The Apocalyptic Interlude:
Revealing Death in Kinshasa

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Abstract: Temporality in contemporary Kinshasa is of a very specific eschatological
kind and takes its point of departure in the Bible, and more particularly in the Book
of Revelation, which has become an omnipresent point of reference in Kinshasa's
collective imagination. The lived-in time of everyday life in Kinshasa is projected
against the canvas of the completion of everything, a completion which will be
brought about by God. As such, the Book of Revelation is not only about doom and
destruction, it is essentially also a book of hope. Yet the popular understanding of
the Apocalypse very much centers on the omnipotent presence of evil. This article
focuses on the impact of millennialism on the Congolese experience, in which daily
reality is constantly translated into mythical and prophetic terms as apocalyptic
interlude.

Résumé: Le concept de temporalité dans le Kinshasa d'aujourd'hui est d'une
espèce eschatologique bien particulière et trouve son origine dans la Bible, plus
précisément dans le livre des Révélations, qui est devenu un point de référence
omniprésent dans l'imagination collective des habitants de Kinshasa. Le temps vécu
de la vie quotidienne à Kinshasa est comparé au canevas de l'achèvement ultime,
un achèvement qui sera accompli par Dieu. En tant que tel, le livre des Révélations

ne se concentre pas seulement sur la fatalité et la destruction mais c'est essentiellement un livre d'espérance. Et pourtant, la conception populaire de l'apocalypse tourne principalement autour de la notion du mal. Cet article se concentre sur l'impact du millénarisme sur l'expérience congolaise, dans laquelle la réalité quotidienne se traduit constamment en termes mythiques et prophétiques comme interlude prophétique.

> Les morts qui n'ont pas de vivants sont malheureux,
> aussi malheureux que
> les vivants qui n'ont pas de morts.
>
> (Without the living the dead are unhappy,
> as unhappy as
> the living without the dead.)
>
> (Sony Labou Tansi, 1979)

Introduction: The Place of Death in the Realm of the Apocalyptic Interlude

This article intends to explore the changing place and meaning of death and time in one of Africa's largest cities, Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo.[1] As in other cities around the continent, Kinshasa is marked by the rise of Christian fundamentalism as propagated by a great number of Pentecostal churches and other "miracle" churches of spiritual awakening.[2] Since the early nineties, these new churches have become the norm rather than the exception. Drawing hundreds of thousands to their prayer meetings, they have gradually come to supplant other, often more syncretic, prayer movements and independent churches that sprang up during the long life of the Mobutist reign. They have also been very successful in attracting a great number of Christians who previously identified themselves with the traditional Catholic and Protestant "mother" churches. This new strong wave of flourishing faith that has overtaken the city of Kinshasa and Congo as a whole is set against the backdrop of a socioeconomic and political context marked by deep crisis, war, and material conditions of hardship, hunger, lack, and poverty. Without any doubt, the harsh living conditions that prevail throughout the country have contributed dramatically to the rapid spread of these new church movements.

    One of the central questions this article addresses is what happens when people's material conditions of life become so incredibly hard that their very conceptions of what constitutes reality are affected. I will try to

provide some answers to that question by looking at the changed place of death in this urban world and by analyzing the apocalyptic time scale that the churches have introduced and that profoundly pervades daily life in Kinshasa, a city that feverishly attempts to make sense of its own crisis. In such an urban context, the religious transfiguration of daily urban reality, with its juxtapositions and contradictions generated in the "telescoped" experience of the passage of time and of events as laid out in the Bible, and more precisely in the Book of Revelation, produces a constant and often astonishing switch from the social to the semiotic, leading to what could be described as an overproduction or an "overheating" of meaning that gives expression to a disturbing unmooring of the social imagination. Death is the site where that unmooring becomes most tangible. Death has become so omnipresent in Kinshasa, and in Congo as a whole, that the labor of loss and mourning has ceased to be meaningful. Invaded by an ever increasing amount of dead that cannot be put to rest, the society of the living has stopped mourning them.

By focusing upon the newly emerging place of death in the urban Congolese context, I will analyze how the changed value of death, and the experience of what I call the "apocalyptic interlude," affects on the city's daily life and above all, its capacity to symbolize and produce meaning and sense. I will argue that common structures of meaning themselves have changed in the process.

"Siting" the Imaginary

Lévi-Strauss and Lacan postulate the supremacy of the symbolic in relation to the imaginary. In this respect the signified is, to some extent, subordinated to the signifier; symbols are imbued with a larger reality value than that which they symbolize, that is, the levels of the imaginary and of what Lacan calls "the real" (that which is neither imaginary nor symbolic). More recently Godelier (1996) has offered a critique of these classic interpretations in which he turns around their primacy. For Godelier, the levels of the symbolic and the real are materializations of the imaginary, which (re)creates and institutionalizes society. Here the symbolic is not a mental structure but an internalized social structure, deriving from a social logic that is unconscious but that constantly externalizes itself as social essence in the domains of sexuality, power, and politics. It is the concentration of the three orders of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the *réel* that makes social reality, the social life of people, but it is the register of the imaginary that offers the fixed points from which a society invents itself.

But what happens if the very nature of the imaginary as flexible but organized field of social practices has become disorganized and has lost, at least to some extent, its localizing force and its capacity to create continuity, to produce sociality? The imaginary is the dimension of the invisible,

but what if the invisible becomes visible, and the dead replace and become more alive than the living? What if the imaginary is no longer the socially productive phantasmagoric but constantly crosses the boundaries and invades the real in an unmediated, nonsymbolic way? What if the imaginary is no longer the *irréel* but the *indiscernibleness* between *réel* and *irréel* (see Deleuze 1990, quoted by Bayart 1996:138)? What if, in other words, the dual and therefore nonalienated relationship with the double, which until recently certainly existed in local Congolese experience, most notably in relation to the ancestor (but also the witch, as an institutionalized figure of crisis), is problematic and leads to alienation instead? If death, as the double of the living, belongs to the realm of the imaginary, and if the imaginary thus operates as the disjunction between life and death, what then does it mean for a societal constellation when that distinction ceases to exist?

In an insightful chapter on the "thing" and its double in Cameroonian cartoons, Mbembe remarks upon exactly the new experience of speech and things which I have indicated above, but he nevertheless assumes that "despite the scale of the transformations and the discontinuities, an imaginary world has remained" (2001:146). More generally, the "imaginary," a notion with a complex genealogical tree that includes Lacan, Sartre, and Castoriadis, has become the social scientist's catchword to capture the ways in which a general subconscious, with its "autochthonous networks of meaning," is related to the ruptures and constant alterations of a hybridized postcolonial urban (and increasingly also rural) landscape. Appadurai (1996), for example, has developed the concept of the imaginary, or more broadly, imagination, as an organized field of social practices in new global cultural processes. In the same vein Bayart (1996:143), while discussing the cultural dimensions of political action, describes the imaginary as the dimension out of which emerges a continuous dialogue between tradition and innovation. Understood as such, the imaginary, he adds, is primarily interaction—interaction between the past, the present, and the projection of a future. But it is also interaction between social actors, or between societies, the relations of which are selectively shaped by their respective "imagining consciousnesses." The mediating qualities of the imaginary turn it into an institutionalizing social force through which a society confronts and absorbs changes and mutations, and thereby defines and authors itself anew (De Boeck 2000). With the dissolution of more traditional anthropological locations for research (see Gupta & Ferguson 1997a, 1997b; Olwig & Hastrup 1997), the imaginary as alternative "field site" therefore presents novel opportunities for more detailed analytic scrutiny of the multiple transformations that African society is currently undergoing. In urban settings like Kinshasa, the imaginary ceaselessly creates its own level of autonomy, with all of its excesses, its witchcraft, its diabolization of social life. This new "siting" of the city's imaginary forms the undercurrent that runs throughout this article.

A City of Death

For quite some time now, death, as metaphor and as reality, seems to have become omnipresent in Congo. Death has acquired new meanings in the religious realm, but not only there. Real, tangible death has flooded the country to such an extent that people say that "there aren't enough tears left to mourn all the dead' (see also De Boeck 1998:50). The long and spectacular breakup of the Zairean state, combined with the spillover from conflicts along its borders, most notably in Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola, opened up spaces of death even further, and contributed to the banalization of the material and symbolic usages of violence and death invented in earlier periods of the (post)colonial state. This is obviously the case in a growing economy of violence as produced through the machete and the bayonet. And when, in August 1998, Rwandan- and Ugandan-backed rebels invaded Kinshasa's streets, violent death was brought to the heart of the capital. In the communes of Masina and Ndjili particularly, citizens, spurred on by the governmental nationalist discourse against the intruding "cockroaches," started to track down and kill the rebels. The technology of necklacing—which had already emerged a year earlier when Kabila's child soldiers walked into the city and the Kinois vented their anger and frustration at Mobutu's ruinous reign by molesting and burning some of his agents—became an inextricable part of Kinshasa's reality and collective imaginary.

Violence, of course, had diffused itself through the city's veins long before. In 1991 and 1993 two waves of massive and frenzied looting swept across Kinshasa and large parts of the country, devastating much of the city's economic infrastructure in the span of a couple of days. Around the same period the masked paramilitary death squads commonly known as *hibous* ("owls," because they usually operated after nightfall) became active in Kinshasa. More generally, the militarization of daily life in the postcolonial "space of death" (Taussig 1992) that Congo has become is illustrated by the increasing use of the military vocabulary in the church context, where preachers such as Sony Kafuta "Rockman" launch evangelical crusades and refer to themselves as "generals" of church communities that are garrisons of God, armies of salvation.

The alternative space in which Kinshasa performs itself on stage, the popular music scene, has given rise to another kind of violence, grounded in the competition between different orchestras. Inevitably, the chronicle of Congo's music has always been also a social history of this turbulent city. Intimately linked to and rooted in the realities of the lives of the urban young, this music emerged together with the city in the 1940s and 1950s. It formed the acoustic canvas of social and political developments, the rhythm of the times in which dance and disorder became increasingly intertwined. Against this social, political, and economic backdrop, bands and orchestras emerged and split up in an endless musical battle for pub-

lic recognition. The history of the many meanderings and musical realign-
ments of Kinshasa's competing camps and orchestras almost reads like a
political anthropology of shifting patterns of schism and continuity, or
fusion and fission. The history ranges from the earliest generation of stars
like Wendo, Bowane, and Kabasele, to Congo's fourth musical generation,
which emerged with a group of young musicians around the orchestra
Wenge Musica in the late 1980s. In between is situated the rise and fall of
Congo popular music.

In Kinshasa, the second half of the 1990s was marked by the splinter-
ing of the original Wenge Musica into several rival orchestras. The most
prominent of these are Wenge Musica Maison Mère and Wenge Musica
BCBG, headed respectively by two of the original band's extremely popu-
lar lead singers, Werrason (nicknamed *mokonzi ya banyama*, the "King of the
Forest") and J. B. Mpiana, also known as "Souverain 1er," the "First Sover-
eign." Their music translates a whole imaginary of war, political power, and
ethnic violence into an embedded youth vocabulary and choreography. In
and through dance, the juvenile body thus appears as a subversive site, as a
corporeal locus that reflects, and reflects upon, the violence and death
generated by official postcolonial cultural and political grammars, which
have been characterized by some as necropolitical, as the work of death
(Mbembe 2002:640).

Indeed, death itself has become a model for social and political action.
For example, on March 9, 2000, in eastern Congo, where rebels had buried
an unknown number of women alive, the women of the occupied Kivu
province declared a four-day "mourning" period to protest the daily realities
of violence and poverty in which they had to live. On the first day the women
stayed at home, weeping, lamenting, and refusing to eat. For the next three
days they dressed in black and covered their heads, a sign of sorrow. On the
April, 6, 2000, thousands of kilometers to the west, in Kinshasa, Etienne
Tshisekedi's UDPS (L'Union Pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social) oppo-
sition party announced, for the nth time, a "dead city day" (*journée ville morte*)
to protest the continuing warfare in Congo. In this country where, for many
years now, political action has been translated into the creation of a "dead
city," and where funerals and mourning ceremonies (*matanga*) have become
the motor of social and political criticism (de Villers & Omasombo 2004;
Vangu 1997), Kinshasa has sometimes been described in the local press as a
necropolis, a *cité cimetière*, the term the playwright Nzey Van Musala (n.d.) has
coined for the capital of this "thanatocracy" (Yamb 1997) that Congo has
become—a country whose citizens are more dead than alive, whose ceme-
teries are overcrowded and where corpses are simply abandoned anony-
mously at the entrance of mortuaries (Grootaers 1998).

Not only has death thus become a metaphor to speak about certain
areas of daily life in Kinshasa (Biaya 1998), but the country in its totality has
become a "postmortem" (De Boeck 1998), a place in which one constantly
inhabits two worlds: "that of the dead and that of the "not-so-alive" (*pas-*

tout-à-fait-vivants) (Labou Tansi 1979:17), or "a place and a time of *half-death*, or, if one prefers, *half-life*" (Mbembe 2001:197). The broader sociopolitical crisis has created a general atmosphere of collusion, familiarity, and interchangeableness between the living and the dead in a movement of generalized and quite literal zombification that permeates society as a whole. That is why RDC (République Démocratique du Congo) has become, in popular speech, *Rdécès*, the "deceased" or "dead" Republic of Congo, the "country that has died" (*mboka ekufi*) and where, people say, "on répare même les cadavres" ("even corpses are repaired"). In a sense, one could argue that death is the only tangible kind of "democracy" that has been installed in Congo so far. Papa Nova, a shopkeeper in one of Kinshasa's suburbs, has painted onto the wall of his small pharmacy-shop: "Rich and Poor Equality in Death—Cemetery" ("Riche et pauvre égalité à la mort—cimetière"). It is, however, symptomatic of the deep social, economic, and political crisis which Congo is undergoing that death in itself can no longer be posited and given an unproblematic place.

Invaded by an ever increasing number of dead that cannot be put to rest, the society of the living has stopped mourning or even remembering them. Death itself has been banalized, often through laughter. *Okolia mpau*, the Kinois jokingly address their dead: "You will eat the spade," you will end in the hole we dig for you. In the process, death itself has become desecrated and commodified:

> **Attempt to Bury a Woman in a Used Coffin Dug Up in One of Kinshasa's Cemeteries**. Kinshasa, January 10, 2002. In the night of December, 31, 2001, in Bwanga street 21, Mikondo neighborhood of the commune of Kimbanseke, Kinshasa, a young man, aged 27 and not otherwise identified, brought home a used coffin, which had apparently been unearthed in a local cemetery, in order to bury the body of his wife, who died at the age of 17, after childbirth in Kinshasa's General Hospital.... The next morning, according to our informant, the members of the bereaved family were getting ready to go to the morgue to prepare the corpse for burial. Much to their surprise they noticed that the coffin brought along by their in-law was old, broken in several places, and covered with red earth. Inside, the cloth used to embellish the coffin was torn and dirty. Asked to provide an explanation as to the state of the coffin, the widower fled, in an attempt to escape from the wrath of the youth of the Mikondo neighborhood, and the penalty awaiting him for having desecrated a grave. Our sources indicate that the coffin is presently kept at the police station of Jumbo in the Mikondo neighborhood. An official investigation has been started. According to some, this event is linked to a criminal network of youngsters which specializes in unearthing and reselling used coffins. The deceased woman was buried on Sunday, January 6, 2002, in the cemetery of Siforco, located in the commune of Masina, Kinshasa. (ACP Press release, January 10, 2002)

This "pillaging of death" illustrates the fact that the intrinsic quality of death has changed. The desecrated dead have become increasingly restless, and no longer remain silent in their graves. The streets of Congo's cities resonate with stories and rumors of returning dead, of "nocturnal spouses"(*epoux/épouses de nuit*) who return at night to have sex with the widowed partner they left behind, or of dead people who were spotted digging for diamonds in Angola. Everywhere, it seems, the dead revive and multiply. At night, they attend concerts to dance to the popular tunes of Kin's orchestras. Places such as Rond Point Victoire, the heart of the Matonge neighborhood in the commune of Kalamu, are said to be as crowded as they are because of the numerous dead who are attracted by Matonge's vibrant nightlife. At night, also, the many roadblocks that are erected on the city's main traffic arteries are believed to be manned by soldiers from the "second world." Although the deceased sometimes return to protect and assist the family members they left behind, more frequently their interventions are less benevolent. At best they are just annoying.

Another case of "pillaging of death" has been the emergence of a new funerary ritual called *Ekobo* in Kinshasa's streets:

> Following the beliefs of certain tribes, Ekobo was originally conceived as a means to preserve and protect persons exposed to the attacks of returning dead from evil, as well as a means to finance the burial payments within the family. Ekobo has become, however, the practice of delinquents who stop innocent people in the street to extort money from them, which they say will be used for buying coffee, sugar and firewood during the funeral wake.... In case one refuses to pay up, these youngsters throw dirt at one, or physically harm one. (Elima newspaper, September 21–22, 1991, "Halte à la pratique illégale et dégradante du rite mortuaire 'Ekobo,'" ["Stop the illegal and degrading mortuary ritual 'Ekobo'"], quoted in de Villers, 1992:192–94)

What Ekobo and similar practices illustrate is the fact that the management of death has increasingly become monopolized by the young. Whereas before, until the late 1970s and early 1980s, children, standing at the beginning of life, were called inside the house whenever a funeral procession passed in the street for fear that they would be contaminated by death, they have now become the owners and the caretakers of death. They are the ones who have taken control of death as the object of an important social traffic. They are also the ones who control the commercialization of death. Around some of the cemeteries of the city, children forcefully kidnap the coffins, snatching them out of the hands of the deceased's relatives, and return the body only after the bereft family has paid them a fee. Officially, the cemetery of Kintambo, one of the largest in Kinshasa, is closed for lack of space, and yet people continue to be buried there in a clandestine way. Youngsters get paid to demolish tombstones and bury a

new corpse on top of an old one. These young dance, drink, take drugs, and live on the tombstones.

Due also to the changed nature of public and private space in the urban context (mourning ceremonies around the dead body take place in the middle of the street for lack of space in the compounds, for example), as well as to the fact that death no longer primarily knocks at the elders' doors, death and childhood have become less mutually exclusive. AIDS has contributed a great deal to this profound shift. Urban social life emerges through a new cartography of suffering and illness that often remains invisible and only surfaces through the death of the sufferers, who are increasingly children and youngsters. With AIDS, death has become a contaminating illness touching even those who have only just started their lives.

The changed character of funeral rituals is also partly due to the fact that, for an increasing number of people, death occurs outside of a kin-based network. Death has become embedded in altered structures of solidarity, of kinship and relations of gerontocracy. This is illustrated by the changing position of the *noko*, the maternal uncle, whose authority has greatly diminished in the urban context, most notably in matters related to death. Said one informant during a mourning ceremony in Camp Luka, a popular neighborhood of Kinshasa next to Kintambo cemetery:

> Today, in the white man's village [the urban *cité*], things have changed. In the village where we come from, the maternal uncle was a chief. If a problem arose in the family, people called on him for advice and guidance. Today, the uncle has lost that status. In the city, the uncle has become a useless thing, considered by many as a sorcerer, especially by all who pray and for whom things traditional are satanic. Before, when we buried a dead body, it was the uncle who addressed the family, and when we returned from the burial place, it was the uncle who "lifted the palm branch" [formally ended the mourning period]. The uncle was the "owner of the dead person," he was the first responsible. Today, the uncles have multiplied. They are now three. The actual uncle is considered a nuisance. People flee him for fear he will ask for a contribution to the funeral. He no longer addresses the family. Instead the preacher has become the uncle who speaks and directs the mourning ceremony. And the third uncle is *Cataphar* [from *catafalque*, funeral chapel]. Before, the uncle received funerary gifts from the attendants during the funeral. Now these gifts mainly go to the preacher and to *Cataphar*, for the payment of the location of the draped chapel. The preacher and the funeral chapel have become the new uncles, whereas the real uncle now hides during funerals for fear of being accused of the deceased person's death. (Fieldnotes, September 2000)

The "multiplication of the uncles" in this mortuary context also points to the changed place accorded to death itself.

Death and Time in Popular Culture and Prayer

A Saturday night in Kinshasa, May 2000: In the Mbuji-Mayi-Kananga, one of the bars of the moment, beyond a sign that puts the place out of bounds for armed soldiers, a concrete stairway leads to a rooftop terrace. The members of Bana OK, the heirs to one of the oldest Kinshasa-based orchestras, Franco's OK Jazz, are getting ready for a late night concert. Bathed in a glow of yellow, red, and blue lights, the Mbuji-Mayi-Kananga occupies the three levels of a building along the avenue Lumumba in Masina, one of Kinshasa's most densely populated neighborhoods, also known as the "People's Republic of China." Around midnight, after the band has played a couple of tunes to warm up the audience, everyone starts dancing to its rolling rumba rhythms. Holding back at first, the glistening bodies soon dance with more and more fervor in between tables and white plastic garden chairs. From the terrace, and much to the delight of the street children below, the electrifying sounds of the music drift out into the night, a tidal wave of sound rolling out over the endless sea of this vast *cité*'s corrugated iron roofs. As on other nights, Bana OK's playlist consists of the songs that have come to form part of Kin's rich collective musical memory.[3] The band's songs propel the dancing crowd back into the sixties and seventies, a period that is now looked upon with nostalgia as a time when the future still looked bright, modernity's promises were still within reach, and *Kin-la-Belle* was still *Kin kiesse*, the city of joy, or *Kin makambo*, the turbulent city (De Boeck & Plissart 2004).

While I was listening to the music on that warm, effervescent Kinshasa night, my attention was caught by the orchestra's *atalaku,* the person who incites the dancing crowd with his slogans and shouts during the rumba-soukous' fast dancing part (*seben*) (see White 2004). In his shouts I could discern a repeated reference to the number 666. In the context of contemporary Kinois urbanity, the city's typical rumba-soukous has always generated and represented an oneiric space of pleasure and enjoyment. In these arenas of popular culture, dancing, drinking, and ludic sexuality defined and rooted the city's inhabitants in a never-ending "now," a euphoric postindependence space "ivre de l'espoir des chairs et du sang" ("drunk with the hope of bodies and blood") (Yoka 1999:164; see also Nlandu 2002), from which death was firmly excluded. As Sam Mangwana, another legendary figure of the Congolese music scene, sings in a famous 1960s song entitled "Zela Ngai Nasala" ("Wait, Let Me Work," released on the album "Festival des Maquisards" by Sonodisc), "When will be the day I die? I don't know. I want to live a crazy life, a life without worry, together with my friends, I ignore when my death will come, mother."

Today, however, this very same site of pleasure, in which death was crushed and obliterated and in which time was redefined as a moment of an Eternal Now, has become one of the main locales, along with the

"enchanting" spaces of Christian fundamentalism, in which temporality and mortality are reintroduced. As such, Kinshasa reveals a fundamental part of itself in the bar and the church. These form the city's two main public spaces of appearance, and there also exists a considerable overlap between these two spaces, for many churches have their own orchestras that transform the sites of the religious gathering into a frenzied dance hall, using the rhythms of popular tunes but replacing the secular lyrics with more religious ones. It is through the increasing theatricality of the city in both these spaces, also, that *fête* and *folie*, pleasure and psychosis, the ludic and the lethal become interlocked and open up into the dimension that underlies all of Kinshasa's reality: the dimension of death, now undeniable. Death has become omnipresent throughout the city: in the visible form of funeral wakes (*matanga*) that transform houses and streets into public sites of mourning and mercy, or in its more invisible form, that of the "second city" (*deuxième cité*), a shadow city that is constantly present as a parallel world of nocturnal and evil forces and makes its presence felt in the minds and lives of most Kinois, for example in the form of "witch-children" and street children, considered to be representatives of a "dead society" (*société morte*).

The reintroduction of temporality, and thus of death, in contemporary Kinshasa is of a very specific eschatological nature and takes its point of departure in the Bible, and more particularly in the Book of Revelation, which has become an omnipresent point of reference in Kinshasa's collective imagination. The number 666, which was being shouted over the rooftops of Masina by the atalaku of Bana OK, referred, of course, to the Beast mentioned in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 13:18: "This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six"). In the fundamentalist Christian traditions of the countless churches that have sprung up in the African urban locale and that bear witness to the luxuriant growth of millennarianism throughout Africa, the Beast (the Antichrist) is commonly taken to be the *vicarius filii Dei* or the *rex sacerdotulus*, the Pope and the Church of Rome. More generally, the Beast refers to Satan and his demons. It is especially in Chapters 8–19 of the Book of Revelation that Satan occupies an important place. The opening of the seventh seal ushers in angels and trumpet blasts that, together with vivid descriptions of plagues, torment, and great woes, represent messages of judgment directed against Satan's system of things. Before the seventh and last trumpet calls forth great voices that proclaim the thousand-year Kingdom of God and Christ, there is a whole interlude describing the war between diabolic swarms and the hosts of heaven. In this interval judgments are executed against false religion (Babylon and its great whore) and against ungodly political systems and doomed unbelievers, symbolized by dreadful wild beasts, prototypes of the Antichrist. Satan, bound to rise again after a thou-

sand years in order to submit mankind to a final test, will be finally disposed of and destroyed in a lake of fire, along with death, hell, his demons, and any rebels on earth who follow him.

By referring to the number 666, the musicians of Bana OK, from within the hedonistic site of dance and enjoyment, were thus producing the linkage between dance, death, doom, and judgment. This linkage is also evident in one of Kinshasa's recent dance crazes known as *La Salle des Morts*, the "Chamber of Death." In this dance, which was launched by a small Lemba-based orchestra, Laviniora Esthétique, but has since been picked up by the city's biggest bands, the dancers imitate the robotlike movements of zombies. Popular music culture thus opens up a space of death as well as an eschatological space, plunging the audience into the abyss of the end of time and linking the apocalyptic description in the Book of Revelation to the realities of everyday life as experienced by the inhabitants of Kinshasa today. In this collective experience of the Kinois, in which stress is predominantly put on the "death of the world" (a common saying was "mokili ekokufa na l'an 2000," "the world is going to die in 2000"), the current and very real hardships of life in the Congolese capital (war, violence, starvation, looting, social breakdown) are interpreted in light of this end. In it the lived-in time of everyday life in the city is projected against the canvas of the completion of everything, a completion that will be brought about by God and that, although hidden, is already present with Him. As such, the Book of Revelation is not only about doom and destruction, but it is also essentially a book of hope, a symbol of possible *recommencement*. As one Kinois put it: "the apocalyptic vision is a way to wash your heart and to start a new phase of life."

This message of resurrection and entrance in the Glorious Millennial Reign is also a message that is strongly stressed by many of the churches. A *Watchtower* pamphlet (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society [Jehovah's Witnesses], December 1, 1999), which was widely circulated in Kinshasa under the title "Should You Fear the Apocalypse?" thus stated: "True, Revelation does contain judgment messages against the wicked. But in their public witnessing, God's servants focus mainly on the wonderful hope set out in the Bible, including that in the Apocalypse, or Revelation. Thus they do not add to or take anything away from the prophetic words found therein— Revelation 22: 18, 19."

And yet, the lived experience of most in the Congolese postcolony constantly contradicts these glad tidings that are expressed in the churches' creation of such geographies of hope. In the Book of Revelation, the judgment to come is announced by the coming of the Son of Man, in a cloud with great power and glory. His coming, though, is preceded by terrors, and by a magic interlude between his preliminary and his final victory over Satan. Life for most in Congo situates itself in this interlude in which Satan reigns. For some others, the world has arrived at the end of the thousand-

year day of judgment and thus at the moment in which Satan is briefly released again. Thus the popular understanding of the Apocalypse centers on doom and the omnipotent presence of evil, thereby contributing to the rapid demonization of everyday life in Congo.

As such, the Congolese experience is one in which the realities of the "in between" and the interstitial, which are so much celebrated by post-colonial theorists today, are constantly translated into mythical and prophetic terms as an apocalyptic interlude. Most Congolese seem to experience their existence as lived in an intermediate space in which salvation and doom, the revivalist moment and the presence of the Antichrist, or saving and condemnation, occur simultaneously. The temporal scope in which the dynamics of the apocalyptic interlude unfolds is not that of real time. In this specific space-time, the complex chronology between the various phases announced in the Book of Revelation (the first and second Coming of Christ, the presence and second release of Satan) has collapsed into a confusing present in which all of these moments somehow come together in what is often a swirling conceptual and existential imbroglio, arising out of the explosion of the linear, though complex, narrative chronology which is outlined in the Book of Revelation.

"When we enter the year 2000," said Vero, a member of the Eglise Evangélique Libre d'Afrique (EELDA), speaking in the fall of 1999,

> the heavens will open their gates. Then, God will descend. He will come down and seat Himself on the royal throne. Jesus will sit down to His right and the prophets to His left (for example Moses and Eliah with the angels). The judgment will commence. After the judgment the good people without sins will rise to heaven. The sinners will stay on earth. Behind Jesus, heaven will close itself, and here on earth Hell will be established. There will be much suffering. Fire will burn everything. People will throw themselves into the fire. They will wage war. Those who are in heaven will experience delicious joys. No more suffering, plenty of food and singing, joy upon joy. After the first judgment Satan will establish himself in the world, and will start his reign. The world will transform into a Hell, and the Bible talks about the end of the world. The Bible tells us that when we come towards the end of the world wars start, the end enters, children no longer respect their parents. That is what we live today, that is why we see looting, wars, breakdown of authority. Then, afterwards, when we will have entered Hell here on earth, Satan will introduce a system with a stamp. The stamp will have the number 666. It is Satan's number. The stamp is like a *laissez-passer*, a permit. Satan will put a stamp with the number 666 on our arm. Without the number 666 you won't receive food. Without 666 you won't be able to buy things. Everybody with the 666 mark will be able to circulate freely and accumulate goods at will. Those who are saved by Satan with the number 666 will receive food for free. But without the number 666 in your body you will continue to suffer. Famine will be everywhere, things to eat will have disappeared. Suffering will be tremendous.

> Because of this suffering you will want to kill yourself. However, death will no longer be as before. It will no longer be the end of the world. The suffering of those who are not on Satan's side will be eternal. But those who accept to suffer and refuse to wear the 666 sign will be saved when Jesus will come down into this world for the second time, for at that moment he will proceed with the final judgment: 'You, who were you?' 'I was a preacher, preaching the word to my neighbors.' 'And I was a musician, I made people dance.''And I was rich, I helped the poor.' At that moment, everyone wearing Satan's mark, the number 666, will be condemned forever. And then the world will be destroyed and Satan will be drowned in the water, under the earth. It will be like in Noah's time: God will destroy the world and create another one. And that is why we witness all these new things: the churches of spiritual awakening, the Kimbanguist churches, the church of the Africans and their God Nzambi a Mpungu. At the start of the year 2000, God will come down and destroy the world at midnight. (Conversation with author, September 1999, Kinshasa)

Vero's account fully illustrates the contradictions and oscillations between the geographies and chronologies of hope and hell that I pointed out above. For those who refuse Satan's stamp, suffering will be eternal, and yet they will be saved in the end. Although this account thus gives meaning to the current crisis in which most Kinois find themselves (those who suffer refused to sign a contract with Satan), it also squarely situates Kinshasa within the Devil's reign. As such, Kinshasa's collective social imaginary echoes the message of the fundamentalist Christian churches. This theme is developed in a 1992 *Watchtower* pamphlet entitled "Who Really Dominates the World?", which was widely circulated in a French translation in Kinshasa in the late 1990s. Above the title the pamphlet shows a hand holding the globe, and on page three the answer to the question is revealed: "The whole world is in the power of the evil one,.. that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (1 John 5:19; Revelation 12: 9)." This message of the globalization of evil (and jointly of God) which is propagated by Christian fundamentalism (and which, ironically, is the only form of globalization in which the Congolese really take part and can claim a leading role) has become a popular theme in the city's social imaginary. With meticulous and almost obsessive detail, Kinshasa imagines, describes, and tries to expel the Forces of Evil. For many in Kinshasa, the contemporary life world is continuously viewed as an Armaggeddon, a place where the demons gather in their war against God (see Book of Revelation 16:16: "And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Ar-mà-ged'don"). Kinshasa, as self-proclaimed Armaggedon, is constantly referred to by its inhabitants as a "second world" (*deuxième monde*), "second city" (*deuxième cité*), "pandemonium world" (*monde pandemonium*), or "fourth dimension" (*quatrième dimension*, i.e., one of the multiple "invisible" worlds of what is referred to as *kindokinisme*).[4]

The Place of Death between "New World" and "Second World"

Depending on one's interpretation of the apocalyptic time scale, the Day of Judgment is either about to happen (e.g., on January 1, 2000, or in 2050, according to some) or lies already in the past, meaning that the world now lives in the grip of Satan. In the first case, salvation is near for those without sins. Says Bibiche, a twenty-year-old student, during a conversation we had:

> There will be a flood. Water will be plentiful, everywhere. And then we'll all die. There will be an eternal night. Those with a clean heart will resuscitate. Those with sins will go down in the water forever. Heaven will fall down upon us, and we won't recognize each other any more. This will be the century of our death. Sinners will die, those who committed adultery, those with AIDS, those who drink, those who dance to worldy music ('the tunes of the country,' *banzembo ya mokili*). More than 500.000 men will die, and 3 million women. All those who won't obey the Word will die. Before Christ's Second Coming, wars will be fought everywhere, we will live hunger and famine, the churches of false prophets will multiply and the witches will encroach upon us. All of these things can already be seen in Congo today.

In the second case, one already lives in this drowned world, in the grip of the forces of Evil (and indeed, Bibiche's description of war, famine, religious fanaticism, and witchcraft sound true enough in the Congolese context). Here, however, hope is not entirely absent either, because one can still be saved in a distant future, when Christ will descend for the second time and rescue those without Satan's stamp: the 666 sign. For many Kinois, who seem to be caught between a vision of a (nearby or distant) New World (*mokili ya sika*) and the constant intrusion of a second world of demons and devils, both time scales seem to coexist.

Typical of the diffuse time scale of the apocalyptic interlude is the changed place that death occupies in the lived world of many Congolese. As Vero expressed in the interview I quoted from above, not only is death, in the apocalyptic interlude, no longer as before, it is no longer the end of the world either. The theme of the "living dead," for example, is very much alive in the minds and experience of most Kinois.

In April 2001 I visited a friend in his homestead near Lemba Terminus, a crowded and seething market square where young *cambistes*, illicit money changers, await their clients. On one of the garden walls in my friend's compound somebody had painted a black square that served as a blackboard for the children. One of the little nieces of the household, fourteen-year-old Mimi, had just written a draft of the essay she had to prepare for school. The topic she had chosen for her essay was the following:

Topic: "The dead are not dead."

> In the history of this world, ever since its creation until today, the life of
> Man ends with death. Man is alive when he lives, but dead when he no
> longer lives. However, in analyzing today's topic we will comment upon
> this fact: the dead are not dead, they are active in the "second world."
> According to the Bible they are not dead until the Last Judgment. In the
> next few lines we will elaborate upon this thought. The dead are not dead
> due to their preceding actions that have made them immortal, as we have
> illustrated above, a person's acts which will never be forgotten. And by
> connecting this logic to the Bible, we will see that the dead will be judged
> according to the acts that posed before their death. These acts never die,
> in a way. This also illustrates that the dead are not really dead. They are
> somewhere while waiting for a judgment of their previous acts.

One of the Bible passages that Mimi was referring to is no doubt John 5:
28–29: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in
the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good,
to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrec-
tion of judgment." Similar passages that are frequently quoted, include
John 11: 11–14, on the resurrection of Lazarus, where Jesus compares
death to a deep sleep, and Acts 24: 15: "having a hope in God which these
themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the
unjust." The new churches and prayer movements have contributed a great
deal to the growing interchangeableness of the living and the dead by con-
stantly focusing on these messages of resurrection as framed with the spe-
cific religious time frame that pervades Congo today.

    This religious zombification can be witnessed in all the *réveil* or revival-
ist churches, where accounts of returnees from death abound. The follow-
ing are excerpts from an interview with Mama Nsasa, a schoolteacher and
member of the church CADC (Communauté de l'Assemblée de Dieu au
Congo), who recounts how she died and returned to the living:

> In the compound in which I live there are many tenants. One day, every-
> body had gone off to a prayer campaign. I was home alone. Children were
> playing outside. Towards the evening I put my chair outside, near the
> door. The doors and windows of the other tenants' rooms were closed.
> Nobody was there but me. Then I heard a voice who called me three
> times: 'Don't be afraid. It is me, God, who is calling you. Go inside the
> house, lock the door, kneel and pray.' I did so and prayed for a long time.
> Then I heard God's voice again: 'Don't be afraid. It is me, God. I want to
> put you to sleep to make you see things. I will take your breath [your life].
> Afterwards your body will remain. The living will sing and pray for you.
> Tell them before not to mourn you, not to bury you, you will return to life.
> Tell your landlord and the director of your school. Tell them not to search
> for you if you go missing for two ir three days.' When I heard His voice
> who told me about this coming event, my spirit was no longer of this

world. My spirit was gone, my voice muted. The next day I went and told the people what had happened to me. Everybody said this was the work of God. . . .

Days later, I was anxiously waiting for the event to happen. I gave my watch and my shoes to a woman who leads the prayer group, for these things no longer belonged to me. Then I saw a light. It guided me to the church. It was packed with people and everybody was praying. I saw them pray but I could only hear their voices very vaguely. In which world am I? In which world are they living? I fell asleep on my chair while contemplating this light. Then prayer halted and at that very moment I heard some call me three times. I replied three times: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. I fell onto the ground immediately. At that moment I was dead, but my breath was still there, as if I didn't yet have a visa to leave. The preacher and the deacons rushed towards me. They massaged my feet, my arms, my head. They tried to move my body but it had become rigid. I couldn't answer them because my voice had left me. When they asked whether they should pray for me I nodded my head. They prayed, and when they uttered a final 'Amen', my breath was interrupted and I was dead. . . .

From heaven I saw the whole world beneath me. Two days had passed since they had taken me, and my body had become cold, as if somebody had put me in a refrigerator. The people standing around my body touched me and only felt the cold, and the women started to cry and beg God to let me return in the world. They were ready to close the lid of my coffin. Then a preacher who lived in Ngaba [a neighborhood of Kinshasa] arrived on the spot. He was guided by the Spirit. He ordered people to start praying to bring me back to life so that I could bear witness of what I had been shown in heaven. In the evening of the second day, God liberated me and put me back in the world. On my way back I crossed groups of dead people with chains around their arms, their neck and their ankles. They were dressed in black, as in mourning, while they descended to Satan. I was still dead but my voice was freed, I could speak. I started to speak about my voyage and the preacher wrote everything down what I told him. When I finished I was dead again, and the preacher started to pray to God to return me for good to the world. And finally, on the third day, God worked a miracle and resuscitated me. I moved an arm first and then a leg. The preacher said: 'let us pray, for she is returning.' When they ended a prayer with 'Amen!' my ears were unplugged. And with the second 'Amen!' my eyes opened. On the third 'Amen!' I stood up. A disgusting odor came out of my body. Everybody fled away and watched me from a distance, but the preacher ordered the women to lead me into a nearby house and wash and clothe me. They gave me some water to drink and blessed some food which they gave me also, which I swallowed with great difficulty. While I was dead the blood and the water in my body hadn't circulated, my intestines had become hard, but slowly I returned to life and started to give witness of God's miracle. (Fieldnotes, notebooks 78 /78bis)

In contemporary Kinshasa, children, too, are considered to cross the borderline into the "second world" of evil with as much ease as Mama

Nsasa's passage between life and death, on her way up to heaven and back (see De Boeck 2004, Honwana & De Boeck 2005). Increasingly, also, children between ages four and eighteen are accused of causing, through witchcraft, misfortunes and mishaps, as well as the illness or death of other children and adults in their family and neighborhood. In other cases little girls are suspected of transforming themselves into stunningly beautiful women to lure their own fathers and uncles into their bed, to snatch away their testicles or penis, and to cause their impotence or even death. Children are also believed to be at the origin of madness, cancer, or heart attacks among their relatives and parents; others appear to be three- or four-year-olds in the "first world," but in the nocturnal, second world they have themselves already given birth to many children. These in turn become witch-children roaming through the streets of Kin. Others transform themselves into "mystic" serpents, crocodiles, or *mami wata* sirens. Frequently these hidden suspicions and open accusations erupt into violent conflict within the accused child's family. Often the child in question is severely beaten, in some extreme cases even killed, by family members or neighbors (De Boeck & Plissart 2004:170) Although such forms of extreme violence are by no means the rule, most of such alleged witch-children (called *sheta, tsor,* or *tshor,* from the French *sorcier,* witch) are disowned and repudiated and end up in the street, where they often team up with other abandoned children.

Conclusion: The Changing Nature of the Imaginary

The oneiric, nightmarish character of the forms in which violence and death appear in daily life, as well the transformations of the qualities and realities of what constitutes life and death, are characteristic of some deeper alterations that Congolese society as a whole is undergoing. Without going into the historical roots of these changes, I would argue that this evolution may, on one important level, be summarized as a generalized crisis of sense, or of representation. There is a continuous rupturing and/or multiplication of the links between signifier and signified (see De Boeck 1996:92), an interchangeableness of the factual and the fictional, a constant reminder of the arbitrariness of the signs in the lived world. There is, in short, the widespread feeling that what you see is not what you see, what is there is not what is "really" there, or more important, is not what matters most. In urban Congo, in other words, the "crisis" situates itself in the changing function and qualities of junction and disjunction (such as the disjunction between life and death), and hence in the changing role of the imaginary, which operates that disjunction. Put in a different way, the societal crisis in postcolonial Congo, as it is also and most poignantly expressed in the space of prayer, essentially revolves around the increasingly problematic positing or "siting" of the double (for example, death as the dou-

ble of the living, or the double as the living and familiar figure of death).
Something seems to have changed in the slippage between visible and
invisible, between reality and its double, its *elili*, as it is called in Lingala,
that is, its shadow, specter, reflection, or image.

On one hand, something has altered the significance of that elili, the
quality of the symbol, in that it often seems to have become unmediated
reality rather than representation of a reality. The symbol, in a way, has
ceased to symbolize, but has become ontological instead, through a sever-
ing of the ties that operate the mechanisms of doubling, of junction and
disjunction. On the other hand, reality is annihilated by its double. Reality
and its mirror image collapse into each other, have lost their capacity to
exist simultaneously. What may be observed here is, in a way, the liquida-
tion of the double. In Congo, as elsewhere in Africa, there has always
lurked, in a rather unproblematic way, another reality underneath the sur-
face of the visible world. Movement and stagnation, social or physical
reproduction and death, the diurnal and the nocturnal, have always existed
in and through each other, and the crossing from one world into the other
has always been easy to effectuate, even though it sometimes proved to be
dangerous. Today, however, within the specific space-time of the apocalyp-
tic interlude, this other, second world increasingly seems to push aside and
take over the first world of daily reality. The invasion of the space of the liv-
ing by the dead is symptomatic of this more general change as is, for exam-
ple, the invasion of the first world by the second in the form of witch-chil-
dren and zombies. A term that is currently used in Lingala to describe this
change, this quality of mounting *Unheimlichkeit* and elusiveness of the
world, is *mystique*. In the postcolonial *Afrique fantôme* that Kinshasa seems to
have become, it is increasingly common to designate people, objects, and
situations as mystique, difficult to place, interpret, and attribute meaning
to.

In summary, what this contribution has intended to illustrate, through
a focus on the Apocalypse, is the changing nature—should we call it cri-
sis?—of the local imaginary, or better: of the qualities of junction and dis-
junction between the imaginary and the symbolic, and of the epistemolog-
ical breach that accompanies these alterations in Congo today. This breach
is basically appearing in what is a growing indiscernibleness between the
first and the second world, or between reality and its double. In the Con-
golese context, the first world of social reality is formed only in relation to
a second world, a mirror image that is rooted in a collective imaginary. And
yet the qualities of reality in Congo are no longer those of Lacan's *réel*
(hence the importance of "appearance" in a city like Kinshasa, I would
add). Instead, the second world has become the first, comparable to the
way in which the informal second economy has become the first economic
reality. It is clear that the processes of doubling and mirroring, and the
qualities of the structuration of symbolization itself, have changed dramat-
ically and, as a result, have lost much of their previously unproblematic

character in the current Congolese context. The linkages among the orders of imaginary, symbolic, and real have lost their simultaneity; they have disappeared or weakened and can no longer be trusted or taken for granted. The relation with the double has somehow ceased to be one of exchange and negotiation, and has turned from familiar to *mystique* instead. What needs to be understood much better in order to grasp the realities of such postcolonial transformations, however, is the precise nature of the changing, and thus historical, character of symbolization—its stability, collective power, its relation to "realism," its imagic form, its capacity to fix ontology.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Since 1987, I have conducted extensive field research in both rural and urban settings in Congo. In recent years, I have mainly been doing research in Kinshasa. The material for this article was collected during regular field trips between 1997 and 2004. My work in Kinshasa culminated in a book (De Boeck & Plissart, 2004) and an exhibition that I co-curated with the architect and critic Koen Van Synghel. The exhibition, "Kinshasa: The Imaginary City," commissioned by the Flemish Institute for Architecture, won the Golden Lion at the 9th International Architecture Biennial in Venice, September 2004. Recent research was sponsored by the Fund for Scientific Research-Flanders (FWO).
2. See Corten and Marshall-Fratani (2001), Gifford (2001), Grootaers (2001), Laurent (2003), Meyer (1998), Tonda (2002); and from a comparative perspective see Hall, Schuyler, and Trinh (2000), Robbins and Palmer (1997), Stone (2000), and Weber (2000).
3. For a good introduction to Congolese music, see Stewart 2000.
4. *Kindokinisme* is derived from the Lingala term *kindoki,* "witchcraft." The use of the neologism is significant in that it illustrates how the unpredictable transformations of reality constantly seem to require new conceptual frameworks.