

«IT'S GONNA BE ME THERE IN THE PICTURE»

An attempt to understand audio-visual forms of
self-representation by African migrants in Switzerland

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Pictures: *Film Team of «Paradise in my Mind» and the «African Mirror Foundation»*

The anthropologist Victor Turner (1987: 81) once defined humans as *homo performans*. This implies that people are «essentially performing creatures who constitute and sustain their identities and collectively enact their worlds through roles and rituals» (Conquergood 1983: 27). Nowadays, the media are an often frequented public space for such identity enactments. However, audio-visual media are not just a vivid platform for representations, they are also a useful research tool. They are especially well suited to study human performances because they not only present lived experience but also facilitate the expression of imaginary as well as emotional parts of the self. As Sarah Pink (2001: 5) writes, a research approach which includes audio-visual methods recognizes «the interwovenness of objects, texts, images and technologies in people's everyday lives and identities».

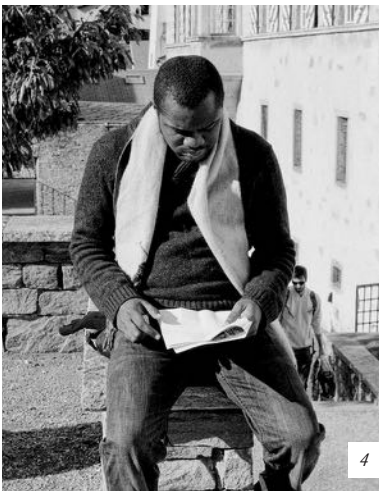
This double-functional nature of audio-visual performances as a practice and a research method inspired my doctoral research. In more concrete terms, I initiated a film project with African migrants in Switzerland in order to better understand their everyday lives. Over the course of four years, I was able to take part in an amateur film production and work together with more than 60 people – most of them first-generation migrants of various African descent. Based on their ideas, we conceptualised and produced the 96-minute long film *Paradise in my Mind*. This film narrates the fictionalized stories of three migrants and provides exceptional insight into the everyday lives of African migrants in Switzerland realized from their perspective.

This collaboration allowed the participants to reflect upon their experiences, ideas, dreams, and hopes as foreigners living in Switzerland and to demonstrate their creative skills. At

the same time, I was able to study the ways they represent themselves as a group through audio-visual media. However, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1990: xv) outlines, performance is «not what *they* do and *we* observe» but rather a process both sides are engaged in. It is team work. Due to my interest in studying collective forms of self-representation in a collaboration, I consequently joined the film crew and worked as co-producer, script co-writer, production manager and later also editor in the project. In these positions, I was – just as Fabian suggests – not observing the production processes from afar but was rather actively participating in the project and consciously co-creating the very field I was studying. My project participants became my colleagues, with whom I shared the common objective of making a film. This kind of involvement and sharing of a common objective enabled me to closely experience the making of the film – from the gathering of first ideas to the public screenings – and analyse the social processes accompanying its production.

The Photo Collection

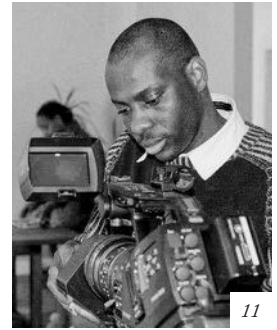
The most intense phase of our collaboration was the actual filming. During the film shootings, activities in front of and behind the camera took place. In order to visually document these processes, it was our initial idea to assign a crew member to take pictures of each day we filmed. But as the technical crew was often short-staffed, the assigned photographer occasionally had to abandon the camera and help his colleagues with the handling of the filming equipment. Though, the unattended camera was not left unused. It attracted the attention of other crew members (including myself) as well as actors



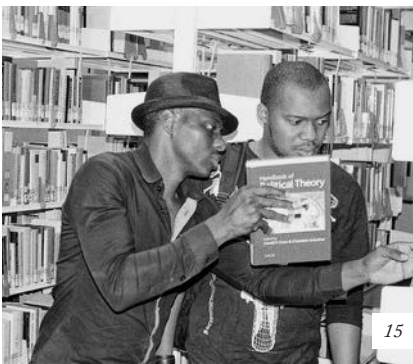
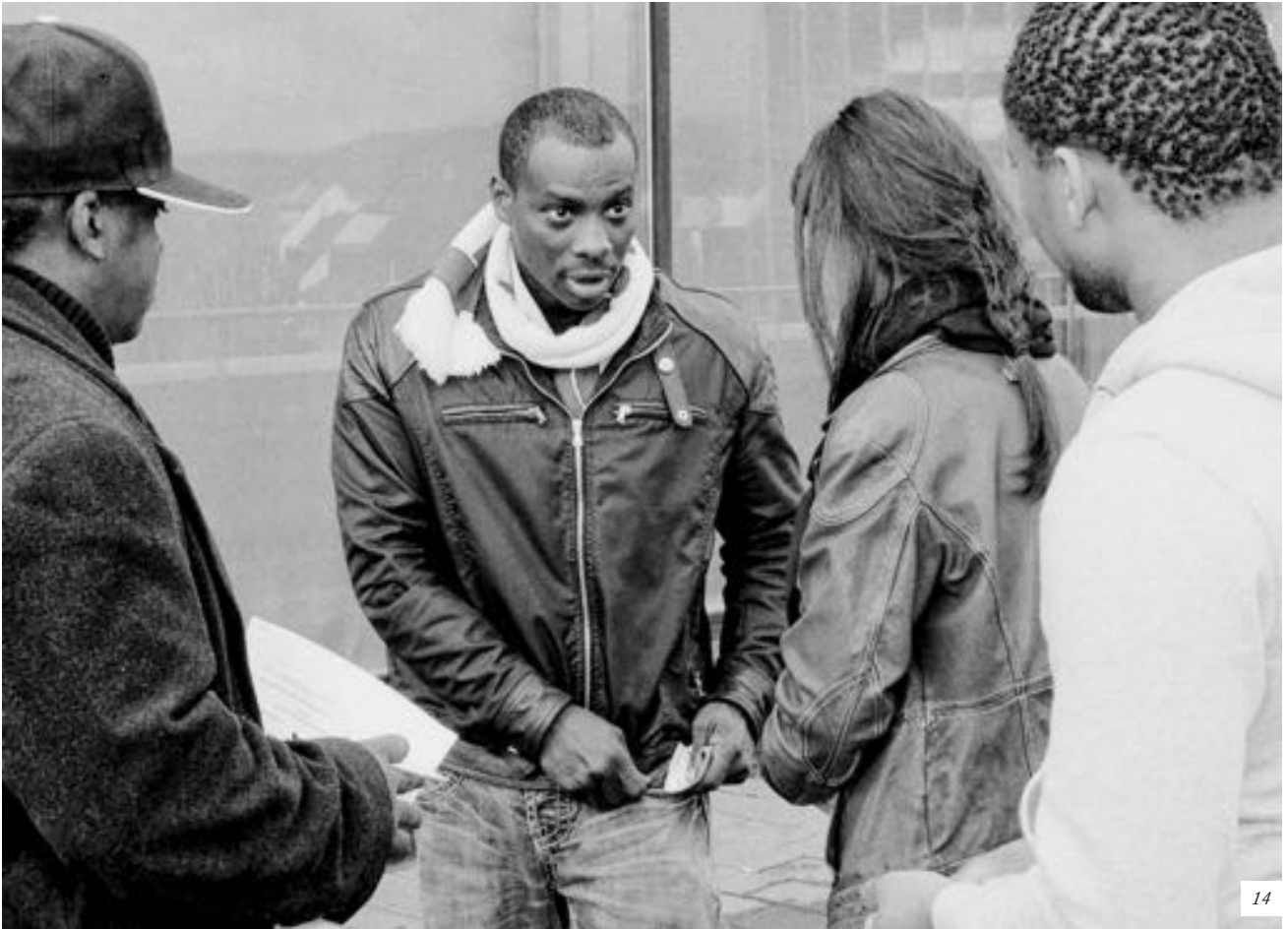
Photographs 1-5
Reading the Script



Photographs 6-8
Styling



Photographs 9-13
Equipment



Photographs 14-17
Directing



Photographs 18-20
Filming



Photographs 21-24
Discussions

awaiting their part. We all started using it and taking random pictures. In doing so over the course of 30 shooting days, we took more than 3000 pictures. These pictures now form a unique collection of photographs that capture the various activities and illustrate the major processes of the shooting.

In the following, I paired six groups of photographs with descriptions and personal thoughts. They give an insight into the organic and processual nature of the film production by visualising different levels of individual and collective decision making processes and revealing the many social mechanisms that lie behind the migrants' audio-visual self-representations.

Photographs 1-5: Reading the Script

About a week before each shooting day, the actors and crew members received an e-mail with general information about the up-coming film shoot as well as script excerpts of the scenes we planned to realise. The script of *Paradise in my Mind* was constantly altered and re-written according to the venue, the weather, the people available, as well as new ideas. Therefore, the actors did not possess a complete script but were rather given script excerpts at short notice.

The actors approached the script in very diverse manners. For example, Mike, who played the supporting role of a drug dealer, came to the shooting with a script copy full of personal notes and red marks (**photo 1**). For him, the script had to reproduce his word choice as well as the way he imagined his character would talk. In order to make it sound «natural», he thus «corrected» the wordings and then learnt his altered version by heart. A very different approach was followed by Esther, who played the main female role (**photo 2**). She tried to detect and embody the essential message of each scene by practicing her script ideas in front of the mirror until they became – as she put it – part of herself. Lead actor Remy had a similar approach. He identified the gist of each scene, learnt the main statements and then started his shooting days by discussing his visions with his fellow actors (**photos 3 & 5**). In the interaction with others, he positioned his role in the broader context and shaped his character. Other actors came to the venue unprepared. They asked for a script copy, read it a few times, talked to their fellow actors about it and then improvised in front of the camera (**photo 4**).

No matter if they learnt the script by heart, embodied its message or used it as a guideline for improvisation, the reading of the script always initiated a creative process. As the director told them to freely interpret the script, the text was the starting point of their own ideas and helped them to envision and rethink the story.

Photographs 6-8: Styling

The producers asked the actors to wear their own clothes for their performances. As a result, many female performers brought a bag or a small suitcase full of clothes and accessories with them (**photo 7**). They created different outfits for their character and changed their clothes for each scene. During a conversation, Jasmin – who played the girlfriend of a lead character – emphasised that the change of clothes helped her to define her character and separate herself from her role (**photo 8**).

On shooting days, make-up and clothing seemed to be primarily female tasks. The women usually gathered in a separate area and applied each other's make-up (**photo 6**). In contrast, most male actors already wore their clothes by arrival and only minimally changed their style on site. However, to think that the male participants did not care about their physical appearance or styling would be a fallacy. I vividly remember an e-mail with pictures of nine different pairs of shoes an actor sent me. He was unsure of how to dress for his role and asked me for my «female advice». This indicated that all actors were very aware of the public nature of the film production. While they were instructed to wear their own everyday clothes, most of them dressed up and tried to create a visually appealing image of themselves as well as their community.

Photographs 9-13: Equipment

While the actors were preoccupied with their styling, the predominately male crew installed the equipment (**photos 9-12**). They positioned the camera and lights, tested the various recording devices, and arranged the venue for the subsequent filming. Just like the actors, the majority of the crew members were amateurs. Some of them had never worked as film crew members before and had to learn from scratch how to operate the different pieces of the equipment. Luckily, our director and cameraman Mark was not only the owner of most of the equipment but also knew how to use it. He instructed the crew and shared his expertise with them (**photos 9 & 13**). That way, they learnt how to effectively hold a boom arm or correctly set the lighting. When I asked crew member Chris (**photo 10**) about his experience on set, he told me:

«I was holding the microphone in place. They were directing me when the microphone was not in a good position [...]. I had never done such a thing before. But I liked it because I want to achieve something. As far as it is something to make me progress, why can't I do it? [...] Now I have an idea of this kind of work. You need a lot of muscles.» (*Chris; interview – 29 October 2013*)

Chris and many others seemed to understand their participation as a chance to acquire skills, to expand their professional knowledge and thereby to potentially advance their careers. As their participation as crew member did not require prior knowledge or experience, they embraced it as an opportunity to gain an insight into the world of filmmaking and its potential future job prospective.

While learning for the future, the crew members created the technical prerequisites for the shoot. However, many of them also participated in the team discussions, made suggestions for the film realization and showed interest in the acting process. Several of them even played minor roles and appeared in the film.

Photographs 14-17: Directing

As soon as cast and crew were ready to shoot, the director and the acting coach started giving instructions (**photos 14-17**). They both had experienced professional film shootings before and shared their knowledge with the team. As creative heads of the project, they instructed the crew and told the actors where to stand or what to do.

Usually, either the director (who was also our cameraman) or the acting coach outlined the proceedings before each shot. At times, however, they did not give any instruction at all and only answered questions. I often had the feeling that their approach depended on how important the scene was to them personally. As a former drug dealer, the director was very much invested in the scenes focused on the storyline of the drug dealer. For example, he showed the actors how to place dummy drugs packages in their mouths or how to effectively hide cash from passers-by (**photo 14**). He shared his experience and made the team aware of the risks and consequences of drug dealing.

While the director was eager to express his own experience as a migrant and to warn of the drug dealing business, the acting coach seemed primarily concerned with the creation of representative – or what he called «natural» – images. But they both cared about the film's message and the way the African community was portrayed through it. In doing so, they added their visions to the filming process and moved the team in a certain direction.

Photographs 18-20: Filming

The most crucial moments of every shooting day happened during the actual filming. As soon as the camera was turned on, everyone's ideas converged (**photos 19 & 20**). The actors embodied

their characters, the crew converted their technical knowledge into practice and the directors saw to the implementation of their instructions. Through this interplay, the individuals' imagination was transformed into a collective act. Or as the supporting actress Kathy (**photo 18**) described it, everything started «flowing»:

It was an interaction between my film partner and me. Whatever I brought out, she responded and then I gave back another response. (*Kathy; interview – 14 December 2013*)

Due to this open approach, the performances were primarily based on improvisation and intuition. Similar to the observations Marston, Woodward and Jones (2007: 54) made in the context of Nigerian filmmaking, also our film was «produced organically from the interaction between actors as well as whatever intervening opportunities, obstacles and complications might surface while shooting». Interestingly, this also caused the lines between reality and fiction to blur. What was an intuitive act, what was a planned move? What was re-enacted lived experience and what had its roots in sheer imagination? What was an act of self-expression and what a performance in character? The convergence of different visions allowed the formation of something new.

Photographs 21-24: Discussions

However, this *something new* was not always agreed upon. It had to be negotiated in the group. Some of these negotiations occurred in subtle ways. For example, lead actor Remy admitted that he often changed the script or staged the scene in another way than he had been told. The director and the acting coach accepted most of these autonomous alterations without any further comment and, as I sensed it, at times even encouraged and welcomed such creative suggestions by the cast. However, in other cases, when they disagreed upon a certain setting, an interpretation of the scene or a way to act, such changes caused intense discussions amongst the team members (**photos 21-24**). Lumi – the third lead actor of the film project – was often involved in these discussions (**photo 22**). He explained his interventions as follows:

We did a lot of improvisation and that was very good. I felt very comfortable with it because there were some things in the script I couldn't see myself doing or I thought were stupid. [...] So I was always commenting and discussing because it's gonna be me there in the picture. (*Lumi; interview – 16 April 2014*)

Lumi is a good example of how especially the participants of African descent were concerned about the way they appeared in the film. As amateurs making a film about their own experiences, they not only felt their personal reputation at stake but

the image of their whole community. Despite the fictional nature of the film, they were noticeably worried about its outcome. In fact, some actors even insisted on watching the filmed scenes on the camera display directly after the shoot.

Conclusion

The photographs taken during the filming process are full of different faces and people. This is not by chance. *Paradise in my Mind* is not the product of a single person, rather it is the result of an intense collaboration. Each day of filming was influenced by numerous people. From a seemingly small deci-

sion like the colour of the eye shadow to a hard-fought compromise over the interpretation of a scene, this film includes many ideas, voices, and perspectives.

In many ways, the involvement in the film project allowed the participants to express themselves as individuals as well as community members. Concomitantly, it gave them an opportunity to be imaginative and to stimulate their creativity. Their interest in the creative production of self-images was also evident in their approach to an abandoned photo camera. They collectively created a photographic documentation with thousands of pictures they knew would be available online and used for articles like the one presented here.

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You can find more information and pictures of the film project on www.facebook.com/paradiseinmy mind.

AUTHOR

Sandra Mooser is currently doing her PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Bern. Her study is part of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) research project «Nollywood made in Switzerland. Audio-visual forms of self-representation by African migrants in a transnational context» and additionally supported by the Dr. Joséphine de Kármán Foundation. During her fieldwork, she co-produced the Nollywood inspired film *Paradise in my Mind*.

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