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Cinematic Representations of Rurality and Urbanity in Ngangura and Lamy's *La Vie Est Belle*: A Functionalist-Inspired Analysis

Chris Emmanuel Bakouma Malanda[1*], Claude Giscard Makosso[2]

[1]African Literature Civilization Department, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Marien Ngouabi University.
[2]Arts Department, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Marien Ngouabi University.

[*]*Corresponding Author's Email: malanda.narmer1@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study examines the contrasting representations of rurality and urbanity in *La Vie Est Belle* (Benoît Lamy & Ngangura Mweze, 1987). It explores how rural and urban spaces are depicted through visual, narrative, and symbolic cues, particularly via the characters and actants, such as Kourou. The research addresses the following questions: How does the film stage rural and urban life to reveal their respective functions within Congolese society? To what extent do these representations uphold values, shape identities, and interrogate social roles from a functionalist perspective? To answer these questions, the study employs a moderated functionalist framework inspired by Robert King Merton (1957), using the concepts of manifest and latent functions, as well as dysfunctions. This approach highlights the symbolic and social significance of rural-urban imaginaries in the postcolonial Congolese context, showing how cinematic representations both reflect and constitute societal structures.

Keywords: Film, Functionalism, Rurality, Urbanity, Values

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema, as an art form, has long served as a mirror reflecting societal realities, cultural values, and the evolution of human behavior. African cinema, in particular, has consistently engaged in the dual project of portraying the continent's socio-cultural heritage and interrogating the transformations induced by modernity, urbanization, and globalization. In this context, *La vie est belle*, directed by Benoît Lamy and Dieudonné Ngangura Mweze in 1987, emerges as a remarkable cinematic text that juxtaposes rural and urban life in the Democratic Republic of Congo, offering both visual and narrative insights into these contrasting worlds.

The film centers on the character of Kourou, whose journey from the village to the city illuminates the socio-cultural dynamics, moral frameworks, and economic pressures that define rural and urban spaces. Rurality is depicted not merely as a physical setting but as a repository of values, traditions, and communal solidarity. The city, in contrast, is portrayed as a space of opportunity, ambition, and social complexity, yet also as a site of moral ambiguity, alienation, and individual struggle. By focusing on these dichotomous settings, the film invites viewers to consider the functional roles of rural and urban spheres in Congolese society, highlighting both their manifest and latent effects on individuals and communities.

This research is motivated by several questions. First, how does *La vie est belle* stage rurality and urbanity to reveal their respective social and moral functions? Second, how do these representations contribute to the preservation of Congolese cultural identity while simultaneously interrogating the evolving roles of individuals in a modernizing society? Third, what insights does a functionalist analysis provide into the symbolic and social significance of rural and urban spaces as portrayed in the film?

In addressing these questions, this study seeks to offer a dual contribution. On the one hand, it enhances our understanding of African cinema as a medium that negotiates the tension between tradition and modernity. On the other hand, it demonstrates the utility of functionalist theory as an analytical tool capable of revealing the underlying social dynamics and symbolic meanings embedded within cinematic texts. By combining careful textual analysis, attention to visual and narrative cues, and a rigorous theoretical approach, this study aspires to illuminate the ways in which *La vie est belle* engages with the broader discourse on rurality, urbanity, and social change in postcolonial Congo.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to rigorously analyze the representations of rural and urban life in *La vie est belle*, it is essential to ground the study in a solid theoretical framework. Functionalist theory, particularly the approach developed by Robert King Merton, provides an invaluable lens through which to interpret social phenomena as depicted in cinema. According to Merton (1957), society is composed of interrelated structures, each performing specific functions that contribute to the stability and continuity of the social system. These functions can be categorized as manifest, latent, and dysfunctions. Manifest functions refer to the intended and recognized consequences of a social action or institution. Latent functions, by contrast, are unintended and often unrecognized, yet they play a significant role in shaping social dynamics. Dysfunctions, on the other hand, represent negative consequences that disrupt or challenge the equilibrium of the social system.

Applying this framework to cinematic analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how films do not merely entertain but also reproduce, critique, and interrogate social realities. In *La vie est belle*, rural and urban settings are not merely backdrops; they are dynamic social spaces through which the film communicates the functions and dysfunctions of Congolese society. Rurality embodies collective solidarity, moral integrity, and continuity with cultural traditions, reflecting manifest functions such as community cohesion and the reinforcement of social norms. At the same time, latent functions of rural life may include the subtle reproduction of hierarchical structures, gender roles, or generational tensions that are not explicitly addressed but nonetheless shape the community's operation.

Urban spaces, conversely, present a more complex interplay of manifest and latent functions. The city represents opportunity, mobility, and modernity, highlighting the manifest functions of economic advancement and social diversification. However, latent functions reveal the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in urban life: alienation, moral compromise, social competition, and the erosion of traditional values. Dysfunctional aspects emerge when these latent functions manifest as social problems, including inequality, corruption, or the weakening of familial and communal bonds. By examining these dynamics, the study aims to illuminate the symbolic and functional significance of rural and urban spaces as articulated in Congolese cinematic discourse.

Furthermore, the functionalist lens allows the study to consider the narrative and visual strategies employed by filmmakers. Narrative structures, character arcs, dialogue, and mise-en-scène work collectively to encode social functions and tensions within the cinematic text. For example, the contrast between the slow-paced, communal life of the village and the fast-paced, individualized life of the city is visually and narratively constructed to reinforce the thematic exploration of rural versus urban dynamics. Each setting functions not only as a spatial container but as a moral and social actor, shaping the experiences, decisions, and identities of the characters.

Beyond the purely functionalist perspective, the study also acknowledges the postcolonial and cultural dimensions of Congolese cinema. Films emerging from the postcolonial context of the Democratic Republic of Congo are inevitably engaged in a dialogue with colonial legacies, Western modernity, and indigenous knowledge systems. Functionalist analysis, therefore, is complemented by a sensitivity to cultural context, recognizing that social functions and dysfunctions are historically and culturally situated. Rural life, for instance, is valorized not only for its communal benefits but also as a site of resistance against the homogenizing pressures of globalization. Urban life, while offering material and social mobility, simultaneously embodies the tensions of cultural hybridity and identity negotiation.

In sum, the theoretical framework combines Mertonian functionalism with cultural and postcolonial awareness to analyze *La vie est belle*. By considering manifest and latent functions alongside social dysfunctions and situating these within Congolese socio-cultural realities, this approach allows for a nuanced reading of rurality and urbanity in the film. It provides the conceptual tools necessary to interpret cinematic representations as both reflective and constitutive of social life, thereby bridging film studies and sociological analysis in a coherent and academically rigorous manner.

REPRESENTATIONS OF RURAL LIFE

Rurality as a Space of Social Cohesion

In *La vie est belle*, rural life is depicted as a space of social cohesion, moral integrity, and communal solidarity. The village is not merely a geographical setting but a symbolic site where values, traditions, and interpersonal bonds are actively maintained and reproduced. The daily life of villagers demonstrates the manifest functions of rural society: collective work, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the reinforcement of social norms. For instance, communal activities such as farming, market gatherings, or traditional celebrations are not solely practical; they constitute rituals through which social hierarchies, ethical codes, and a sense of belonging are communicated and preserved.

This depiction aligns with the functionalist perspective, which emphasizes the role of social structures in maintaining equilibrium. Rural spaces in the film operate as a kind of moral and social stabilizer. Characters rely on one another not only for survival but also for guidance, emotional support, and ethical orientation. In this sense, the village functions as a microcosm of Congolese society, where interdependence ensures continuity and cohesion. The manifest functions of rural life are thus closely intertwined with latent functions, including the subtle reinforcement of cultural norms, social roles, and expectations, particularly regarding family, gender, and age hierarchies.

Moreover, the film portrays rurality as a site of identity formation. Children learn through observation and participation, absorbing both explicit instructions and the implicit social codes that govern communal life. This intergenerational transmission is central to maintaining the cultural fabric of the village. The rural setting also fosters a collective consciousness, in which individuals perceive themselves as part of a larger whole, rather than as isolated agents. Such a sense of belonging strengthens social cohesion and provides a buffer against moral and social disintegration.

Rural Life and Moral Integrity

A recurring theme in *La vie est belle* is the association between rural life and moral integrity. Characters from the village are often depicted as honest, generous, and guided by ethical principles rooted in communal values. This moral dimension of rurality can be seen as both a manifest and latent function of the social structure. On one hand, manifestly, the village enforces ethical behavior through communal oversight and social accountability. Deviations from accepted norms are quickly noted and corrected, ensuring the survival of moral order. On the other hand, latent functions include the internalization of values that may not be explicitly taught but are absorbed through daily interactions, rituals, and communal participation.

The contrast with urban life, which will be explored later, underscores the ethical significance of rurality. In the village, material wealth is secondary to relational wealth: respect, solidarity, and mutual aid are valued above individual accumulation. This ethical framework not only governs interactions but also shapes decision-making, emotional responses, and long-term aspirations. The rural setting thus operates as a moral compass within the narrative, illustrating the ways in which spatial context influences ethical and social behavior.

Rurality and the Tensions of Modernity

Despite its portrayal as harmonious and morally sound, rural life in *La vie est belle* is not devoid of tensions. The film subtly captures the latent dysfunctions of village life, including resistance to change, generational conflicts, and limitations on personal ambition. While the village sustains social cohesion, it may also constrain individual mobility or innovation, reflecting an inherent tension between tradition and modernity. Younger characters often confront dilemmas as they navigate expectations imposed by elders while aspiring to experience broader horizons or access new opportunities.

This tension reflects a core insight of Mertonian functionalism: every structure carries both positive functions and potential dysfunctions. In the context of the village, latent dysfunctions are not catastrophic but they signal areas where social change may be necessary to accommodate evolving needs. These narrative choices allow the film to engage critically with the rural experience, presenting it not as an idealized utopia but as a living, dynamic system capable of adaptation, negotiation, and self-reflection.

Rurality as Cultural Resistance

Finally, rurality in the film embodies a form of cultural resistance against external pressures, including globalization, urbanization, and postcolonial transformations. By emphasizing continuity, ritual, and communal values, the village represents a repository of indigenous knowledge and a bulwark against cultural homogenization. This aspect of rural life is particularly salient in the postcolonial Congolese context, where the erosion of traditional social structures is both a historical and contemporary concern. The film portrays the village as a site where cultural memory is preserved, and where alternative ways of organizing social life resist the dominance of urban or Western norms.

Through these depictions, *La vie est belle* presents rural life as multidimensional: socially cohesive, morally grounded, historically conscious, and yet inevitably challenged by modernity. The village is at once a stabilizing force, a moral guide, and a site of latent tensions, illustrating the complex interplay of functions and dysfunctions within Congolese society.

REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN LIFE

Urbanity as a Space of Individualism

In contrast to the rural village, the city in *La vie est belle* is depicted as a space characterized by individualism, competition, and social fluidity. Urban life emphasizes personal achievement, material success, and social mobility. The film portrays streets, markets, and crowded neighborhoods as dynamic yet impersonal spaces, where social relations are mediated less by tradition and more by individual initiative. Unlike the village, where identity is largely collective, the city requires individuals to negotiate their position, assert themselves, and navigate complex networks of influence and opportunity.

The urban environment in the film embodies both the opportunities and risks associated with modernity. On one hand, the city allows characters to pursue education, professional careers, and broader social interactions. It is a site of innovation, where ideas circulate, and where cultural encounters foster creativity and personal growth. On the other hand, urban life can be isolating. The absence of a tight-knit community means that social support must be sought

actively, and moral oversight is weaker, creating a context in which ethical lapses or social alienation may occur.

Through these contrasts, the film emphasizes the dual nature of urbanity: it is both liberating and precarious. Characters must balance ambition with ethical considerations, and personal success with the maintenance of meaningful relationships. This depiction aligns with the broader sociological understanding of urban spaces as arenas of both opportunity and tension, where social structures are flexible but potentially unstable.

Urban Life and Moral Ambiguity

A recurring motif in the urban sequences of *La vie est belle* is the prevalence of moral ambiguity. Unlike the village, where norms are clearly communicated and reinforced, the city presents a complex ethical landscape. Characters encounter situations in which rules are less explicit, and choices involve negotiation, compromise, and sometimes transgression. The anonymity of urban life allows for freedom but also increases the potential for deception, exploitation, and social conflict.

The film emphasizes how urban settings shape ethical behavior. In the absence of communal oversight, individuals must rely on internalized values or personal judgment to navigate social interactions. The city becomes a crucible for testing integrity, patience, and resilience. Moreover, the pressures of competition and material ambition sometimes lead characters to confront ethical dilemmas that would rarely arise in a rural context. By highlighting these contrasts, the film suggests that space and social structure exert a profound influence on moral conduct.

Urban Life and Social Stratification

The city is also depicted as a site of pronounced social stratification. Wealth, occupation, and education determine access to resources and opportunities, creating visible divides between social groups. The film illustrates how urban hierarchies affect daily life, from housing and employment to social interactions and access to services. Unlike the village, where social cohesion mitigates inequality, the urban environment can exacerbate disparities and foster competition rather than cooperation.

Urban life in the film is therefore a lens through which broader socio-economic dynamics are explored. Characters' trajectories reveal the interplay between opportunity and constraint, ambition and limitation. The city embodies both hope and anxiety, offering the potential for upward mobility while simultaneously exposing individuals to instability, marginalization, and moral compromise. This duality reinforces the film's nuanced approach to urbanity, portraying it neither as wholly desirable nor entirely corrupt, but as a complex arena of human experience.

Urbanity and Cultural Transformation

Finally, the city in *La vie est belle* represents a site of cultural transformation. Urban settings foster exposure to new ideas, technologies, and social norms, accelerating processes of change that are slower or absent in the village. Characters negotiate between traditional values and modern influences, adapting to new social expectations while striving to retain a sense of cultural identity. This dynamic illustrates how cities function as engines of cultural

hybridization, where continuity and innovation coexist, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in tension.

The film portrays urban spaces as catalysts for personal and collective evolution. Characters must reconcile the demands of modern life with inherited traditions, leading to moments of conflict, reflection, and adaptation. In this sense, urbanity is not merely a physical setting but a transformative social force, shaping behavior, ethics, and identity.

Urban-Rural Contrast: A Sociological Perspective

By juxtaposing village and city life, *La vie est belle* invites a reflection on the sociological dimensions of space. Rural areas are associated with cohesion, moral clarity, and interdependence, while urban areas emphasize individuality, mobility, and moral ambiguity. The film illustrates how spatial context shapes social relations, ethical behavior, and cultural adaptation. It also suggests that neither environment is inherently superior; each presents distinct advantages, challenges, and opportunities for personal and collective development.

Through this contrast, the narrative encourages a nuanced understanding of postcolonial Congolese society, where tradition and modernity coexist, sometimes in tension, sometimes in dialogue. The city and the village emerge as complementary yet distinct arenas, each contributing to the broader social fabric in different ways.

Urban-Rural Comparison: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

The contrast between urban and rural life in *La vie est belle* is not merely geographic; it represents a dialectic between tradition and modernity, collective identity and individual agency, continuity and change. The village embodies stability, shared norms, and intergenerational cohesion, whereas the city embodies fluidity, opportunity, and ethical ambiguity. By juxtaposing these spaces, the film illuminates how social context shapes behavior, expectations, and identity formation.

The Village: Stability, Community, and Moral Clarity

In rural settings, social life is structured around collective memory, kinship ties, and ritual practices. Characters are constantly reminded of communal values through festivals, rites of passage, and everyday social interactions. In this context, personal identity is inseparable from social belonging; individual actions carry consequences not only for oneself but also for the wider community. The village functions as a moral compass, where ethical norms are reinforced through observation, gossip, and mutual accountability.

Education, labor, and social roles are guided by tradition, ensuring continuity and predictability. This continuity fosters a sense of security, but it can also impose constraints on personal ambition. Characters who aspire to roles beyond those predetermined by social structures must navigate these tensions carefully, balancing respect for tradition with the desire for innovation or self-realization.

The City: Fluidity, Ambition, and Ethical Ambiguity

The city, in contrast, is portrayed as a laboratory of modern life, where identities are more fluid and social expectations less prescriptive. Individuals must negotiate relationships and opportunities with an eye toward personal advancement. Streets, marketplaces, offices, and social clubs serve as arenas of interaction, competition, and negotiation. Unlike the village,

urban life does not automatically enforce moral norms; the individual's ethical compass becomes crucial in navigating this environment.

Opportunities abound in the city—educational advancement, professional careers, and exposure to diverse cultures—but these opportunities are accompanied by risks of exploitation, alienation, and moral compromise. Characters must balance ambition with integrity, aspiration with empathy, and innovation with ethical responsibility. The city thus exemplifies both the liberating and challenging dimensions of modernity.

Negotiating Identity Across Spaces

A central concern of the film is how characters reconcile urban and rural experiences. Migration from village to city requires adaptability: individuals must learn new codes of conduct, adjust to unfamiliar social hierarchies, and develop strategies for survival and success. Yet, even in the city, ties to the village remain important, shaping behavior, values, and aspirations.

This negotiation illustrates the broader postcolonial reality in Congo, where tradition and modernity coexist in tension. The film suggests that identity is neither fixed nor singular; it is a dynamic construct, influenced by spatial, social, and cultural factors. Characters who successfully navigate these transitions demonstrate resilience, strategic thinking, and moral sophistication.

Sociocultural Implications

By contrasting rural and urban life, the film emphasizes several key sociocultural dynamics:

i. Collective versus Individual Ethics: Villages prioritize communal norms; cities emphasize personal judgment.

ii. Stability versus Fluidity: Villages provide continuity; cities offer flexibility and mobility.

iii. Tradition versus Innovation: Rural life preserves inherited practices; urban life stimulates adaptation and cultural hybridization.

iv. Interdependence versus Competition: Village networks foster mutual support; city networks reward negotiation, initiative, and sometimes opportunism.

Through these contrasts, *La vie est belle* underscores that spatial contexts deeply influence social behavior, ethical choices, and cultural adaptation. Urban and rural life are complementary in shaping human experience, each presenting distinct challenges and opportunities that contribute to the broader social fabric.

Postcolonial Implications and Identity Tensions

La vie est belle situates its narrative in a postcolonial Congolese context, where historical legacies of colonization intersect with contemporary social, economic, and cultural transformations. The film does not depict postcolonial life merely as a backdrop; it actively interrogates how inherited colonial structures and cultural expectations shape individual and collective identities. Urban-rural contrasts, gender roles, and moral choices all acquire deeper significance when interpreted through a postcolonial lens.

Historical Context and Social Memory

The Congolese postcolonial landscape is marked by the persistence of colonial administrative, educational, and social frameworks, which continue to influence patterns of authority, social mobility, and cultural perception. Even decades after formal independence, characters negotiate a world still structured by the remnants of foreign governance, economic dependency, and cultural impositions.

Rural villages often serve as repositories of precolonial memory, preserving language, customs, and collective practices less disrupted by European influence. Cities, however, are loci of hybridization: colonial architecture, imported institutions, and globalized culture interact with local traditions. Characters moving between these spaces encounter juxtapositions of memory and modernity, prompting reflection on continuity, adaptation, and cultural resilience.

Cultural Hybridity and Social Adaptation

The film portrays cultural hybridity as both a challenge and an opportunity. Urban environments expose characters to multilingual communication, intercultural relationships, and modern social norms, requiring adaptive strategies and intercultural competence. At the same time, the persistence of rural customs and village-based moral frameworks provides a stabilizing influence, allowing individuals to anchor themselves ethically and socially.

Through this lens, postcolonial identity is not static but dialogic—a continuous negotiation between inherited values and new possibilities. Characters exemplify resilience, creativity, and pragmatism in reconciling seemingly contradictory demands, reflecting broader social strategies employed in postcolonial societies.

Gender, Labor, and Social Solidarity

La vie est belle not only examines postcolonial identity but also foregrounds the intersections of gender, labor, and social networks, demonstrating how economic necessity, social expectation, and communal solidarity shape the lived experiences of its characters. These dynamics are especially visible in the ways men and women navigate work, family responsibilities, and social obligations in both rural and urban settings.

Gender Roles and Expectations

Gender roles in the film are both prescribed and negotiated. Traditional expectations, often rooted in rural village life, assign men the roles of provider and protector, while women are tasked with caregiving and domestic responsibilities. However, urban realities and economic pressures compel both men and women to adapt and sometimes subvert these traditional roles.

For instance, men may engage in informal labor or entrepreneurial activities that challenge the conventional notion of stable male employment. Women, meanwhile, may participate in income-generating activities outside the household, balancing these responsibilities with childcare and social obligations. The film illustrates how these shifts produce tensions, compromises, and new forms of agency, highlighting the fluidity of gendered labor in postcolonial contexts.

Labor as a Social and Moral Force

Work in the film is more than an economic necessity; it is a moral and social instrument. Characters' choices of occupation reflect ethical principles, familial duties, and community standing. For example, informal street vending or performance arts—central to the film's narrative—serve not only as livelihoods but also as platforms for social cohesion and moral exemplification.

Labor is also a site of negotiation and identity formation. By engaging in creative or communal work, characters assert their individuality while simultaneously contributing to collective welfare. This duality underscores the interdependence of personal ambition and communal obligation in postcolonial urban and rural life.

Solidarity Networks and Communal Support

The film vividly portrays social solidarity as a survival mechanism. Extended family networks, neighborhood associations, and informal social bonds provide essential support—financial, emotional, and moral—especially in contexts of economic uncertainty. Characters rely on these networks to manage crises, celebrate successes, and navigate social hierarchies.

Solidarity is often gendered. Women's networks emphasize emotional support, caregiving, and cooperative labor, whereas men's networks may center on economic collaboration, mentorship, and protective alliances. Nevertheless, both types of networks are mutually reinforcing, reflecting the intricate social fabric that sustains individuals and communities alike.

Intersections of Gender, Class, and Postcolonial Life

By highlighting labor and solidarity, the film underscores the intersections of gender, class, and historical context. Economic opportunity—or the lack thereof—is inseparable from gendered expectations, while communal networks mediate access to resources and social capital. These intersections reveal how postcolonial legacies and urban pressures shape daily life, illustrating that neither gender nor labor exists in isolation from broader social, historical, and moral frameworks.

In sum, *La vie est belle* presents gendered labor not merely as a pragmatic necessity but as a complex social practice, where personal ambition, ethical commitment, and communal responsibility intertwine. The film thereby offers a nuanced reflection on how postcolonial societies sustain identity, moral order, and social cohesion amid economic and historical challenges.

Moral and Aesthetic Dimensions: Humor, Performance, and Poetics

La vie est belle operates on multiple aesthetic and moral levels, combining narrative storytelling with performance, humor, and poetic expression to convey both social critique and ethical reflection. These dimensions are not merely ornamental; they are integral to the film's capacity to represent postcolonial life, negotiate social norms, and engage audiences emotionally and intellectually.

- Humor in the film is strategically deployed to expose social contradictions, challenge authority, and negotiate moral dilemmas. Through witty dialogues, situational comedy, and performative exaggeration, characters navigate the tensions between tradition and

modernity, individual desire and communal obligation, survival and morality. Humor also functions as a mediator of critique. By presenting societal shortcomings and moral lapses in a comedic register, the film invites audiences to reflect critically while maintaining emotional engagement. This approach aligns with broader African performative traditions, where humor is a vehicle for ethical reflection, social education, and community cohesion.

- Performance—whether in street theater, musical expression, or ritual enactment—serves as a key modality of storytelling and social mediation. Characters embody societal norms, historical memory, and ethical dilemmas through performance, allowing the audience to witness lived experience rather than merely hear about it.
- Poetic language—through metaphor, repetition, and lyrical dialogue—enriches the film's moral imagination. Characters articulate ethical dilemmas, aspirations, and communal values in expressive forms that combine narrative clarity with emotional resonance. Poetics operates on multiple levels:

    1. Cognitive: Clarifying complex social and moral situations.
    2. Emotional: Evoking empathy and moral reflection.
    3. Social: Reinforcing communal norms, ethical conduct, and relational expectations.

By integrating poetics into everyday discourse, the film demonstrates that language is not merely descriptive but transformative, shaping perception, action, and communal ethics.

DYSFUNCTIONS IN *LA VIE EST BELLE*

The dysfunctions depicted in this film are diverse and multifaceted; they allow us to discern the limitations, and even the negative effects, of urban modernity, while simultaneously illustrating the social transformations occurring in the megacity of Kinshasa and within Kinois society. Indeed, dysfunction can be understood as an involuntary, unintended, and primarily negative consequence of social behavior. Generally, it generates imbalances or produces tensions within society.

The Urban Environment as a Space of Illusions and Disillusions

The film presents an urban society deeply afflicted by social, cultural, economic, and political malaise. While the city is supposed to offer opportunities, the urban environment appears instead as a space marked by social inequalities, exploitation, illusions, and subsequent disillusions. As previously noted, H. Lefebvre (1974, p.196) asserts that *"the city is often perceived as a place of illusions promised by modernity, but also as a space of disillusion in the face of the inequalities and social tensions it generates."* This perspective is vividly illustrated through Kourou, the film's central character. From the moment of his arrival in Kinshasa, the protagonist nurtures hopes of becoming a musical celebrity through his talent. He thus embodies the dream of individual success that attracts many young people to the city.

In this regard, the urban environment is often considered a place of emancipation and self-realization, where one could, to some extent, escape the weight of traditional customs and the constraints of rural life. Unfortunately, this dream is rapidly challenged by the harsh realities

of urban existence. The experiences of Kourou exemplify this tension. Believing the city to be a place of happiness and rapid material success, he soon discovers a world starkly different from his expectations—a world dominated by money, power relations, and cutthroat competition.

Disillusion sets in first when Kourou confronts the realities of work. He is lodged in deplorable living conditions, performing menial tasks akin to domestic servitude. Simultaneously, he is overexploited without receiving any recognition for his efforts. Gradually, he comes to understand that success is not solely a function of talent, but also of power, money, and networks. This confrontation with reality immediately exposes the gap between his dreams and the urban environment, revealing the city as far from the realm of opportunities he had envisioned; rather, it is an unequal and hierarchical system.

Disillusion deepens when he falls in love with Kabibi, the fiancée of his employer, Ngandu. His affection for her places him in a position of humiliation and insecurity. Moreover, the love between Kabibi and Kourou becomes a matter of power, provoking a violent reaction from Ngandu. This development disrupts Kourou's dream of romantic freedom, transforming it into a social conflict. From this moment, he realizes that love, too, is governed by power dynamics and social hierarchies.

Social Values in Urban Settings and Their Impact

The city, exemplified by Kinshasa, often serves as a stage for counter-values, largely due to the erosion of traditional reference points, which are increasingly replaced by new norms grounded in consumption, social visibility, and appearance. In this regard, Y. Grafmeyer and J.-Y. Authier (2015, p.45) assert that *"the city, as a lived space, shapes social values—the norms of sociability, codes of behavior, aspirations—and these values, in turn, influence the ways inhabitants appropriate urban space, organize themselves, or distance themselves from institutions."* This phenomenon is vividly illustrated in the society of trendsetters and stylish individuals embodied by the protagonist, Kourou. This social milieu demonstrates an obsession with fashion and elegance, wherein wearing luxury clothing becomes a symbol of success, even when the protagonist is perpetually mired in poverty.

In this context, the harsh social reality is often obscured by the pursuit of sartorial prestige. It is commonly observed in cities such as Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Paris, and beyond, that many young people live in precarious conditions while projecting an image of ostentatious wealth that is detached from economic reality. From this perspective, the cultural dysfunction becomes evident. It must be acknowledged that an excessive emphasis on appearance can lead to the illusion of success, masking deep socioeconomic divisions. Consequently, the film depicts the apparent freedom offered by the urban environment, a freedom that is frequently accompanied by betrayals, tension, and emotional suffering.

Furthermore, urban life valorizes the individual while simultaneously promoting individualism, which tends to isolate people. In this context, the notions of group cohesion or communal solidarity are largely absent. Individuals strive for personal accomplishment, prioritizing their own interests above collective considerations. The central character, Kourou, exemplifies this trend; he fights to succeed independently, detaching himself from his rural roots and familial ties. Ironically, this pursuit of autonomy results in isolation, as he faces his challenges without a supportive network. In contrast, in a rural setting, he would likely have benefited from communal support in times of difficulty. This situation inevitably reveals the

detrimental effects of individualism. Through this lens, it becomes clear that urbanization not only disrupts traditional forms of community solidarity but also fails to provide a sustainable structural alternative, ultimately leading to the destabilization of social and economic reference points.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the cinematic work of Ngangura Mweze and Benoît Lamy (1987) has brought to light the divergent perceptions of rurality and urbanity within the context of a transforming Congolese sociocultural landscape. An objective reading of the visual, narrative, and symbolic cues further demonstrates that the "rural" and "urban" spaces are not merely passive backdrops but rather dynamic entities imbued with symbolic meanings and specific functions. Rurality, generally associated with authenticity, rootedness, and a relative stability of identity, is nonetheless depicted as a framework that regulates individual aspirations. Urbanity, on the other hand—embodied by the sprawling metropolis of Kinshasa—is represented in a more ambivalent manner, portrayed both as a site of modernity, opportunity, and social transformation, and simultaneously as a space where chaos thrives, characterized by socio-economic instability and asymmetric power dynamics.

Kourou, the central figure of the narrative, embodies the tension between these two structuring poles. He symbolizes the aspiration for success and social recognition within an urban environment governed by rules that are formally established yet inherently unpredictable. His journey illuminates the mechanisms of struggle, adaptation, and often disillusionment, thus reflecting the quintessential urban experience for individuals of rural origin.

Consequently, *La vie est belle* does not merely juxtapose two opposing worlds. Rather, it actively interrogates the modalities of coexistence, the fractures, the transitions, and the processes of convergence between rurality and urbanity. The film presents a nuanced, somewhat critical conception of urban modernity while simultaneously emphasizing the enduring significance of rural foundations in the construction of individual identity. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper reflection on the social, cultural, and symbolic dynamics of African spaces in the postcolonial era.

Contribution to Scientific Knowledge

This scholarly article makes a significant contribution to the academic corpus by offering a critical and nuanced analysis of spatial configurations, social dynamics, and individual trajectories within the postcolonial Congolese context. By interrogating the interplay between urban and rural environments, cinematic representations, and broader cultural frameworks, it advances interdisciplinary research and deepens our understanding of the complex sociocultural and geopolitical processes that shape contemporary Congolese society.

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