or dancing halls blasted Zairian music into the night air; each playing a different record yet creating in my tortured head a common effect, a kind of pulse caused by seemingly never-ending repetition of guitar riffs. Here was African life that assaulted me physically, made its presence painfully felt. I was about to go out of my mind, as the saying goes, when a tropical downpour swept all sound from the square. (1998, 82; c.f. Fabian 1990, 79)

This passage is cited not to single out Johannes Fabian—who has done a great deal to advance our understanding of popular culture in Africa—but because his confession speaks to a common experience among first-time visitors to the Congo: the feeling of being overwhelmed by unfiltered noise. Many things have changed since Fabian first left for the field, not the least of which is that popular music in the Congo has itself become the object of serious study. Fabian himself admits to being "privately embarrassed that it took me so long to recognize [the music] as perhaps the richest and most distinctive gift to the continent, and indeed the world, to come from Zaire" (1998, 82).

And yet this increased attention on the part of researchers has not stripped the music of its status as a source of noise. Congolese popular music has multiple uses and divergent meanings: it is a symbol of national heritage, a means of gaining access to wealth and power, an expression of violence, a symptom of widespread moral decay, a space of memory, and a way of forgetting. My intention is not only to explore the noisiness of this particular form of popular culture, but also to talk about this "noise" as a form of "meaningful sound" (Fabian 2000, 115). If it is true, as Achille Mbembe suggests that "Noise, here, is part of the practice of joy" (2006, 82), then what are the components that make up this noise and how are they combined to create a collective experience of transcendence through music, that indescribable feeling that people in Kinshasa attempt to describe with the Lingala expression "eloko mosusu" (literally "something different")?

For many academics, the idea of doing research on popular culture can be unsettling. Not only is popular culture diffuse and difficult to characterize, but it is also tainted by its proximity to city, mass media and the market. If anthropology has traditionally shown resistance (or indifference) to popular culture (Fabian 1998), it is as much out of fear as from any theoretical or scientific justification. First, there is the fear that studying popular culture will have a negative impact on the researcher's reputation as a "serious" scholar. Second, the screaming sensuality of popular culture—especially popular music, and Congolese popular music in particular—triggers an intellectual response that calls up (again) the separation between mind and body, and clearly relegates popular culture to domain of the latter. In the words of Simon Frith: "The danger...is not so much the absence of mind as the presence of body" (1996, 260). But there is also the more pragmatic fear that the diffuse and protean nature of popular culture makes it impossible to manage from a research perspective. Even those who might acknowledge popular culture as a valid object of anthropological inquiry may feel limited by the methodologies that we have at our disposal to make the complexity meaningful and thus are in many ways intimidated.

Before going any further, it is important to distinguish "popular culture" from "popular arts", where the latter includes not only cultural products or performances, which we can refer to as "expressive culture". When I try to define popular culture, which is not easy, I call attention primarily to two factors: it is commercially robust, and in the African context it transcends ethnic categories, while not completely purging itself of ethnic references and markers, making it in some sense "supra-ethnic". With this definition it is possible to distinguish "popular culture" from "culture" in a strictly anthropological sense, which Fabian refers to as "culture tout court", where the latter is generally associated with a system of beliefs, values and practices, and the former often takes the form of a product or performance.[1]

Popular music in Kinshasa is not only interesting because of its "power and beauty" (Fabian 1998), but also because of how it uses—and is used by—the institutions of power. It is a "mediating force" (Barber 1997) that provides us with unexpected "ways in" (Barber 1987) to understanding politics and popular consciousness: how expressions of power are embodied in the act of performance, how officialdom make use of the voices of music, how structural and stylistic elements of artistic expression are tied to long-term political delinquency and neglect. And these factors—to be seen as more of an agonistic dance with power than a resistance to it (Mbembe 2001)—are part of what makes popular dance music so political. Ultimately, however, popular culture is more than just a solution to academic problems. Following Lila Abu-Lughod, I want to argue that the most important reason for studying popular culture is that it belongs to a world in which, in some sense, anthropologists are also natives (2005, 52), even though, as I will explain further below, having access to a cultural world through its cultural products still requires us to observe, ask questions, and somehow verify that we have understood.

Popular Culture and Aesthetics

If there is something slightly strange about an anthropologist writing on the question of aesthetics, it is probably because anthropologists spent the better part of the last century trying to explain cultural practices and products in terms of their social function, and this intellectual tradition, despite numerous critiques, is alive and well. Kofi Agawu (2001) criticizes the asymmetry of Western musicological analysis, which sees African traditional music as "utilitarian" and elite or art music as contemplative and thus autonomous from society. While I

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[1] For a more detailed explanation of the different uses of the term « culture », see (White 2006a).

am interested, as Agawu suggests, in concentrating on "music itself", my use of the term "aesthetics" must be taken with a grain of salt. I am not attempting, as Jean During has done for traditional music in the Middle East, to construct a theory of beauty, a task that is outside of my expertise and my data. Nor am I attempting a form of "aesthetic description" in the terms laid out by Achille Mbembe (2006)—to "put into words the totality of sensations, pleasures and energies provoked by a particular work"—since I am more interested in form and perceptions of form, than I am in experience per se.

My primary interest is in what urges people to move when listening to this music, or why, to put it simply, the music is so moving. In my opinion, these are questions that are part and parcel of an aesthetic analysis, albeit one that is more informed by popular perceptions than the views of those with expert knowledge of music or aesthetics. As Simon Frith (1996) has shown, scholars of popular culture have ignored aesthetics for a long time. And yet there is nothing in a sociological or anthropological approach to the study of music that keeps us from being able to talk about the relationship between aesthetics and culture. In fact, in this article I would like to argue that whether or not we believe in the possibility of an experience with art that is unmediated by culture, we can still attempt to explain why Congolese people think their music is beautiful, and this analysis can tell us about more than just music.

One of the first intellectuals to write about popular culture critically will not necessarily be remembered for helping the cause: Theodor Adorno. As an important early player in the group of critically minded social theorists that later would become known as the Frankfurt School, Adorno espoused a position (most generally associated with his writing about American popular jazz, but also cinema and television) that relied heavily on the notion of *standardization*, by which the products of culture are subsumed in the capitalist system of goods, flattened out in their form and content, thereby becoming commodities just like any other product, and reinforcing a social hierarchy in which inequality is perpetuated and its mechanism of operation fetishized. Indeed, it has become quite common for researchers working in the area of popular music or popular culture more generally to use Adorno's biting critique of the culture industry as a sort of strawman against which they can rally support from the reader, already inclined to support popular culture, either as a form of resistance, or a kind of souped-up populism.

Achille Mbembe's writing on Congolese popular dance music is a good example of this usage. "Adorno would have no doubt disliked Congolese music", writes Mbembe (2006, 71), which he would have likely found vulgar, frivolous, and repetitive. But according to Mbembe, Adorno

"would have been wrong" (ibid., 72). He goes on to situate Adorno by claiming that "the aesthetic signification of the musical work cannot, as Adorno would have us believe, be measured simply by its ability (or its inability) to expose social alienation" (ibid.). But at a closer look, Adorno's thoughts on this subject would seem to be considerably more complex. Adorno was not arguing that art is only aesthetic to the extent that it exposes social alienation, but rather that in order for art to expose social alienation it must express itself in aesthetic terms. In other words, Adorno was not arguing that art needs critical theory, but that critical theory needs art. His theory of aesthetics was primarily concerned with how formal properties of performance and composition are brought to bear on praxis and by extension on changing modes of consciousness: "Cultural products, in so far as they evinced particular modes of praxis in their formal arrangements, could, for example, heighten or suppress human critical, perceptual, and expressive faculties" (DeNora 2003: 10).

Clearly Adorno was no fan of popular culture. The critique lodged by Adorno and his colleague Horkheimer (1972) is not only the most important early attempt to critically engage with what was becoming the archetype for the global culture industry, but it was also oddly prophetic. Even today students who read Horkheimer & Adorno for the first time are surprised at the audacity of their critique and are swayed by its rhetorical turns and tone, one that can only be described as angry. But there are just as many readers who find Adorno's critique condescending, elitist, and demeaning, primarily because it implies that consumers have no knowledge of the banality of their consumption, as if the very act of consumption strips consumers of their capacity for self-awareness or irony. It is important to remember, however, that Adorno was just as critical of mass culture as he was of culture for a bourgeois elite, since according to Adorno they both reinforce the ideology of a capitalist mode of production, one through mindless hedonism and the other through the dogmatism of beauty. He even criticized politically engaged or "committed" art forms, for being aloof with regards to aesthetics. In every sense, Adorno's posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1997), a book that according to Robert Hullot-Kentor (the English translator) literally killed him, was concerned with broadening the very notion of aesthetics in order to breathe new life into aesthetics as a domain of critical analysis.

And given that one of Adorno's main aesthetic concerns was the standardization of the products of culture through what he termed the "culture industry", in the Congo we have a fascinating case in which music becomes standardized in the absence of, or perhaps because of the absence of a fully functional commercial apparatus. Elsewhere (White 2008) I have tried to explain the complex relationship between the decline of the Congolese music industry and the emergence

of a certain degree of repetitiveness in the music—generally referred to locally as "la monotonie"—that expresses itself not only through clichés in song lyrics, but also through the cyclical nature of the music's signature guitar sound. As the argument goes, musicians, no longer able to earn an income through the formal sale of cassettes and CDs, have placed increasing emphasis on live performance (spectacular dance formations, high-fashion wardrobes, and heightened interactions with audiences), since it is through the liveness of the concert atmosphere (*ndule*) that they are able to solicit financial support from wealthy fans and sponsors. So maybe Adorno would have liked Congolese music after all.

Gadamer and the Metaphor of Listening

But why rely on Adorno to teach us something about the aesthetics of popular culture, since in some sense we already know how his story will end? Adorno believed that unorthodox compositional practices lead the way to social and political transformation and that these practices cannot thrive in the context of an industrial cultural complex. For Adorno, then, artists are (or should be) constantly challenging the aesthetic norms of their art form and of their discipline. In this model, social change is the result of the artist's private intellectual activity that occurs outside of her relationship with her audience. This is one of most important differences between Adorno and another important 20th century German philosopher of aesthetics, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Despite the fact they both made the case for subjective experience as a central aspect of any theory of aesthetics, and that they both set out to criticize the bourgeois notion of aesthetics embodied in the formula "art for art's sake", Adorno and Gadamer rarely share the same stage. Gadamer criticizes bourgeois art since "here there is no progress in any absolute terms, neither is it possible to exhaust the content of a work of art" (1996, 118) and opposes this "aesthetic consciousness" to the lived experience (*erlibnis*) of art, working through a model of understanding that is fundamentally intersubjective. "Understanding," in Gadamer's terms, "is part of the encounter with the work of art" (ibid).

It is this notion of "encounter" that points most clearly to the weakness in Adorno's aesthetic theory and that I would like to examine further in the context of an anthropological analysis of popular culture. According to Gadamer, the dialectical nature of understanding resembles the back-and-forth movement of a game, where two or more players engage in non-goal-oriented play, absorbed in the immediacy of exchange, without concern for rules, procedures or techniques. This play is characterized by a certain degree of "buoyancy", or a quality of being borne along by the subject matter (*subjectum*), and it is based on the simple but elegant premise

that each player has something to learn from the other. Transposing this analytical model to the domain of literature and theater, Gadamer's discussion of tragedy raises the question of how works of art create effects in audiences. His answer to the question "What is the spectator saying 'yes' to?" (Gadamer 1996, 150) has something to do with the pleasure and pain of identifying with tragic figures, not only confronting the terror of injustice, but also accepting the hegemony of destiny.

Thus Gadamer's notion of the "experience of art" is not based on unsettling formal conventions in order to somehow jog the listener-spectator into a state of critical reflection, as is the case with Adorno. Instead, he is interested in how art creates an effect that enables the spectator to see the self as other and the other as self. And it is in this sense that "[h]ermeneutics necessarily absorbs aesthetics" (1996, 184). Gadamer's contribution to a theory of aesthetics then is not only to have significantly broadened our definition of what qualifies as "text", since the hermeneutic model he describes operates just as well with non-written forms of art (in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer devotes considerable attention to painting), but also to have called attention to the intersubjective nature of language, and by extension, understanding. Instead of linking the aesthetic value of a work of art to a "world of sensations"—with all that the term "sensations" implies—Mbembe is much closer to a meaningful analysis of aesthetics when he argues that music exists as "an act of listening" (2006, 72). "What makes [music] arouse," asks Mbembe "in the African subject hearing it, listening to it or dancing to it, a force so unique and so intimate that the subject experiences a feeling of complete jubilation?" (2006, 73). To the extent that this question may shed some light on a Congolese notion of musical aesthetics (and to the extent that it can be answered at all), I would like to hold on to it, even though my way of answering may be somewhat different from that of Mbembe. In addition to a number of historical inaccuracies in his text, I think there is good reason to closely examine Mbembe's use of cultural products as a source of information, a subject that I will discuss in my conclusion.[2] But his overarching question—which I understand to be something like *how can something so beautiful*

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[2] To cite only two examples, Mbembe (2006) claims that the two main schools of Congolese popular music were founded by Joseph Kabasele and that Franco's inspiration for traditional rhythms came from African Jazz, both of which are not true. He also confuses the second generation with the third generation and suggests that the splintering of groups was born with the latter, when in fact splintering has always existed in the Congolese music industry. For a detailed discussion of the very important question of generations and inter-generational relations, see Makobo (2010).

emerge out of so much ugliness?—is a valid question to ask with regards to popular culture and aesthetics in the Congo.

What Are People Saying "Yes" To?

If popular dance music is the privileged form of popular culture in the Congo, it is not only because the music is "good" or "beautiful" (*kitoko*), but also because it does such a good job of combining words, sounds, movements and ideas. It is a total phenomenon, in the sense that it explains the reality of people living in today's Congo—and they listen to it because it speaks to them about this reality—but it also evokes particular emotional states and bodily experiences that contribute, albeit unevenly, to the renewal of individual memories and collective identities. Because words and music are not enough in and of themselves to fuel the fire of popular imagination, we have to examine the artful use of these elements and their combination with other elements (emotion, irony, repetition, discrepancy, play) in order to understand how aesthetics are mobilized in the realm of popular culture. In order to explore the specific case of popular music in the Congo, I will address two aspects of the music's form and content: the emergence of a new song structure that enables a tension in the music between melancholy and joy and a form of commercialized praise-singing that has become central to the aesthetic of the music over the last 20 years. By focusing on these two formal aspects I am not attempting to theorize a global aesthetic vision of Congolese music or society. Rather I see these elements as answers to the question "What are people saying 'yes' to?"—a question that acknowledges the fundamentally intersubjective nature of any artistic (especially performative) enterprise. My attention to these different elements is based on a series of personal observations that have emerged progressively through the back and forth of conversation during ethnographic research, what Gadamer (1996) refers to as "participation in a common meaning".[3]

Animation, or From Melancholy to Joy

One of the most important developments in Congolese popular dance music since the emergence of the genre nearly 70 years ago has to do with the structure of songs. Whereas much of the

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[3] Some of the material in this text is drawn from interviews conducted as part of a project entitled "Ethnographies of Listening", a comparative audience-based study that took place simultaneously in Kinshasa and Montreal between 2002 and 2005.

music of the first and second generations of music followed the familiar forms of 20th century global pop music (a series of alternating verses and choruses followed by a solo and an extended chorus that returns to the initial statement of theme), popular songs in Kinshasa today generally begin with a slow lyrical section (which corresponds roughly to the verse), in some cases progress through a slightly more up-tempo middle section (chorus), and conclude with a fast-paced dance section that continues until the end of the song (*animation* or *seben*).[4] Thus within most songs there is a progression from a slow, lyrical sound, often romantic or melancholy (*mawa*) to a more frenetic, upbeat solo section characterized by controlled excitement (*maîtrise*), but also by visible, physical release.[5] Much of the excitement of listening to this music comes from the tension created by the buildup that leads from a feeling of melancholy to a feeling of joy. It is this formula that draws in listeners by creating a heightened sense of expectation around the transition from lyrics to dance, or "from words to motion" (White 2008).

As with many forms of urban popular dance music, Congolese popular music has never strayed far from themes having to do with love and matters of the heart. This thematic tendency is often expressed through the idea of *mawa*, a complex Lingala term that expresses sadness, regret, compassion, pity, and melancholy. *Mawa* is not only a commonly occurring theme in song lyrics, but it is also audible in the sound of the music, primarily through vocal timbre, melody and rhythm and lead guitar. The first recordings in Kinshasa (during the 1940s, then Leopoldville) were relatively upbeat and carefree, in some cases because local artists were simply recording Afro-Cuban songs that had already had some success abroad. But with the arrival of a second generation of musicians in the 1950s, the music became more varied and certain artists became known for a more mellow, melancholy sound, especially those who began their careers under the banner of Grand Kallé's African Jazz, such as Docteur Nico and Tabu Ley Rochereau. Artists from the third and fourth generations of popular Congolese music (1970-present) have relied on this aspect of the music, some artists more than others, primarily because of its ability to hold the attention of listeners, who often say that popular music is important to them because of the way that it is linked to individual memory and intense feelings of emotion:

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[4] *Seben* refers to the fast-paced dance portion of popular songs in Congolese rumba that follows the mostly lyrical and romantic introduction or preliminary section. There are several patterns in the variation of song structures: a slow extended verse with a break in between verses, a verse and an extended chorus without *seben*, a verse directly into a *seben*, and the most common a verse followed by a chorus followed by a *seben*.

[5] White (2008) contains a more detailed description of the different musical components of a good *seben*.

> What I wanted to say is that… for example, when I listen to Tabu Ley, I find it totally captivating. I listen to it and I just like it. But when I listen to younger groups like Zaïko or Wenge, with these groups I pick and choose. One song I might like, but not the next one. But when I listen to Tabu Ley, when he sings to me, there is something in his voice, I mean, how can I explain it? Sometimes it makes you feel nostalgia, sometimes sadness […] I guess you could say that it is like boiling water. (Male in his fifties, Kin2G3)

> It depends on the emotion you felt when that song was popular. And that song is indelible, meaning you can never erase it from your memory. If it creeps up on you during a time when you are sad (*mawa*), you will never forget that song until the day you die. Every time it plays, it is going to remind you of what you went through. So you'll always be grateful toward the musician who wrote it. Do you see what I'm saying? (Male in his twenties, Kin1G4)

> It's like a song of sadness, or anxiety, but not in a bad way. It's not in the sense that someone has died and you're just crying, but in the sense of a separation, but some day you will see that person again. Because Europe was far away. Especially because during that period a lot of Congolese were leaving the country, and those that stayed behind were really sad and that song made them feel better. (Male in his twenties, Mon2G3G4)

It is this description of "a song of sadness, but not in a bad way" that best describes the idea of *mawa*. A particularly good example of this phenomenon is "Maya", a hit song by O.K. Jazz that had a huge impact on audiences upon its release in 1984[6]. Songs such as these, in many cases among the most popular for music fans in Kinshasa, challenge ideas about African popular music as primarily intended for dancing. More recent examples demonstrate the same type of contemplative chord progression and plaintive upper-register male vocals: "Washington" (Koffi Olomide, *Effrakata*). The middle section of the song (when it is included) signals an emotional distancing from the pain and suffering (*mawa*) of the song's introduction. In this section the tempo changes slightly (117bpm to 102 bpm), perhaps signaling the possibility of breaking free of the isolation of heartbreak and the strong back-up vocals of a male chorus accompany the lead singer as he searches for a solution to his problem: "Vita Imana" (Wenge Musica Maison Mère, *Solola Bien)*.

The repetition of certain instruments and sounds contributes to a feeling of suspense that will spill over into the fast-paced dance section of the song, usually referred to as *animation* or *seben*. The transition to the *seben* is a kind of musical vortex that seems to pull the listener out of an emotional state of loneliness and into an imaginary space of common experience and collective

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[6] To listen to the different songs : https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7apNbU3XQng4flQsEbwrZq?si=-JqJPNiiS6qWBYbhi70xPQ

movement, but this transition requires the momentary loss of self, or what I have referred to earlier as "thirty seconds of joy". Indeed, it is at this point in the song that the dance floor tends to fill up and that couples separate to dance together, but now as individuals.[7] The excitement of the *seben* is created by a particular combination of lead guitar, snare drum and the shouting that have become the signature sound of the music. In order to hear the creative tension between these moments in the music, moments that correspond to two very different emotional states, it is important to listen to specific examples.

First, we can take an example of the *seben* in isolation. Listen to the way that the different instruments in this example work together to build tension through the repetition of a single note that is played in unison and ends in series of syncopated accents that prepare the listener for the explosive release of the section that will follow. As the *seben* begins, each of the different components will take off in different, yet complementary directions: solo guitar, bass guitar, snare drum, and the shouting vocals of the *atalaku*. Indeed, the effect is much like that of a plane taking off into flight. In this example the *seben* appears at the very beginning of the recording: "Les 19 Minutes de Ngwasuma", Zaiko Langa Langa, *Empreinte*. Now an example of how the three sections ("couplet", "refrain", and *seben*) work together in the context of an individual song. In this example the refrain begins at around 2:02 and the transition to the seben occurs at 4:02: "Mansouri S.", Koffi Olomide et Quartier Latin, *Magie* also listen to the example of "Julia", ibid.

It is important to note that the *seben* did not exist as an autonomous form until the 1970s, when it was removed from the middle of the song and placed at the end. During this period, the *seben* would often appear on the B-side of 45rpm records. In the 1980s, musicians touring abroad began to play the *seben* alone, pushing aside the rest of the song since according to some artists audiences did not understand the lyrics. This was the first effort to market Congolese music to non-Africans, through a sub-genre of Congolese popular music known as *soukouss* (White 2000). While this style of playing is not common in Kinshasa, it has become common for artists to begin concerts and albums with an isolated *seben* sequence (generally referred to as "générique" or title sequence), which in most cases carries the name of the recently released album and is intended to announce the arrival of the group on stage. And yet, when people in Kinshasa talk about the value of their music, they rarely even mention this aspect of the sound. Despite

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[7] It is also common at this point in the song to hear some form of modulation, either from one key to another (or from a major to a minor key or vice versa) or in terms of the speed of rhythm or the tempo.

continued efforts to get people to talk about the *seben* or what makes people want to dance, participants in group interviews conducted during ethnographic fieldwork from 2003–2005 consistently came back to the lyrics in the song or what songs have to offer as sources of advice (*baconseils*):

> **Serge Makobo**: Okay, so I've got a general question here. What do you think is more important, in your opinion, the music or the lyrics? Music meaning arrangements, guitars, rhythm, melodies, etc.

> **Participant 1:** For me what's important in the music is the advice it gives, the lyrics.

> **Participant 2**: Before, when I turned off the music, I would not hear the instruments—I only liked the lyrics. Songs like 'Coucou' and others, I would turn off everything except the lyrics.

> **Participant 3**: I don't care too much about the instruments, because it's the lyrics that make you feel good, that make you emotional. My favorite musician in terms of the songs he sings is Koffi. When Koffi sings certain songs it puts me in time ("atiaka ngai na temps").

> **SM**: What do you mean "in time"?

> **P3**: In time? It's like I feel like I'm inside of him. Some musicians sing lyrics that are super interesting ("mystiques"). Like "Gros Bébé", "Gros Bébé" is a beautiful song (*kitoko*).

> **SM**: Because of the lyrics or the music?

> **P3**: Well, it's the lyrics that matter, they make the music. Not the instruments. The way he is singing, it's just words he is bringing out, that's all.

> **SM**: What is more important? The music or the lyrics? [turning to P2…]

> **P2**: Music is the combination of lyrics and instruments. That's what makes music. If there is no singing, there is no music.

> **SM**: What do you think? Lyrics or music? [turning to Participant 4]

> **P4**: Well for me its the lyrics and the instruments.

> **SM**: But what comes first?

> **P4**: Lyrics. The lyrics. Lyrics are something you hear, like things that have happened to you.

> **SM**: If you hear that a new album comes out and a good friend of yours has a copy and wants you to listen to it, what are you expecting to listen for? What are you interested in?

> **P4**: The lyrics.

> **P3**: The lyrics because even if the *seben* is playing, it's just a *seben*, what can you get out of a *seben*? Nothing. You're just listening to music, to rhythm. But the lyrics, when you listen to the lyrics it has an effect on you. Music is not just dancing, but when you listen to lyrics it does something to you… it does something to you that is real.

This exchange is typical of the conversations with fans of popular music in Kinshasa. As Johannes Fabian has shown for popular painting in the Congo (1996), the beauty of a work of art in this context depends on its ability to make us think, to teach us a lesson, to orient us toward a time and space of reflection. During my fieldwork, it was remarkably rare, even with musicians, to have a conversation about the *seben*, perhaps in part because this aspect of the music is more formulaic and less flexible with regards to the possibilities of artistic creativity. And yet when Congolese popular music is exported in the form of *soukouss*, it seems that the *seben* dance section is all that matters. The hypnotic, sensually charged combination of music and dancing is what foreigners find so attractive about the music, but in Kinshasa people seem to take this aspect for granted, even dismiss it as being unimportant. Is it possible that our analysis is fundamentally flawed? Not only that we clumsily separate lyrics and music, but also that we look to the former as a source of explanation for the music's beauty and power? Is this not simply the same old essentialism, harkening back to images of Africa as a series of dancing bodies covered with sweat, somehow connected to each other, and to the earth, through a sacred, dangerous drum? Or could these observations be read as signs pointing toward a conversation in which we talk to others about what they are hearing in the music and what they think this means?

Libanga or an Aesthetic of Buzz

Changes in song structure beginning as early as the first part of the 1970s led to the emergence of the *seben* as an autonomous musical form, a process which was complete by the mid-1980s when Zairian musicians living in Europe began to market their music to non-African audiences in the form of *soukouss*. At about the same time, popular music in Kinshasa witnessed an increase in the frequency with which musicians cited the names of friends, fellow musicians and potential patrons, a phenomenon known as *libanga* that would become increasingly stylized and increasingly common by the late 1990s. Musicians in Kinshasa have always cited or sung the names of people they know and love as a gesture of friendship or acknowledgement. Beginning in the 1990s, however, musicians began to use other peoples' names as an overt income-generating strategy, sometimes citing the names of people they did not know or with whom their relationship was limited to a simple financial transaction in which the artist agrees to sing the name of someone on his upcoming album in exchange for money. By the late-1990s songs that do *not* contain some form of *libanga* are extremely rare and most songs contain long lists of *libanga* integrated in various ways into the music: [“Victime d'amour” (Werra Son, Koyimbi Ko, À la Queue Leu Leu)](#).

This song is a good example of the layering of *libanga*. First there is the constant flow of names coming from Werra Son, the group's leader. On top of that is the lead vocal of his number one singer Ferré, who carefully integrates the names of important friends and sponsors into the melody and the narrative of the song, at times bringing these people in as characters in the story and as witnesses of his failed love:

Blandine Putu, nga nakoki lisusu te, dit eh	**Blandine Putu**, I can't take it anymore
Kende nayo, mokolo ezali okobeta lisolo na bamasa na yo	Go back home, everyone is talking about us
Nga na lingaka na ngai **Guy Luemba**	I just want to be alone, **Guy Luemba**
Tala lelo oyo, nga na zongi na sima [?] **Michel Luemba**	Look at me, I'm nowhere, **Michel Luemba**
[?] Pona nini **Vicky Putu**?	[?] Can you tell me why, **Vicky Putu**?
Nga moto na lakisaki yo que nalingaki yo, eh	I'm the one who said that I loved you
Lelo yo moko yo obebisi relations ya ngai na yo	You're the one that caused all our problems
Zonga epayi ya **Willy Tembele** po adonner ngai conseils	Go see **Willy Tembele** so he'll tell me what to do
José Tumba na koki te	**José Tumba** I can't take it anymore

Then there is a third level of voices with the arrival of the all-male chorus, during which Ferré improvises the names of several more sponsors and Werra Son continues reading from his list. All told, this song contains approximately 118 occurrences of *libanga*, a number that is surprising but that is not unheard of in the Kinshasa music scene since the emergence of this phenomenon.

It is tempting to see *libanga* as form of advertising, and many Congolese, especially music fans from previous generations, see it as just that: "le marketing". But as I have argued elsewhere (White 2008), musicians are not just selling a product, they are using language to secure knots in relationships from which they have benefited and upon which they will probably need to call in the future. Younger fans of the music are much less critical of this phenomenon. They often speak about *libanga* as a "necessary evil", since the declining music industry makes it impossible for musicians to make a living from the sale of CDs or cassettes and since "they should be able to earn a living just like anyone else" (see Madoda 2010; White 2008).

At another level, however, the fact of naming people—whether they are friends of the artist or simply fans with money—clearly gives the music a feeling of liveness by placing musicians and their fans in the same network of sociability and reciprocity.[8] Being connected to a successful popular musician through *libanga* means being connected to people all over the city and across

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[8] On the notion of "liveness" as an aspect of sound in recordings, see Meintjes (2003).

the country, since those whose names are "thrown" often become objects of discussion—even stars—in their own right. Of course, this increased visibility is not without its problems. Data from group interviews suggests that people in Kinshasa view *libanga* as a sign of social status that is uneven and unpredictable, since most are aware that *libanga* is a form of social mobility with relatively few barriers to entry. Interviews showed how people "read" *libanga* against the grain of what they know about people who are the objects of praise:

> When they throw the name of someone, someone that you actually know from your neighborhood, he lives in the same neighborhood, but we know he is bad news ("azana esprit mabé"). They sing his name in some song, but everybody in his neighborhood hates him. If you hear that song, you just turn off your radio immediately. (Man in his late 40s, Kin8G3G4)

Thus *libanga* gives people something to listen for, a series of expectations (à la Jakobson) that make listening predictable and unexpected, uncomfortable and pleasurable. In this sense, *libanga* has become an integral part of music's aesthetic, not only because there is an art to throwing someone's name, but also because *libanga* fills in the space between lyrics, giving the music and the artist an aura or "buzz" that has become crucial to musicians' survival since they can no longer rely on the formal infrastructure of a functioning music industry to make a living from music. Indeed, aesthetically speaking, popular music in Kinshasa may never have been this alive. The practice of *libanga*, which has become considerably stylized over the last twenty years, creates a feeling of connectedness between artists and their fans and it is increasingly difficult to separate this aspect of the music from listeners' aesthetic evaluation of the music:

> On other albums you can cite certain songs, but on Werra Son's "À La Queue Leu Leu" [album] that's where the problems started. For people to take songs like that, even Baby Ndombe's song is a great song, but there are too many people in it. Even Werra Son is there. Werra Son is not even singing, but he cites people's names in that song. That's going too far. (Man in his mid-twenties, Mon3G4)

What is most striking about this phenomenon is the degree to which it has become normalized as a part of the music's form. *Libanga* has become a part of musical practice that reflects its own aesthetic patterns and logic, for example in the way that it enables artists to mobilize certain poetic forms such as parallelism or repetition (White 2008). During an interview with a group of young Congolese men who had recently immigrated to Canada (Mon3G4), participants discussed their differing opinions on the topic:

> **Bob White:** So it's not just the lyrics, but in this song, I like this example because it has a lot of *libanga*. So having *libanga* in a song like this, a love song, with the names of so many people mentioned, for you does this take away anything from the value of the song?
>
> **Participant 1:** It's true, it takes something away from the music…
>
> **Participant 2:** Doesn't take anything away for me. [laughter]
>
> **P1:** No but really, with our music we have become so accustomed to this way of doing things that it seems normal. J.B. started the whole thing with "Laureat", the whole song is just J.B. citing the names of the all the people who contributed no matter what they did.
>
> **Participant 3:** You should say that it just makes people more fanatic.
>
> **P1:** No but that's what I wanted to talk about. Recently with Koffi's new album it's exactly the same thing. No different from what J.B. does. From A to Z he just cites people's names. And we listen to these songs so much that people don't even notice it anymore. It's become totally normal. It's like a song […]. I listened to the song by Felix Wazekwa and I didn't even realize it was full of names.

If *libanga* is seen as being "like a song" it is not only because people have become accustomed to hearing names cited in popular music, but also because the deployment of names has become more artful, more effectively integrated into the flow of words and sounds. In ways that are very different from songs of even one generation ago, popular music in Kinshasa today enables people to imagine themselves as participants in the creative energy of the country's most revered artists. In the past, artists like Tabu Ley and Franco connected with audiences through the truth value of the stories they told through song, stories about everyday problems and existential doubts. For some people this new way of connecting with audiences (which does not necessarily exclude what came before) is viewed as a form of uglification, a moral corruption in the music that becomes a sort of noise. For others it only makes the music more beautiful, since the thought of being sung by one's favorite artist creates a particularly strong emotional response in the mind of the listener (White 2008).

Listen Up! We're Working Here…

So what, if anything, can we say about the aesthetics of popular culture in this context? It seems obvious to say that popular culture has its own forms and its own way of knowing the world, in other words, its own aesthetics (Frith 1996), but this is only part of the work that we have to do. Among the various formal aspects of Congolese popular dance music, I have chosen to discuss those that stand out in my listening and in my conversations with people in Kinshasa. Here I

have only focused on two, none of which correspond neatly with the conventional units of aesthetic analysis: changes in song structure and commercialized praise-singing. I could have also addressed other important aspects of the music as they relate to questions of form: the counterpoint of interlocking guitar lines, the percussive nature of shouts, the layering of vocal harmony, creative discrepancies in the motion of dance steps, diglossia and patterns of voicing in song lyrics, the use of metaphor, etc. Clearly more research will need to be done to explore these questions of structure and form, but this work will have to be undertaken by scholars with training in musicology and linguistics. It is also important to keep in mind that throughout my analysis I have been referring primarily to popular perceptions of musical practice and sounds, not the analysis of aesthetics from a philosophical or musicological perspective, or even from the point of view of professional musicians, but conventional wisdom about the way music sounds and what this sound means.

Despite these limitations, there are several observations that can be made about the relationship between popular culture and aesthetics in this context. First, it would seem that the aesthetics of popular music is fundamentally a generational phenomenon. This means that what sounds good varies from one period to another and that music, as a privileged domain of aesthetic activity in an African context, is one of the terrains on which generations debate the eternal questions of what is beautiful, what is good, and what is true. Second, and this only confirms what Africanist scholars have known since Jan Vansina's important work on oral tradition (1965), the analysis of popular aesthetics in an African context should never underestimate the importance of language. The non-verbal aspects of music (rhythm, tone, melody, etc.) are obviously important to the music's sound, but listeners tend to emphasize lyrics more than the non-verbal aspects of music, even implying that the most beautiful songs are those whose lyrics provoke strong emotions and vivid personal memories. Third, the nature of aesthetic changes in the music is linked in important ways to what is going on in the larger political economy and this relationship, always embedded in a particular historical moment, is something that needs to be explained. In the examples I consider here, it is difficult to imagine the emergence of *libanga* without the autonomous development of the *seben*, and just as difficult to imagine the *seben* without significant changes in song structure. But what led to these structural changes in the music? The answers to this question lie in the complex evolution of cultural policy under Mobutu, which promoted the idea of "authentic" African culture as a means of covering up a looming economic crisis that was primarily due to the opportunism and mismanagement of a newly entitled state-based elite (White 2006b). As I have argued elsewhere (White 2008), musicians tried to resolve

this crisis through their music, and not surprisingly their efforts only had limited benefits for the economy as a whole.

The elements I have chosen to discuss in my analysis apply primarily to the third and fourth generations of popular music in Kinshasa, a period that begins in the early 1970s and according to most accounts continues to the present day (Makobo 2010). Before this period, popular music in the Congo was different because "l'esprit de l'époque" or *Zeitgeist* was different, what Raymond Williams refers to as the "structures of feeling" (1976). In fact, one could argue that while popular music today is much more prone to monotony than popular music forty years ago, in some ways it is also more complex. Take, for example, the simple observation that songs today are much longer than they used to be and that their structure is based on three parts instead of only two. Or look at the way that musicians combine strategies to implicate listeners in the process of consuming music, not only song narratives playing on emotion, but also an increased emphasis on live spectacle and the emergence of the *libanga* phenomenon. I am also inclined to argue that the lyrics contemporary popular songs do part of the work required of music and the music does something completely different, even though the two work hand in hand to create complex aesthetic experiences that keep Congolese audiences interested. By this I mean that lyrics set the stage for intense feelings of sadness and loneliness while music, operating at a completely different register of experience, offers a kind of resolution to this problem, pulling the listener out of emotional paralysis and re-integrating him or her into a community of exchange.

But this interpretation is mine and mine alone. In the best of worlds, I see my analysis as an attempt to listen to people listening, an attempt to figure out if when we listen, we are hearing any of the same things (Szendy 2001). From the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics (at least in Gadamer's terms), the fact that we can only ever hear from a particular point of view does not mean that we should give up altogether on listening. Of course, to listen to others, truly listen to others, we have to be capable of listening to ourselves, and this means separating our own perceptions, interpretations, and desires from those of our subjects. Not in order to remove these pre-judgments from the equation as the modernists would have us do, but so that we might mobilize them to our advantage in the long and tedious process of question and answer that only rarely makes the leap from conversation to dialogue. So when we talk about the "experience" of listening, whose experience are we referring to? What aspects of this experience are unique to the individual listener and what aspects does she share with other listeners? From my own experience, the power of Congolese music comes from its ability to allow listeners to completely

lose themselves in the music. This interpretation is based on many years of listening to this music, but on relatively few conversations with Congolese about how they experience this "thirty seconds of joy". What status should I give this interpretation, especially in light of the fact that I am an outsider—albeit with some status as initiate or apprentice—looking in?

The lesson for the study of popular culture is simple: popular culture is certainly more accessible than "culture tout court", since very often it comes in the form of a text, a CD or a DVD, but these objects often run the risk of coming between us and the people who produce, distribute and consume them. Take for example Achille Mbembe's (2006, 90) analysis of "song and melody" in which he describes in detail what he hears in a recent recording by Koffi Olomide:

> This interweaving of sounds paradoxically produces a strongly syncopated rhythm, which is interrupted by spasmodic phrases. Nothing is stable in the composition. There are no sustained breaks. Each instrument interrupts another, taking its turn before being extinguished by another instrument, by the *atalaku*, or the chorus. Then, it all ends as it began, without ever reaching a peak and with no clear conclusion.

What Mbembe interprets as spasm and interruption is actually a finely crafted combination of different *seben* partitions that are carefully woven together in order to showcase the musical skills and talents of the members of the group, what musicians in Kinshasa refer to as a "générique". In fact, this song is not a song at all, but a particularly elegant example of a relatively recent aesthetic form that announces where the musicians will be taking the listener, but that also serves the purpose of simulating the energy of a concert, since this form is one that has been perfected in the context of live performance. Olomide even underlines the seriousness of this exercise by playfully calling the musicians to attention at the beginning of the song: "Allez Silence! Ici on travaille…" ("Listen up! We're working here…").[9] Mbembe's analysis, however interesting as a transcription of a particular listening experience, unwittingly reinforces the idea that cultural products are enough in and of themselves to give us access to the Congolese "world of sounds".

If it is true, as Bogumil Jewsiewicki has suggested, that popular culture is the way that Africa represents itself (2002), then we had better understand how these representations function, and

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[9] See "Ici On Travaille (Clip Officiel)" here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUbQzZVYzAo (consulted November 25th 2025).

because very often this popular culture takes the form of a story, a dance, or a song, this requires us to go beyond a simple analysis of their content. As the history of aesthetics tells us, form is not merely a reflection of content, but a vector of meaning in its own right. In contexts such as the Congo, where speaking truth to power can land you in jail or at the bottom of the river, form takes on a particular sense of purpose (Yoka 2010). Indeed, this purposefulness, unlike the notion of disinterestedness in Kant's aesthetic theory, requires us to remain constantly vigilant with regards to the various layers of meaning that popular music urges us to explore, and this does not necessarily exclude the pleasure of interpretation, one of several "plaisirs de l'esprit". But however pleasurable this work might be, it is still work and as such it requires us to resist the temptation of letting our imagination turn people into monsters. It requires us to bring our interpretations back to the table with those who truly have something at stake in our analysis, ensuring again and again that listening is more than a research strategy or methodological tool, but a way of managing our relationships with others.

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