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Framing the Frame: Production Design and Visual Authorship in Anglophone Cameroonian Cinema

By

Pani Nalowa Fominyen
Department of Performing and Visual Arts.
University of Buea.

Abstract
This paper explores the evolving significance of production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking, emphasizing its narrative, cultural, and ideological functions within postcolonial and resource-constrained contexts. It argues that production design in this setting operates not merely as technical support but as a form of visual authorship and cultural negotiation. Through close analysis of two feature films *The Fisherman's Diary* (2020) and *Saving Mbango* (2020) the study investigates how spatial design, material textures, and symbolic elements construct meaning and enhance emotional resonance. Drawing on interviews with production designers and viewer feedback from public screenings, the paper reveals a shift from incidental visual composition to intentional, thematically charged design practices. In response to the inadequacy of dominant global models in capturing these dynamics, the study proposes the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM). This decolonial, context-sensitive framework foregrounds collaborative labour, symbolic economy, and cultural specificity. By repositioning production design at the heart of film analysis and practice, this paper contributes to broader debates in African cinema about aesthetics, authorship, and the politics of representation.

Keywords: Production Design**,** Anglophone Cameroonian Cinema**,** Visual Authorship**,** Decolonial Aesthetics**.**

Introduction

Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking has historically faced challenges in audience engagement, critical recognition, and establishing a cohesive visual identity. The term refers to films made predominantly by English-speaking Cameroonians from the Northwest and Southwest regions, whose cinematic practices differ significantly from those of their Francophone counterparts due to distinct historical, institutional, and aesthetic trajectories. While Francophone filmmakers benefited earlier

from formal training and cultural sponsorship, Anglophone filmmakers often relied on informal skill acquisition, limited resources, and models inspired by Nollywood. These divergences have led to contrasting approaches to storytelling and design, warranting an analytical distinction. Though the category remains fluid, shaped by multilingual scripts, hybrid production logics, and transnational collaborations, it remains necessary for understanding how postcolonial fragmentation affects representation and authorship. This study uses the term not to essentialize identity, but to foreground a body of work born of marginality and driven by a desire for cultural visibility. By focusing on production design, it examines how Anglophone filmmakers negotiate authorship, coherence, and meaning through aesthetic improvisation and symbolic intent.

While the industry has grown in size and ambition, its films have often been criticized for relying heavily on dialogue at the expense of visual storytelling, thereby weakening both emotional impact and cultural resonance (Fominyen, 2016; Layih, 2017). In this context, the reception of early breakthrough films, such as *Ninah's Dowry* (2012), demonstrated that even without formally credited design teams, purposeful spatial composition and culturally rooted visual choices could significantly enhance narrative credibility and audience engagement (Ateh, 2023). These insights underscore the pressing need for Anglophone Cameroonian filmmakers to refine their production design practices, not only to support storytelling but also to emphasize cultural specificity and cinematic authorship. Despite its narrative and symbolic power, production design has long been overlooked in local film practice, often regarded as an afterthought or delegated to non-specialists, such as set decorators, location and props managers (Franzel, Personal communication, 2021). With limited budgets and little formal training, many productions depend on improvisation rather than strategic visual planning. However, as recent films show, production design is crucial in

shaping mood, conveying cultural meaning, and establishing narrative environments. It functions not just as aesthetic decoration, but as a communication system that affects how audiences perceive and interpret films. As the industry matures, both scholars and practitioners are increasingly recognizing that the visual environment, comprising space, objects, textures, and costumes, must be considered a central element of cinematic meaning-making.

This paper argues that production design should be repositioned at the centre of Anglophone Cameroonian film discourse, not only as a technical domain but as a site of cultural authorship, emotional engagement, and ideological framing. Drawing on textual analysis of *The Fisherman's Diary* (2020) and *Saving Mbango* (2020), complemented by interviews with their production designers and post-screening audience feedback, the study examines how production design has evolved from incidental realism to intentional, symbolically layered expression. It examines how visual choices reflect and often challenge social hierarchies, cultural memory, and postcolonial struggles, particularly under conditions of economic precarity and creative improvisation. Grounded in practice and audience response, the paper identifies recurring strategies and symbolic patterns in local design practices. It proposes the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM) as an analytical outcome. The model offers a decolonial and context-sensitive framework that reflects the hybrid conditions of Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking, where symbolic economy, collaborative labour, and cultural specificity converge. While referential films like *Ninah's Dowry* (2012) are cited for their foundational influence, the focus remains on how production design and its apt critique operate as a tool of narrative structure, visual negotiation, cultural affirmation, and recognition. Thus, it contributes to broader debates in African cinema about aesthetics, authorship, and audience agency within postcolonial production systems.

1. Production Design – An Overview

The term production design, first popularized by David O. Selznick, goes beyond arranging props or building sets to include the overall visual and spatial logic of the film world. Jakob Ion Wille (2017) has argued for an expanded understanding of production design that encompasses physical, virtual, and hybrid environments, framing production design as a "time-based pictorial art" rather than just an industrial task. Similarly, Tashiro (1998) describes the production designer as an above-the-line creative role who works with the director, cinematographer, and art department to shape the film's aesthetic and story. The scope of production design includes choices about mood, symbolism, visual metaphors, and thematic unity, not just logistical tasks.

Across global cinema, dominant frameworks of production design, functional, expressive-symbolic, and conceptual-poetic, have shaped scholarly analysis. Functionalist models (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008) emphasize spatial continuity and narrative clarity, while expressive-symbolic approaches (Affron & Affron, 1995; Tashiro, 1998) focus on emotional tone and metaphorical arrangements. In contrast, Wille's (2017) conceptual-poetic model frames design as an autonomous visual grammar. Complementary tools, such as Barnwell's (2017) Visual Concept Methodology and Tashiro's Circles of Feeling, further highlight the design's affective and interpretive dimensions. However, these models originate from Western industrial contexts marked by formal crews, stable infrastructures, and ample resources. Their transferability to postcolonial contexts, such as Anglophone Cameroon, is limited, as they under-theorize improvisational labor, spatial hybridity, and symbolic excess driven by necessity. This gap highlights the need for frameworks that are attuned to the material constraints and cultural specificity defining African filmmaking, where production design becomes a site of negotiation rather than spectacle.

In African screen cultures, production design functions not only as a craft but also as a form of cultural and material negotiation. Functionalist models fall short in this context by underestimating the symbolic excess and spatial improvisation that characterize many African film practices. Similarly, while expressive-symbolic frameworks are more attuned to emotional resonance, they often fail to recognize the deeper cultural codes embedded in costumes, props, and spaces, codes shaped by indigenous traditions, oral histories, and colonial legacies. Even the conceptual-poetic approach, despite its openness to visual abstraction, relies on assumptions from European art cinema that do not accurately reflect African realities, including financial instability, collaborative authorship, and socio-political representation. Harrow (2007) and Barlet (2000) argued for culturally embedded approaches to film aesthetics, emphasizing visual economies shaped by oral performance, social realism, and symbolic systems. However, even these perspectives may overlook the epistemological frictions between localized performative traditions and the demands of globally legible cinematic language. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space" offers a valuable lens here, identifying cultural hybridity as a site of negotiation between dominant forms and subaltern expressions, a tension vividly present in the visual strategies of African film.

These limitations in both global theory and local practice highlight the urgent need for analytical frameworks that can address the aesthetic, material, and cultural specificities of Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking. As this review demonstrates, existing models often overlook the improvisational effort, symbolic complexity, and representational importance that define production design in under-resourced postcolonial contexts. Closing this gap requires theoretical tools that focus on meaning-making, visual negotiation, and audience interpretation within dynamic cultural systems.

2. **Theoretical Framework**

Understanding production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking requires more than aesthetic appreciation; it demands conceptual tools that foreground the politics of representation, the labour of production, and the cultural negotiations embedded in visual storytelling. To this end, this study draws on four interrelated theoretical perspectives: Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, John Caldwell's theory of production culture, Rosalind Galt's reflections on decolonial aesthetics, and Homi Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity. Together, these frameworks enable a situated analysis of production design as both visual discourse and socio-cultural strategy.

Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is particularly relevant for interpreting how audiences engage with visual cues embedded in mise-en-scène. Hall argues that media texts are encoded with meanings by producers but decoded by audiences through varying frameworks of understanding. In the context of Cameroonian film reception, this model illuminates how design elements such as costume, spatial layout, and props function as signifying practices open to multiple interpretations, often shaped by shared or contested cultural codes. Especially in under-resourced contexts, where exposition is limited and symbolism must convey narrative significance, the audience's ability to decode these visual signs becomes central to the cinema experience. Caldwell's (2008) theory of production culture complements Hall's model by shifting attention to the conditions under which design labour is performed. His framework emphasizes the industrial reflexivity of media workers, the ways in which technicians, designers, and directors respond to production constraints, budget limitations, and collaborative hierarchies. In Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking, where designers often take on hybrid roles due to resource scarcity, Caldwell's insights help unpack how production design decisions are shaped not only by artistic intent

but also by informal labour structures and improvisational problem-solving.

While Hall and Caldwell ground this study in media theory and industrial analysis, the work of Rosalind Galt (2011) and Homi Bhabha (1994) adds a critical postcolonial dimension. Galt's notion of decolonial aesthetics contests Eurocentric biases that equate ornamentation or affective excess with artistic inferiority. In many African film contexts, including Cameroon, production design often relies on symbolic density, saturated palettes, and affective spaces that resist minimalist Western norms. Galt's critique legitimizes these choices not as failures of discipline, but as conscious or emergent assertions of cultural sovereignty. Similarly, Bhabha's concept of hybridity, particularly his articulation of the "third space," provides a valuable lens through which to understand how production design in Anglophone Cameroonian films navigates local traditions, transnational influences, and institutional asymmetries. The visual field becomes a space where dominant cinematic forms are both resisted and rearticulated.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional lens through which to analyze production design as an act of meaning-making under constraint. Rather than treating design as a technical supplement to narrative, this study approaches it as a site of authorship, resistance, and viewer engagement. These theories will inform the forthcoming analysis of three contemporary Anglophone Cameroonian films, drawing attention to how spatial textures, symbolic objects, and design labour shape both cinematic identity and audience perception.

3. **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative, practice-informed approach that draws on three primary data sources: analysis of selected films, semi-structured interviews with industry practitioners, and audience feedback collected

during public screenings. The goal is not to test a hypothesis but to explore how production design functions as a space for narrative, cultural, and ideological expression in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking. Two contemporary films serve as the primary case studies: *The Fisherman's Diary* (2020) and *Saving Mbango* (2020). These films were chosen based on their diverse yet intentional approaches to production design, as well as the researcher's access to key personnel involved in their production. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with production designers Forkwa Babila and Chenui Franzel, both of whom played central roles in shaping the visual strategies of the films. The interviews examined design processes, material constraints, and the interpretive goals behind spatial and aesthetic choices. These firsthand accounts offer valuable insights into how design emerges through collaboration, improvisation, and symbolic reasoning within a resource-limited film ecosystem.

Audience responses were gathered informally during post-screening interactions at the 2021 Cameroon International Film Festival (CAMIFF) screening of *The Fisherman's Diary*. Although not part of a structured focus group or ethnographic study, the researcher engaged in open-ended conversations with approximately 15–20 audience members immediately following the screening. Responses were noted in real time and later categorized thematically. Ethical considerations were followed, with no personal data collected. These responses are not presented as generalizable data, but rather as illustrative insights into how viewers interpret and emotionally respond to production design elements, such as space, texture, and props.

Textual analysis was used to closely examine mise-en-scène, spatial logic, visual motifs, and character–environment interactions across the three films. These analyses are guided by the theoretical perspectives introduced earlier, particularly Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model

and Caldwell's (2008) framework of production culture. Attention is given to how meaning is encoded through design choices, how those choices reflect material realities, and how audiences might decode or negotiate those meanings. Galt's (2011) reflections on aesthetic value and Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity further frame the visual field as a contested space where global codes, local traditions, and postcolonial subjectivities intersect.

This study does not begin with a predefined analytical model. Instead, it conducts grounded, interpretive analysis of film texts and practitioner testimonies to identify recurring visual strategies, symbolic tensions, and design constraints. From these observations, the paper proposes the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM) as a conceptual contribution that synthesizes empirical insights and theoretical perspectives into a context-sensitive framework for understanding production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking.

4. Analysing Production Design in Anglophone Films

The evolution of production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking shows a shift from incidental realism to intentional visual storytelling. In its early stages, the industry heavily borrowed from Nigerian visual styles, often without critique, leading to a lack of a unique local design language (Fominyen, 2016; Endong, 2022). Mise-en-scène was usually reduced to a functional backdrop, driven by the story's needs and limited resources. Filmmakers equated realism with unaltered settings, filling scenes with borrowed interiors, generic public spaces, and props chosen based on availability rather than narrative logic. As Ateh (2012) notes, this resulted in compositions that lacked symbolic meaning and aesthetic consistency, while Ndzana (2020) described the outcome as visual dissonance, disrupting audience immersion. For Layih (2017), these issues carry representational risks, reinforcing postcolonial

stereotypes of cultural inefficiency and undermining cinema's ability to affirm identity.

A key turning point in this trajectory was marked by *Ninah's Dowry* (2012), directed by Victor Viyuoh, which, despite a modest production, exhibited an intuitively coherent and culturally embedded visual style. Its use of ethnographically grounded exteriors and austere interiors signalled this shift toward narrative-driven design rooted in lived material culture. Even without a formally credited production designer, the film demonstrated how production design could serve as both symbolic language and ideological critique. This foundational moment laid the groundwork for a more intentional design ethos, as seen in later works such as *4th Generation* (2021), *Kuvah* (2022), *The Planter's Plantation* (2022), and *Half Heaven* (2023), which preserve cultural authenticity while enhancing spatial layering and character-environment interactions. Overall, these films demonstrate a growing awareness of production design as a crucial component of visual storytelling and cultural identity in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema.

This emergent awareness of production design as a tool of narrative and ideological expression sets the stage for a closer examination of how recent Anglophone Cameroonian films employ visual strategies to construct meaning. To trace this progression from conceptual promise to applied technique, the following analysis focuses on two representative case studies: *The Fisherman's Diary* (2020) and *Saving Mbango* (2020). These films illustrate how production design, even within the constraints of under-resourced environments, has evolved into an intentional, symbolically loaded, and emotionally resonant component of filmmaking. By examining how space, props, texture, and cultural markers are deployed to support character development, social critique, and audience engagement, the case studies reveal how visual authorship is being renegotiated within the region's cinematic landscape. Through these

examples, production design emerges not only as a formal concern but as a mode of cultural affirmation and narrative power.

4.1. The Fisherman's Diary (2020) - Framing Patriarchy

The Fisherman's Diary (2020), directed by Enah Johnscott and designed by Forkwa Babila, exemplifies the pivotal shift in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking toward intentional and affectively resonant production design. The film's narrative, centred on a young girl's quest for education in a patriarchal fishing village, is framed through a mise-en-scène that is as narratively expressive as it is ideologically charged. Working within spatial and economic constraints, Forkwa Babila's design strategy demonstrates how deliberate visual construction can produce both narrative credibility and cultural immersion. The director, Enah Johnscott, who also wrote the screenplay, noted in the interview that his personal experience of growing up in impoverished communities influences the kinds of stories he tells and their visual aesthetics. This, he posits, shaped the visually coherent world in this film, where structure and texture echo the emotional weight of the story. He further attests:

> As directors in this industry, we have become accustomed to multitasking, given budgetary issues. You become so accustomed to visualising in your head and executing it that it's quite a task to explain and trust someone with it without the urge to do it yourself. It was a relief to have someone on set who could run with my vision. (Johnscott, personal communication, October 2021)

Forkwa's approach as production designer was rooted in conceptual collaboration. He recounts how Johnscott's guiding keywords "old and dusty" served as aesthetic anchors in constructing Solomon's environment. Carabot-style (plank) houses, lined with brown cardboard and typical of Cameroon's fishing settlements, became foundational to the location-scouting process. It had to be identifiable both structurally and thematically, so his close collaboration with the director of photography Rene Etta was essential to capturing this essence. Figure 1

presents a section of the village, where the spatial density and narrow layout convey restriction, both physical and ideological, setting the tone and foreshadowing the constraints Ekah seeks to overcome.

Figure 1: The Fisherman's Diary (2020). A wide shot of the fishing village establishes spatial density and ideological confinement (00:12:00)

Unlike Western productions, which often feature sets constructed for the purpose, Cameroonian filmmaking relies on real locations. However, as Barnwell (2017) warns, the authenticity of shooting on location does not diminish the role of the production designer. Creative decisions regarding composition, dressing, and transformation remain critical. This is evident in Forkwa's work in Solomon's home. Located in the heart of a fishing village, it had to reflect a man set in his ways, and a twelve-year-old girl burdened with adult domestic responsibilities. Although the site was naturally aligned with the character, Forkwa attests that considerable reworking was required, including removing personal items and introducing narrative-supportive elements.

> The challenge for me was to get a house for the lead character which would represent him accurately but also be manageable in terms of lighting, as most of the interior scenes in the film were in that house. Then, once we finalised the locations we believed were most appropriate and negotiated for them, I had to transform them so they reflected our character's house. This involved taking away all the personal properties of the real house owners and bringing in furniture and props which reflected our character. I had to redecorate the fisherman's house in the film to align with the vision of the character and give a proper definition of his reality. Once the

> shot was through, we had to reset the house as we found it. (Forkwa, personal communication, October 2021)

This layering of visual and symbolic meaning illustrates Caldwell's (2008) notion of production design as reflexive and collaborative labour. The contrast between Solomon's and Teacher Bibi's homes reinforces this reading. Solomon and his daughter rely on bush lamps and aged furniture, an old foam mattress, chipped cups, faded curtains, details that reinforce their economic precarity (Figures 2 and 3). In contrast, Bibi's house (Figure 4), though modest, exhibits relative elevation in architectural form and furnishing. The plywood-board structure raised on concrete pillars and the availability of electricity signal upward social mobility. The visual demarcation between these two homes encodes class distinctions through spatial and material design.

Figure 2 The Fisherman's Diary (2020). Selected props such as chipped cups and plastic kettles convey economic precarity (00:14:35).

Figure 3*:* The Fisherman's Diary (2020). Aged furnishing and bedding reflect domestic hardship and social stagnation (01:32:00).

Figure 4*:* The Fisherman's Diary (2020). Teacher Bibi's house, raised and electrified, visually separates her from the village norm (00:51:29).

Forkwa further notes the difficulty of achieving compositional balance in uncontrolled settings during the shoot as an unavoidable travail. Framing required active collaboration with the director and the director of photography to ensure that each shot conveyed the narrative intent. However, the placement of people, props, and movement coordination in the real-life locations turned sets was challenging, but could not be traded for the mood it brought to these scenes, connecting character to narrative to theme. This is particularly evident in scenes shot along the village alleys (Figure 5), where framing captures the settlement's congestion while also reflecting the relationship between Ekah and her father.

Figure 5*:* The Fisherman's Diary (2020). A constrained pathway reflects both communal congestion and emotional entrapment (00:03:18).

In perhaps the most symbolically potent scene, Ekah and her father sit for dinner, he on an elevated, worn, cushioned armchair, she on a low wooden stool (Figure 6). Notably, even in her father's absence, Ekah never sits in that chair. This spatial hierarchy communicates embedded

patriarchal ideology: reverence for paternal authority, resistance to female autonomy, and emotional asymmetry within the home.

Figure 6*:* The Fisherman's Diary (2020). The positioning of actors as seen in this screenshot emphasizes hierarchy and authority. (00:05:40)

Ekah's appearance. Her clothes, in faded browns, dull grays, and worn-out yellows, are oversized, tattered, and visibly worn, highlighting neglect and her socioeconomic vulnerability. The muted, earthy color palette reflects both environmental hardship and emotional deprivation. At the same time, her unkempt braids and fraying hairline suggest the absence of a maternal figure and the burden of early domestic responsibilities.

Figure 7*:* The Fisherman's Diary (2020). Ekah's costumes and the colour palettes. (00.04.10)

The Fisherman's Diary demonstrates how production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking can operate as both narrative

architecture and ideological frame. Through intentional choices in space, material texture, colours, and object placement, the film constructs a visual landscape that reflects patriarchal constraint, economic hardship, and emotional austerity. Forkwa's design practice, rooted in collaborative labour, spatial adaptation, and symbolic layering, translates the director's thematic vision into a tactile and resonant environment. The contrasts embedded in lighting, furnishing, and built structures serve not only to distinguish characters and their values but to map class and gender hierarchies directly onto the mise-en-scène. In this way, production design in *The Fisherman's Diary* transcends functional realism to become a subtle visual discourse that subtly shapes how meaning, emotion, and ideology are communicated on screen.

4.2. ***Saving Mbango*** **(2020) – Designing Marginality and Emotional Weight**

Saving Mbango (2020), directed by Nkanya Nkwai and designed by Chenui Franzel, presents a compelling study in how production design can articulate character psychology, social marginality, and familial burden through modest yet intentional spatial choices. Set in a coastal village, the film traces the intertwined struggles of John, a young breadwinner, and Mbango, a stigmatised woman living on the fringes of society. Franzel's design decisions bring emotional depth and narrative cohesion to the film, advancing a form of visual authorship rooted in resourceful storytelling, cultural specificity, and social critique.

The film's primary settings, John's overcrowded home and Mbango's isolated compound, offer contrasting spatial vocabularies that visually encode social inclusion and exclusion. John's home, as seen in Figure 8, is physically cramped; there are so many people that there are not enough seats. Signifying a scramble for space, familial overdependence, and economic exhaustion.

Figure 8*:* Saving Mbango (2020). Screenshot showing spatial congestion in John's family home (00:40:33).

The market scene, introduced early in the film, reveals not only the intimate, closed economy of the village but also the mechanisms of social control embedded within that economy. It is a compact, familiar space where everyone knows one another, and economic exchange is mediated through reputation, kinship, and communal belonging. In such a setting, exclusion becomes immediately visible and powerfully felt, as seen in how Mbango is denied access to food and supplies because of her social stigma. This spatial arrangement highlights how physical and economic spaces can serve as both instruments of community support and social punishment, reinforcing marginalization through routine economic interactions (Figure 9).

Figure 9 : *Saving Mbango* (2020). Screenshot of the small village market, framing the economic setting and potential for exclusion (00:05:06).

Together, these spaces highlight the geographic determinism that structures the characters' fates, one trapped in relational obligation, the other in communal stigma. Franzel's use of props and costuming supports narrative progression while revealing economic and social codes. In John's compound, iron oil tanks, soot-covered pots, and handmade fire pits signify a livelihood built on physical labour and endurance. The presence of a manual palm oil machine, operated solely by John and his young sisters, reinforces his role as the family's reluctant pillar (Figure 10).

Figure 10 : *Saving Mbango* (2020). Screenshot capturing the income-generating oil milling activity and its limited labour force (00:14:48).

Costumes are equally telling. Mbango's worn and twisted clothing reflects years of deprivation, while John's tattered clothes contrast with his father's, underscoring intergenerational burden and moral divergence. Clothing, like setting, becomes a social marker, an index of both care and neglect. The film's perceptible quality emerges through its subdued lighting, fading surfaces, and densely layered outdoor and indoor compositions. Broken wooden walls, uneven floors covered in plastic carpets, faded paint, and cluttered frames contribute to what Galt (2011) refers to as expressive materiality, a mood shaped not by formal aesthetics but by lived textures and emotional atmospheres.

The props are worn, reused, and emotionally charged. The scenes do not glamorize poverty; instead, they reveal it through visual exhaustion. Mbango's compound, in particular, maintains a sparse, exposed quality

that suggests fragility rather than neglect. This mood grounds the film in realism without romanticizing it, highlighting textures that convey the passage of time, use, and hardship. The interaction between characters and their environments emphasizes thematic tensions. John is consistently framed within spatial compression, always surrounded by family, even when he tries to isolate himself for some personal time, hinting at his physical entrapment and mirroring his emotional entanglement. Mbango, on the other hand, is often centred in nearly bare, open frames, visually expressing her alienation and psychological solitude (Figure 11).

Figure 11 : *Saving Mbango* (2020). Screenshot capturing Mbango in open spaces that reinforce her solitude (00:42:16).

When John enters her life and brings food, clothing, and care, her environment subtly remains unchanged. However, her appearance gradually shifts, highlighting how material lack persists even as emotional circumstances improve. These interactions resonate with Hall's (1980) theory of encoding, in which the symbolic order of space and gesture mediates meaning as much as dialogue. The production design strongly reflects local lifeworlds, material cultures, and behavioural codes. Franzel, in his interview, emphasized the importance of avoiding aesthetic mimicry from dominant industries. Thus, his design consciously avoids visual excess and instead foregrounds truthfulness both to character and context. *Saving Mbango*'s design reflects not only

how people live, but also how they navigate the emotional and symbolic landscapes of alienation. Mbango's world is neither entirely within nor outside the community; it is a space negotiated visually, materially, and ideologically.

Saving Mbango affirms that production design, even under economic constraint, is not ancillary to storytelling but intrinsic to it. Franzel's work transforms vernacular materials, lived textures, and improvised spaces into emotionally charged cinematic environments. Through space, costume, mood, and character interaction, the design encodes class, stigma, and resistance, positioning the mise-en-scène as a visual system of meaning. His practice, shaped by necessity and creative discipline, reflects a growing aesthetic maturity in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking. Like *The Fisherman's Diary*, *Saving Mbango* illustrates that intentional design is not a luxury of budget, but a language of authorship, one that speaks powerfully through the materials of everyday life.

5. **The Visual Work of Recognition**

Audience responses to *The Fisherman's Diary* demonstrate how production design in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking serves as more than just visual appeal; it becomes a cultural interface that enables viewers to interpret narrative credibility, emotional truth, and social reality. These responses support Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which highlights that meaning is not passively received but actively negotiated through the viewer's lived experience, cultural context, and emotional memory. Post-screening discussions of *The Fisherman's Diary* at the Cameroon International Film Festival (2021) showcased a series of emotionally charged and socially reflective responses. Undoubtedly, viewers were struck by the film's visual portrayal of domestic hardship and spatial restriction, with comments such as, "Can there still be a place like this in Cameroon?", "I grew up in a place like that, it's nice to see a story from there." "I cannot blame Ekah's mother for wanting to leave that

hellhole of a place." "Parents must be able to respond to the needs of their children." These reactions were not superficial observations; they were readings of mise-en-scène as symbolic language. The presence of a bush lamp, the weathered and torn matteress and beddings, and the arrangement of household items were decoded as markers of deprivation, gendered burden, and generational resignation.

Viewers demonstrated a visual literacy that extended beyond surface-level commentary. Props, lighting, costumes, and space were interpreted as cultural signifiers, such as "that lamp," " my childhood," and "that waterside," not just as set pieces, but as references to real lives and places. These reactions affirm the core function of production design as theorized in this paper: a communicative practice that encodes class, gender, social roles, and emotional tone through spatial and material language. As Galt (2011) suggests, texture and affect are not stylistic excesses but meaningful strategies, particularly in postcolonial contexts where visual codes must carry ideological weight under resource constraints. Crucially, the screenings revealed not only how audiences responded but also what they valued. Several CAMIFF participants inquired about other Anglophone Cameroonian films on Netflix, expressing a growing desire for locally grounded, emotionally resonant cinema. This suggests that intentional design fosters more than narrative engagement; it cultivates viewer trust and shapes the reception ecology of Cameroonian filmmaking. It also reveals a feedback loop between design maturity and audience expectation, where better visual authorship sharpens viewer attention, and more attentive audiences encourage higher production standards. Unfortunately, like Forkwa attests, the validation of design in film still has a long way to go in the industry.

> About 70% of the industry still doesn't consider production design as a compulsory element in film production. They know about it but don't understand yet the value it adds to a film. They see it as

> a luxury due to the budgetary limitation and restrictions. We see plenty directors struggle on set where there is no production designer to visually represent what they have in mind. (Forkwa, personal communication, October 2021)

For those who are embracing it, there is the issue of inadequate critique. Notably, much of the region's visual storytelling continues to be critiqued through representational frameworks rooted in Eurocentric or global-industrial aesthetics. This tendency to judge local films against standards of polish, spatial continuity, or spectacle often obscures the symbolic density and cultural intentionality embedded in many productions. As a result, films that do not align with dominant stylistic norms are frequently dismissed as poor imitations or underdeveloped versions of Western cinema, rather than being read through the lens of their production logics and socio-cultural referents. The recurring audience engagements documented in this study underscore the need for evaluative models that are responsive to these realities. These frameworks can decode the meanings and resonances embedded in local design practices without marginalizing them. It is precisely in response to this critical gap that the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM) is proposed.

6. Proposing the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM)

The analyses presented in this study, grounded in interviews, case study films, and audience reception, highlight a common thread in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking: production design functions not simply as background but as a critical medium of storytelling, cultural negotiation, and ideological framing. Nevertheless, despite its growing intentionality, production design in this context is often misread or undervalued, largely because dominant evaluative frameworks privilege cinematic traditions grounded in industrial stability, technical polish, and Western stylistic norms. In response to these epistemological and practical asymmetries, the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM) is proposed.

MPDAM emerges from the specificities of Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking, where production design is shaped not by abundance but by scarcity, multitasking, and the pursuit of symbolic clarity under constraint. The model addresses two core challenges. First, it addresses the widespread misinterpretation of Cameroonian films, which often results from incoherent or improvised visual storytelling, leading to audience confusion or critical dismissal. Second, it reflects the emergence of a localized visual logic, one in which production designers are increasingly articulating a cohesive and culturally resonant design language that speaks to identity, emotional depth, and narrative intention.

This model is not simply an analytical instrument; it is also a decolonial intervention. It critiques the aesthetic hierarchies embedded in global cinematic discourse and offers an alternative logic of visual authorship, one grounded in context, collaboration, and expressive economy. It draws on three intersecting theoretical currents: Caldwell's (2008) theory of production culture, Hall's (1980, 1997) encoding/decoding model, and Galt's (2011) reflections on decolonial aesthetics. Caldwell foregrounds the material and informal structures that shape creative decisions, making visible the labour negotiations and improvisational strategies common in Cameroonian film sets. Hall's framework redirects critical attention to how audiences interpret design as culturally encoded meaning, not just decorative surface. Galt validates the affective and political potential of aesthetic excess, arguing for the legitimacy of expressive visual design outside Western minimalism. Together, these perspectives frame production design not as a supplementary craft but as a site of knowledge production.

The Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM) is structured around six interrelated categories that emerged from a close analysis of

case study films and insights from practitioners. These include: **Geography and Space**, which considers how environments encode psychological, cultural, or ideological meaning; **Cultural Markers**, referring to the use of costumes, props, architecture, and rituals to localize identity; **Colour and Texture**, which capture the affective mood and material resonance of space; **Periodicity**, denoting how design signals temporal context, whether linear or cyclical; **Character–Space Interaction**, which examines how spatial positioning and movement reflect power dynamics, intimacy, or conflict; and **Design Intentionality**, which assesses the degree to which production design is narratively integrated, symbolically loaded, and aesthetically resolved, even within material constraint. Together, these categories reflect recurring visual strategies in Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking, where design often bears simultaneous symbolic, narrative, and affective weight.

In situations with limited exposition and modest resources, the model recognizes improvisation, collaboration, and vernacular aesthetics as valid and intentional forms of authorship. MPDAM is therefore intended not only as a scholarly analytical tool but also as a practical framework for filmmakers aiming to create coherent and culturally grounded visual storytelling. Consequently, MPDAM offers more than a critical perspective; it becomes a strategic tool for recalibrating production practices. Its application promotes early integration of design into the filmmaking process, supports the development of collaborative pipelines between directors and designers, and highlights the need for institutional investment in visual training. The model asserts that design is not merely decorative but epistemological, capable of conveying ideology, memory, and emotional resonance even within modest screen worlds. The MPDAM emphasizes that when production design is approached with the same intentionality as plot or performance, it transforms not only the cinematic experience but also the relationship between film, identity, and recognition. It encourages scholars, critics, and audiences alike to move

away from judging design by borrowed criteria and instead see it as a culturally situated, symbolically charged form of authorship. In doing so, it provides a framework through which Anglophone Cameroonian filmmaking can be understood not as imitation but as innovation rooted in its own visual logics and aesthetic imagination.

Conclusion

This study has traced the evolving role of production design in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, positioning it as a vital locus of cinematic authorship, cultural expression, and narrative construction. Through the close analysis of *The Fisherman's Diary* and *Saving Mbango*, with contextual reference to *Ninah's Dowry*, it has been demonstrated that even within severe material limitations, production design in this context is neither ornamental nor incidental. Instead, it is deliberately crafted, emotionally resonant, and symbolically layered, encoding power relations, cultural memory, and ideological tensions through space, texture, and visual composition.

Audience engagement with these films underscores the communicative power of design, revealing a shared visual literacy that connects cinematic representation to lived experience. Such responses underscore the need for evaluative models that acknowledge local production logics and resist the imposition of global industrial aesthetics. While existing design frameworks offer valuable insights, they often fail to accommodate the improvisational strategies, collaborative labour, and symbolic economy that define filmmaking in under-resourced, postcolonial settings.

In response, this paper proposes the Modified Production Design Analysis Model (MPDAM), a context-specific, decolonial framework grounded in the lived realities of Anglophone Cameroonian production. MPDAM reframes design as a site of epistemological work, not merely as visual

enhancement, and invites scholars, critics, and practitioners to read mise-en-scène as a culturally embedded language of cinematic meaning. By shifting critical attention to design's interpretive and ideological functions, the model offers a pathway toward more equitable, locally anchored understandings of African screen aesthetics. In doing so, it affirms that production design is not only a visual strategy but a practice of recognition, through which films negotiate identity, claim authorship, and craft new ways of seeing.

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