Acting Without Craft? Performance, Improvisation, and the Politics of Credibility in Anglophone Cameroonian Cinema

By

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

Abstract.

This article examines acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema through a performance-ecological lens, arguing that screen performance in this context is best understood as situated professional competence rather than as a technical deficit measured against external cinematic norms. Drawing on close textual analysis of selected Anglophone Cameroonian feature films, audience-reception studies, and qualitative actor-interview data, the paper demonstrates how acting practices emerge under conditions of material scarcity, institutional fragility, and labour precarity. It shows that improvisation, theatrical expressiveness, explicit dialogue, and emotional intensity function as adaptive strategies that sustain narrative intelligibility, cultural legibility, and audience credibility when cinematic support systems are weak. Performance credibility is shown to be relational and culturally grounded, shaped by alignment between expressive strategies and audience interpretive frameworks rather than by adherence to universalised aesthetic standards. By reframing acting as labour carried out under constraint within a specific performance ecology, the article challenges deficit-based evaluations of Anglophone Cameroonian screen acting and proposes an analytical framework applicable to other minor and under-resourced cinemas.

1. Introduction: The Performance Question Nobody Asks

Scholarship on Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, though still relatively sparse, has engaged productively with questions of marginality, cultural identity, language politics, production constraints, and postcolonial positioning. Within this small but solid body of work, performance is frequently mentioned but rarely examined with sustained analytical

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seriousness. Acting tends to surface in evaluative asides rather than as a central object of inquiry, often framed as a technical weakness or an aesthetic limitation before critical attention shifts toward narrative themes, institutional histories, or representational politics. This marginalisation is striking given that audiences frequently cite acting as a decisive factor in their appreciation of and engagement with Anglophone Cameroonian films (Ateh, 2008; Bannavti, 2010; Fominyen, 2016). Despite its centrality to meaning-making in films produced under conditions of limited resources and infrastructural fragility, acting remains one of the least theorised dimensions of Anglophone Cameroonian cinema.

This sidelining of performance is not unique to the Cameroonian context but reflects a broader tendency within African cinema scholarship to privilege politics, authorship, and thematic content over embodied practice. Foundational studies established enduring frameworks for reading African cinema as a site of cultural resistance and political expression (Diawara, 1992; Ukadike, 1994), while later interventions expanded attention to aesthetics, circulation, and postcolonial form (Harrow, 2007; Barlet, 2016). Across this scholarship, acting is treated mainly as an assumed competence rather than a practice shaped by specific conditions of training, rehearsal, and production. Performances are described, praised, or criticised, but rarely examined as structured forms of labour and technique. This analytical gap is particularly pronounced in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, where film production primarily developed in the absence of training and professional development for film acting (Ndzana, 2020).

Within critical and popular discourse surrounding Anglophone Cameroonian films, a remarkably consistent vocabulary recurs whenever the topic of acting is addressed. Terms such as overacting, stiffness,

theatricality, and unnatural dialogue are widely used in reviews, festival discussions, and informal commentary. These descriptors carry implicit normative assumptions about cinematic acting, often derived from Euro-American industrial traditions, yet they are seldom unpacked or contextualised. Overacting is invoked without clarifying the aesthetic standard against which excess is measured. Stiffness is noted without reference to rehearsal conditions, shooting schedules, or the demands placed on actors in dialogue-heavy storytelling. Theatricality is framed as a flaw rather than as a historically embedded performance mode with its own expressive logic. In many cases, the problem is not simply that performances appear exaggerated, but that acting remains visibly present as acting, with limited variation in range, delivery, or characterisation, raising questions about direction, preparation, and the circulation of performance norms within the industry.

The emergence of a localized star system within Anglophone Cameroonian cinema further complicates these concerns. Certain actors recur across productions and gain popularity through visibility rather than through demonstrable expansion of their craft. Their status as recognisable figures often leads to their performances being taken as benchmarks of acting quality in both popular discourse and scholarly reference. However, popularity does not necessarily correspond to depth of characterisation, versatility, or control of delivery. In some cases, stardom appears to stabilise rather than challenge performance habits, encouraging repetition rather than experimentation. These dynamic risks contribute to the stagnation of craft, in which the symbolic capital of being an A-list actor substitutes for sustained development, and in which the aura of celebrity mutes critical discussion of acting.

What these recurrent critiques and dynamics ultimately obscure is the context in which acting is learned and practised in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema. Unlike film industries sustained by formal acting

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schools, casting systems, and long-standing screen performance traditions, this cinematic space relies heavily on informal pathways into performance. Many actors migrate from theatre, high school drama clubs, community storytelling, church performance, or media-related work, bringing embodied habits shaped outside cinematic naturalism. Others, like Ateh (2008), observed that performers acquire performance skills directly on set through imitation, repetition, and improvisation, often under intense time pressure and with minimal rehearsal. Acting practitioners writing on screen performance have repeatedly noted that such conditions foster learning-by-doing rather than the acquisition of formal techniques, particularly in production environments where rehearsal time is scarce and performance must remain immediately legible (Swain, 2018; Sudol, 2013; Binnerts, 2012). These trajectories are not deviations from an ideal system but the dominant modes through which performance skills are acquired and deployed. This raises a central question that has remained largely unaddressed in existing scholarship: what does acting mean in a cinema with limited training systems, where rehearsal time is scarce, direction is uneven, and performance must carry narrative and emotional weight under significant constraint?

This paper intervenes in that silence by proposing a performance-centered analytical framework that treats acting as a socially and materially situated practice rather than as an individual attribute or technical shortcoming. By introducing the concept of performance ecology, the study accounts for how acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema is shaped by informal training pathways, inherited performance traditions, production constraints, audience expectations, and labour precarity. In doing so, it repositions acting as a central site of cinematic meaning-making and offers a conceptual model applicable to other minor and under-resourced film cultures where craft is forged under constraint rather than institutional stability. Rather than asking whether

performances in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema conform to dominant standards of cinematic realism, this paper takes that question as its point of departure it asks how acting practices emerge from the industry's specific historical, cultural, and material conditions. Acting is approached not as an isolated artistic skill but as a socially organised practice shaped by informal learning systems, inherited performance traditions, star dynamics, and the economic realities of under-resourced production.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in close textual analysis of screen performance, drawing on purposively selected Anglophone Cameroonian feature films produced between the early 2000s and early 2020s that generated sustained discussion within festival, campus, and online reception spaces. The analysis privileges performance moments over narrative structure, examining dialogue delivery, gesture, vocal emphasis, emotional modulation, and actor–camera relations as they unfold within constrained coverage and editing patterns, with analytical observations developed through repeated viewing and triangulated with published audience-reception studies to avoid treating individual interpretations as proxies for general audience response (Ateh, 2020; Ngong, 2021). To complement this textual and reception analysis, the paper incorporates qualitative data from an author-conducted[1] survey of twenty-five Anglophone Cameroonian screen actors (16 female, 9 male), aged 18 - 42, with professional experience ranging from two to eight years, focusing on training pathways, rehearsal practices, production conditions, remuneration, and perceptions of performance credibility. While not statistically representative, these practitioner perspectives are used analytically to illuminate how acting strategies emerge under conditions of compressed production schedules, limited rehearsal time, and

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[1] Actor interview data referenced in this article derive from the author's ongoing doctoral dissertation research and are used analytically rather than representationally.

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economic precarity. It allows acting to be examined as a practice shaped by material and cultural conditions rather than as a measure of individual talent or failure, situating the discussion within broader debates on acting craft, training, production ecology, audience judgment, and labour, as they converge in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema.

2. Acting, Craft, and the Problem of Training in African Cinema

In dominant Euro-American screen traditions, acting has been stabilised as a recognisable craft through durable institutions that standardise training, terminology, and professional expectations. Acting schools, university programmes, unions, casting circuits, and director-actor workflows function as linked infrastructures that make performance teachable, repeatable, and legible within an industry. This is why particular ideals of screen credibility travel so easily: they are not only aesthetic preferences but also outcomes of training regimes that discipline the voice, recalibrate scale for the camera, and formalise how character objectives, beats, and emotional transitions are built for filmed continuity (DeKoven, 2006; Tucker, 2014). Contemporary acting theory also reinforces this craft framing by treating performance as structured cognition and embodied problem-solving rather than raw talent, thereby further legitimising the idea that screen acting is a learnable expertise with identifiable mechanisms (Lutterbie, 2011). Even when competing approaches disagree on realism, method, or stylisation, they still assume the availability of rehearsal economies, feedback cultures, and formalised mentorship that sustain the circulation and expansion of craft standards.

This institutional consolidation shapes the critical language through which acting is evaluated globally. Concepts such as naturalism, subtlety, restraint, and believable interiority carry authority because they are anchored in pedagogical settings that train performers to manage micro gesture, camera distance, and vocal modulation, and in industrial

settings that reward these competencies through casting, stardom, and repeat employment (Tucker, 2014; Lutterbie, 2011). In practice, this means that acting is often judged through criteria that quietly presume time, coaching, multiple takes, and post-production support, as well as stable director-actor collaboration. The problem is not that these ideals are invalid, but that they are frequently treated as universal benchmarks rather than historically situated norms, and they become the default language used to label nonconforming performance as excessive, stiff, or untrained. Once that language is naturalised, it becomes harder to ask the more basic question of what kinds of institutions, labour conditions, and performance genealogies made those standards seem self-evident in the first place.

Contemporary acting theory increasingly emphasises that screen performance is inseparable from the technical and industrial conditions that support it. Sudol (2013), writing on facial communication in film and television, demonstrates that subtle modulation, micro-expression, and emotional containment depend heavily on camera proximity, shot continuity, and editorial rhythm. Facial acting becomes legible only when framing, lighting, and cutting are calibrated to capture minimal muscular movement. Similarly, Swain (2018) conceptualises acting for the camera as a collaborative technical process rather than a self-contained expressive act, arguing that performance effectiveness relies on rehearsal time, multiple takes, feedback loops, and post-production shaping. These accounts underscore a critical point often absent from evaluative discourse: what is commonly praised as restraint or naturalism is not simply an actor's internal skill but the outcome of a stabilised production environment. When such infrastructures are weak or inconsistent, acting styles necessarily recalibrate toward greater vocalisation and physical emphasis to ensure communicative legibility.

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Within African cinema scholarship, acting has rarely been analysed with the same analytical intensity as themes, aesthetics, politics, authorship, circulation, and cultural representation. Since the early 2000s, some of the strongest syntheses and debates in African film studies have understandably focused on colonial afterlives, cinematic modernities, policy and funding ecologies, and the transnational unevenness of African film visibility (Barlet, 2016; Harrow, 2007; Murphy, 2000; Thackway, 2003). In that intellectual architecture, performance often appears as part of a larger ensemble of cinematic meaning rather than as a practice with its own transmission systems, labour routines, and medium-specific constraints. The result is a disciplinary blind spot that is not about neglect or hostility but about inherited priorities. When the field is organised around representational struggle, the actor's labour is easily folded into the film's message, and the question of how screen performance is actually made becomes secondary. This matters because, in many African contexts, the actor's body and voice are not simply expressive conduits; they are sites where cultural performance traditions, linguistic registers, and production constraints converge and become visible.

Where African screen acting enters scholarship more explicitly, it often does so through the study of popular video film industries, especially Nollywood, because the sheer scale of production makes performance style difficult to ignore. Work on Nollywood has identified recurring tendencies such as rhetorical dialogue, melodramatic intensity, and performance modes shaped by theatre lineages and popular address, while also situating these tendencies within informal industrial organisation, fast-turnaround production, and audience-centred storytelling (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013). However, even here, acting is frequently noted as a style rather than theorised as a form of craft. There is more description of what performances look like than

analysis of how performers acquire technique, how they adapt stage habits to the camera, or how the production ecology rewards confident, expressive choices over others. Studies that map Nollywood's broader transformations through questions of class, quality, and professionalisation are helpful for this paper because they show that credibility is not only aesthetic but also institutional, linked to shifting claims about standards and legitimacy within African screen industries (Adejunmobi, 2015; Ezepue, 2020). What remains underdeveloped across much of this literature is a sustained account of training as a practical mechanism that shapes what viewers later deem believable or unbelievable acting.

The training question becomes even more acute in Cameroonian contexts, where scholarship and practitioner testimony repeatedly point to thin or uneven infrastructures for film-specific actor training and to the persistence of classical theatre-oriented instruction that does not systematically prepare performers for camera scale, continuity, and the fragmented temporality of shooting (Ateh, 2008). In the Cameroonian case, one of the few focused academic interventions on film acting argues directly that the major constraint is not talent but limited technical knowledge of the medium, and it points to the gap between theatre-oriented preparation and camera-scale performance demands, a mismatch that practitioners and local academic work repeatedly return to even when they approach it from different angles (Ateh, 2008; Bannavti, 2010).

Whether or not one accepts every claim in that study, its central point is crucial to our argument: when training infrastructures do not stabilise screen acting craft, performance does not disappear; instead, it is assembled through alternative pathways such as theatre practice, drama clubs, community drama, imitation, and on-set learning. This is precisely why the paper insists on shifting the frame from individual competence

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to performance conditions. The question is not why acting fails to match imported standards, but how craft is constituted, recognised, and rewarded; when training is mostly informal, and production is accelerated. Credibility is negotiated within the practical realities of a minor cinema. If improvisation and theatrical expressiveness reveal how actors adapt to structural constraint at the level of performance style, the question that follows is how such adaptations are judged, validated, or rejected by audiences operating within their own cultural and interpretive frameworks.

3. Performance Ecologies in Anglophone Cameroonian Cinema

To move beyond evaluative descriptions of acting and toward an explanatory understanding of performance in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, it is necessary to adopt a conceptual lens that accounts for how acting practices are formed, sustained, and reproduced outside formal training institutions. This paper proposes the notion of performance ecology to describe the interconnected environments through which screen performance emerges. Performance ecology refers to the interaction of cultural traditions, social spaces, learning pathways, and production conditions that collectively shape how actors perform on screen. This framing is particularly relevant to Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, whose historical development has been marked by delayed institutional consolidation, limited film-specific training infrastructure, and heavy reliance on informal modes of cultural production. As historical accounts of Anglophone cinema's emergence demonstrate, acting practices did not emerge from stable film schools or professional casting systems but were assembled from adjacent performance cultures that predate and extend beyond cinema itself (Ndzana, 2020; Yadia, 2023).

At the foundation of this ecology lies a substantial theatrical inheritance specific to Anglophone Cameroon's cultural history. Theatre has long functioned as a central space for public expression, political commentary, and communal engagement, particularly in urban centres such as Bamenda, Buea, and Kumba. Yadia (2023) documents how theatre-choral groups and university-based dramatic activity constituted early platforms for creative experimentation in the Anglophone regions, shaping both narrative sensibilities and embodied performance norms. These traditions privilege vocal projection, physical expressiveness, and direct audience address, qualities shaped by live spectatorship and the need for immediate communicative clarity. As African performance scholars have noted, such modes underscore emphasis and legibility over restraint, especially where performance carries educative, moral, or political weight (Ekwuazi, 1990). For actors who later transition into film, theatre often constitutes the primary site of performance socialisation, providing not only technical habits but also assumptions about how meaning is conveyed through the body and voice. These assumptions do not disappear before the camera; they are negotiated within cinematic contexts that may not fully support the recalibration demanded by screen naturalism.

Community storytelling and mediated popular culture further expand this performance ecology by shaping modes of address and expectations of credibility. Oral storytelling traditions in Anglophone Cameroon emphasise narration, repetition, and performative embellishment, with storytellers shifting between roles and emotional registers to sustain attention and convey moral meaning. This narrative logic informs performance styles in which dialogue carries substantial narrative weight and emotional states are articulated explicitly rather than implied. Reception-oriented work shows that audiences are acutely attentive to acting and frequently cite performance quality in everyday evaluations of films, even when such judgments are framed as complaints rather than

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analysis (Fominyen, 2016). These responses are further shaped by long-standing exposure to Nigerian video films, which have influenced both audience expectations and performer imitation in the Anglophone regions. Acting styles, therefore, emerge within a contested field of reference that combines local performance traditions, religious and communal expressive norms, and imported screen models circulating through popular media economies.

Overlaying these cultural inheritances are the practical realities of film production in Anglophone Cameroon, which decisively condition how acting is rehearsed and executed. Production-focused studies of filmmaking practice in Cameroon point to persistent constraints in budgeting, scheduling, and crew size, all of which limit rehearsal time, continuity control, and opportunities for performance refinement (Ndzana, 2020). In such environments, actors often learn roles through brief script discussions, on-set experimentation, and imitation rather than extended preparatory processes. Improvisation becomes a pragmatic response to accelerated production rhythms rather than an aesthetic choice, confirming Fosudo's (2008) observation that performers working across stage and screen tend to rely on established expressive habits when conditions do not permit gradual adjustments to technique. Compressed shooting schedules further intensify this dynamic, requiring performances to be immediately legible and emotionally explicit to compensate for limited coverage and post-production manipulation. Taken together, these elements form a performance ecology in which acting emerges as a negotiated practice forged at the intersection of cultural inheritance and material necessity. Understanding this ecology allows performance in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema to be analysed not as a technical deficiency but as embodied labour shaped by specific historical, social, and industrial conditions.

4. Improvisation and Theatricality as Adaptive Performance Strategies

Within the performance ecology of Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, improvisation and theatrical expressiveness should be understood less as stylistic excesses than as adaptive responses to persistent structural constraints. Acting here develops at the intersection of inherited theatrical traditions, material scarcity, and fragile cinematic support systems in which cinematography, editing, and sound design often provide limited assistance in shaping meaning. Performers are therefore compelled to shoulder narrative and emotional labour that, in more resourced production contexts, would be distributed across multiple formal registers. This redistribution pushes performance toward heightened expressiveness, verbal explanation, and improvisational adjustment as stabilising strategies. Improvisation and theatricality thus function pragmatically, enabling actors to secure narrative intelligibility, emotional clarity, and audience engagement when the cinematic apparatus itself is unstable or incomplete.

Performance theory helps clarify why theatricality persists under such conditions. McCurdy's (2014) notion of "acting refusal" reframes heightened expressiveness not as a failure to adapt to film but as a strategic resistance to cinematic naturalism when its institutional and technical prerequisites are absent. Rather than aspiring to restraint unsupported by production realities, actors amplify gesture, rhythm, and vocal emphasis to compensate for weak visual storytelling. Binnerts (2012) similarly conceptualises acting under constraint as real-time problem solving, where performers must remain legible despite limited rehearsal, uneven blocking, and accelerated shooting schedules. These dynamics are evident in *4th Generation* (2021), where the romantic bond between Princess Dibotti and Prince Alamiti is articulated largely through dialogue rather than visual intimacy. Extensive monologues, particularly Dibotti's reflections on her missing husband, substitute for

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underdeveloped on-screen chemistry, while the King's emphatic rhythm, tone, gesture, and facial expressiveness evoke stage performance more than cinematic subtlety. Here, theatrical delivery emerges not from stylistic miscalculation but from the need to communicate affect and motivation in the absence of sustained visual support.

One consequence of these conditions is the disproportionate narrative burden placed on dialogue. In many Anglophone Cameroonian films, dialogue explicitly carries motivation, conflict, and emotional stakes because coverage is limited and continuity editing is uneven. In *Lara's Song* (2015), explanatory dialogue accompanying shifts in Lara's mental state functions as a compensatory device, filling gaps left by restricted shot variation and visual redundancy. Similarly, *A Man for the Week-End* (2017) illustrates how editing constraints reshape performance rhythm: what should operate as a light romantic comedy becomes tonally heavy, with quick-paced comedic dialogue repeatedly disrupted by editorial pacing that flattens timing and suppresses humour. In such cases, actors struggle not because of deficient craft but because performance rhythm is subordinated to technical limitations that undermine genre expectations. Speech becomes the most reliable narrative stabiliser, forcing actors to verbalise what cannot be securely shown.

Improvisation further intensifies this adaptive logic, particularly within a local star system structured around visibility and speed rather than preparation. In *Pink Poison* (2012), sequences involving Nollywood actor Jim Iyke reveal performances shaped by minimal rehearsal and compressed schedules, conditions common when visiting actors are integrated into Anglophone Cameroonian productions. The resulting improvisation is evident in uneven tonal alignment and fluctuating character consistency, reflecting logistical necessity rather than indiscipline. *The Planter's Plantation* (2022), with its semi-musical

structure, similarly foregrounds theatrical dialogue, gesture, and emotional emphasis as functional tools for sustaining coherence across hybrid forms. As Fosudo (2008) observes, performers trained in theatre and community drama develop expressive habits oriented toward projection and clarity; when transferred to film under constrained conditions, these habits persist because they remain effective. Viewed ecologically, improvisation, theatricality, and expressive intensity register not as deficiencies but as recalibrations of craft shaped by economic precarity, infrastructural weakness, and a production culture that prioritises recognisability over refinement. Acting, in this context, becomes labour adjusted to constraint, revealing not the absence of craft but its reconfiguration under pressure.

5. Credibility, Audience Judgment, and the Politics of Believability

Discussions of acting quality often assume that credibility is an intrinsic property of performance, something that can be assessed against stable and essentially universal criteria. Research on Anglophone Cameroonian cinema challenges this assumption by showing that believability is rarely grounded solely in technical finesse. Instead, audience judgments emerge relationally, shaped by the interaction of performance style, narrative coherence, cultural familiarity, and viewing context. Studies conducted within Anglophone reception spaces demonstrate that audiences do not isolate acting as a purely technical category but evaluate it in relation to how convincingly it sustains story logic, moral clarity, and cultural identification (Ngong, 2021; Ateh, 2020). Credibility, in this sense, is not a fixed benchmark but a negotiated outcome produced at the intersection of performance and reception.

For many viewers, "real" acting is defined less by restraint or subtle modulation than by recognisability and affective clarity. Ngong's (2021) study of student audiences in Bambili shows that viewers frequently prioritise emotional intelligibility, educative value, and moral legibility

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over technical refinement when assessing performances. Acting is judged credible when it reflects familiar ways of speaking, gesturing, and expressing emotion drawn from everyday social life, religious discourse, and community interaction. Ateh's (2020) focus group research similarly demonstrates that performances in *Ninah's Dowry* (2012) were widely perceived as believable because actors were seen to "enter" their characters in ways that aligned with recognisable social situations and emotional rhythms. In both studies, what audiences describe as natural acting corresponds not to minimalist screen realism but to cultural congruence.

The relational nature of credibility becomes especially clear when audience responses to different films are compared. Ateh (2020) documents how *Jungle of Heirs* (2012), a film centred on succession conflict within a royal family, attracted sustained criticism for overacting, excessive gesturing, and strained vocal delivery, with participants linking these performance choices to narrative incoherence and emotional implausibility. Crucially, these judgments were not blanket rejections of theatricality but context-sensitive evaluations of when expressiveness undermined rather than supported the story. Ngong's (2021) findings reinforce this point by showing that audiences are willing to overlook technical imperfections when acting sustains narrative engagement, but become sharply critical when performance disrupts pacing, believability, or moral clarity. Credibility thus operates as a dynamic threshold rather than a binary condition.

As shown earlier, stardom is not only a reception phenomenon but also a production strategy that stabilises casting choices and can normalise repetitive performance templates. Both studies suggest that recognisable actors initially function as markers of familiarity and local identity, especially in a media environment saturated with Nigerian video films.

However, visibility does not guarantee credibility. Ateh (2020) shows that audiences are quick to criticise well-known actors when repetitive mannerisms, exaggerated delivery, or limited emotional range weaken narrative immersion. Ngong (2021) similarly notes that familiarity can become a liability when audiences perceive performances as formulaic or complacent. Stardom may secure attention, but it does not shield actors from evaluative scrutiny; instead, it intensifies expectations and exposes the limits of performance range when craft development stagnates.

These patterns underscore the political and cultural dimensions of believability. Acting is encoded within specific performance ecologies shaped by training gaps, production constraints, and market pressures, and it is decoded through culturally situated interpretive frameworks. Hall's encoding and decoding model remains useful here as a heuristic for understanding why performances praised within Anglophone viewing communities may be dismissed by external critics trained in Euro-American cinematic norms as exaggerated or poorly directed (Hall, 1997). Ateh (2020) and Ngong (2021) both demonstrate that Cameroonian audiences occupy active interpretive positions, capable of distinguishing between expressive excess that serves narrative clarity and excess that undermines it. Recognising credibility as relational does not suspend critical judgment; instead, it grounds it in the social conditions of reception. Acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema succeeds not by conforming to universalised standards of realism, but by establishing a shared horizon of meaning between performer and spectator under conditions of constraint. These reception dynamics cannot be fully understood without attending to the labour conditions under which performances are produced, conditions that shape not only what actors can do, but how consistently and sustainably they can do it.

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6. Acting as Labour: Precarity, Speed, and Multitasking

Within the performance ecology already outlined, acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema must also be understood as labour carried out under sustained pressure. Approached analytically, these conditions align with political economy perspectives that understand cultural production as shaped by time scarcity, informal organisation, and uneven capital distribution rather than by artistic intention alone. Production timelines are typically compressed, often unreasonably so, with shooting and post-production proceeding in rapid succession and little allowance for rehearsal, refinement, or performance adjustment. This temporal compression is not incidental; it reflects fragile financing structures, limited access to equipment, and the urgency to complete films before resources are exhausted. Under such conditions, acting is rarely a protected or privileged activity. Performers are expected to deliver emotionally legible performances quickly, often with minimal preparation, while navigating the instability of production schedules that prioritise completion over process. While actor interviews could further illuminate individual experiences of precarity, this analysis deliberately foregrounds structural conditions observable within production practices, performance outcomes, and reception patterns, aligning with scholarship that treats labour relations as systemic rather than anecdotal.

A further layer of pressure emerges from the widespread practice of role accumulation, particularly the tendency for producers to cast themselves as lead actors. While this practice is sometimes justified by budgetary constraints or star appeal, it frequently places performers in structurally conflicted positions. When producers double as actors, the demands of financial oversight, logistics, and crisis management compete directly with the concentration and emotional availability required for sustained performance. This tension is evident in several Anglophone productions

in which acting appears uneven or underdeveloped, not necessarily because of a lack of ability, but because performance is subordinated to the survival of production. The strain of multitasking limits rehearsal time, disrupts continuity of character work, and reduces the space for directorial guidance.

The contrast between performances delivered under different labour conditions is instructive. Syndy Emade's acting portfolio illustrates how the burden of production responsibility can shape the quality of acting. In films where she functions solely as an actress, such as *Half Heaven* (2023), her performance often allows for greater emotional modulation, narrative restraint, and character coherence. By contrast, in productions she also produced, including *Broken* (2019), performance delivery is more uneven, suggesting the impact of divided attention and managerial pressure. This contrast is not a verdict on a single actor but an illustration of how divided labour roles can compress the time and attention available for character work. Acting weakens not because skill disappears, but because the structural demands placed on the actor exceed what sustained craft development can support.

The star system further intensifies these labour dynamics. In Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, a relatively small pool of recognisable actors dominates casting decisions, with star appeal often determining pay scales, role allocation, and perceived legitimacy. Visibility becomes a form of symbolic capital that substitutes for a diversified range of performances, encouraging repetition rather than risk. At the same time, stardom masks deeper precarity. Well-known actors may secure roles more easily, but they are not insulated from rushed schedules or production instability. For emerging actors, the situation is more acute: payment is frequently deferred, reduced, or framed as optional, with performers encouraged to accept poor conditions in exchange for exposure or the honour of being cast. Such practices normalise

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underpayment and discourage actors from demanding adequate preparation time or fair compensation. Actor testimony further complicates the relationship between stardom and the credibility of performance. Survey respondents repeatedly identified economic pressure, unpaid labour, and symbolic hierarchies as factors shaping on-screen delivery. Several actors reported being underpaid or promised remuneration that was never fulfilled, while being encouraged to accept roles as a form of "exposure" or symbolic honour (Fominyen, doctoral dissertation in progress). In this context, stardom operates less as recognition of craft than as a market logic that stratifies performance value and constrains rehearsal, preparation, and risk-taking. The result is a paradoxical performance economy in which visibility increases while craft development is structurally undermined.

These labour realities shape how acting is produced and why specific performance patterns persist. When actors are underpaid, overworked, and pressured to multitask, performance becomes a function of endurance rather than refinement. Range narrows, experimentation diminishes, and familiar expressive habits are recycled because they are reliable under stress. Audiences, as shown in reception studies, often implicitly recognise these conditions, which partly explains their simultaneous tolerance of technical roughness and frustration with perceived stagnation. Acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema thus operates at the intersection of aspiration and survival. Understanding performance as labour under precarity clarifies why credibility, effort, and range are unevenly distributed and why craft development cannot be discussed meaningfully without addressing the economic and organisational pressures that shape how acting is done.

7. Rethinking Craft: What Acting Means in a Minor Cinema

The preceding sections have demonstrated that acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema emerges within a specific performance ecology shaped by cultural inheritance, material scarcity, institutional fragility, and uneven labour conditions. Within this ecology, acting cannot be adequately assessed through models of craft that presume stable training infrastructures, extended rehearsal periods, or robust cinematic support systems. This paper, therefore, reconceptualises acting as situated competence: a form of professional capacity developed relationally through practice under constraint rather than through institutional mastery alone. Although Cameroon hosts university-based and private training initiatives, these programmes remain unevenly resourced and often oriented toward stage performance rather than film-specific demands. Both existing scholarship and actor interview data indicate a persistent gap between institutional instruction and the technical requirements of screen acting, particularly in relation to camera awareness, shot continuity, and modulation for the lens (Ndzana, 2020; Fominyen, doctoral thesis in progress). As a result, acting craft continues to be formed primarily through experiential learning within production environments rather than through fully stabilised institutional transmission.

This condition reflects a partial transformation rather than a full departure from earlier modes of practice. Ateh (2008) identifies an earlier phase of Anglophone Cameroonian cinema in which screen acting training was largely absent and performance skills were acquired almost entirely through immersion and repetition. While training opportunities have expanded since then, industry scepticism toward formally trained actors persists, with institutional preparation often perceived as insufficiently attuned to the collaborative, technical, and temporal realities of film production. Casting practices, therefore, continue to favour performers shaped by on-set learning, while graduates who do

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secure roles frequently encounter difficulties with blocking, continuity, and performance calibration across shot scales, challenges exacerbated by limited access to equipment and screen-based rehearsal environments (Ndzana, 2020). Acting, under these conditions, is produced through accelerated cycles of doing rather than through prolonged pedagogical refinement.

Understanding acting as acting under constraint aligns with contemporary performance theory that rejects universalised definitions of craft. Swain (2018) cautions against evaluating acting independently of production conditions, emphasising that performance choices are co-produced by time pressure, technical affordances, and narrative responsibility. McCurdy's (2014) critique of cinematic naturalism similarly reframes performance as contingent negotiation rather than stylistic achievement. Within Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, acting expertise is therefore not defined by adherence to external aesthetic ideals but by the ability to adapt expressive resources to unstable production environments. Situated competence names this adaptive expertise: the capacity to remain emotionally credible, narratively intelligible, and culturally legible under conditions of economic precarity, compressed schedules, and heightened visibility.

This reconceptualisation foregrounds the relational nature of performance credibility and links directly to audience reception. Acting does not succeed or fail in abstraction but in relation to audience interpretive frameworks and cultural expectations. Reception studies demonstrate that performances are judged credible when they sustain narrative clarity and affective resonance, even in the presence of technical limitations (Ateh, 2020; Ngong, 2021). Polish, understood as refinement supported by extensive rehearsal and post-production control, thus represents only one possible marker of quality rather than a universal

standard. In Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, credibility is more often secured through recognisability, emotional intelligibility, and cultural plausibility than through restrained modulation associated with Euro-American realism.

Framing craft as situated competence also clarifies why theatrical expressiveness, explicit dialogue, improvisation, and emotional intensity persist across Anglophone Cameroonian screen performance. These features are not residues of an unadapted theatrical tradition nor evidence of resistance to cinematic form; they are adaptive strategies that enable acting to remain legible within constrained production ecologies. At the same time, labour conditions characterised by irregular remuneration, compressed timelines, and a small star system that rewards recognisability over experimentation shape how actors deploy their skills. Craft, under these conditions, is inseparable from survival, visibility, and speed. By analysing acting as labour embedded within specific economic and institutional structures, this section prepares the ground for the conclusion's argument that performance quality cannot be meaningfully evaluated without addressing the policy, labour, and organisational frameworks that shape how acting is produced in minor cinemas.

8. Conclusion: Toward a Performance-Centred and Policy-Responsive Film Scholarship

This paper has argued that acting in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema is best understood as a form of situated professional competence produced within a specific performance ecology marked by material scarcity, institutional fragility, and labour precarity. Rather than treating performance shortcomings as technical deficits measured against external cinematic norms, the analysis reframes acting as labour carried out under constraint, where adaptability, recognisability, and communicative clarity function as rational responses to uneven

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production conditions. By foregrounding how acting practices emerge through interaction with cultural inheritance, accelerated production cycles, audience expectations, and limited technical support, the framework developed here offers a grounded way of analysing performance in minor and under-resourced cinemas, where craft is shaped less by institutional abundance than by negotiation, visibility, and survival.

Reframing acting in this way has important implications for how performance quality and credibility are evaluated. Credibility in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema does not rest on minimalism or psychological restraint associated with Euro-American realism, but on recognisability, affective clarity, and cultural plausibility. Audience reception studies confirm that performances are judged believable when they align with familiar expressive registers and sustain narrative coherence, even in the presence of technical limitations. Acting succeeds, therefore, not by approximating external aesthetic ideals, but by establishing a shared horizon of meaning between performer and spectator under conditions of economic and technical constraint. This perspective challenges deficit-based critiques and recentres embodied performance as a primary site of cinematic meaning-making.

The analysis also foregrounds acting as labour carried out under sustained precarity. Compressed production schedules, irregular remuneration, and the concentration of creative and financial authority within producer-actor models significantly shape rehearsal time, role preparation, and performance range. Without enforceable labour standards, acting remains vulnerable to exploitation and symbolic recognition without material support. These conditions limit opportunities for sustained craft development and help explain the persistence of repetitive performance patterns often attributed to

individual shortcomings. Understanding acting as professional labour clarifies why performance quality cannot be meaningfully discussed without addressing the organisational and economic structures that shape how acting is done.

Understanding acting as situated competence and professional labour has direct policy implications. If performance quality is shaped by production ecologies rather than individual talent alone, then improving acting craft requires structural rather than purely pedagogical intervention. In the Anglophone Cameroonian context, the Cameroon Film Association (CFI) and its incorporated Actors' Guild are strategically positioned to address the labour conditions that constrain performance by instituting enforceable standards for remuneration, rehearsal time, contractual clarity, and professional protection. Such measures would not only stabilise acting as viable labour but also create conditions under which formal training can meaningfully translate into screen performance. By aligning institutional training, labour regulation, and production practice, a performance-centred policy framework would support sustained craft development and enhance the credibility of Anglophone Cameroonian cinema. Treating acting simultaneously as cultural practice and economic activity is therefore not ancillary to performance quality but foundational to it.

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