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The Writers' Forum: Toni Cade Bambara

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Toni Cade Bambara

I want to talk about language, form, and changing the world. The question that faces billions of people at this moment, one decade shy of the twenty-first century is: Can the planet be rescued from the psychopaths? The persistent concern of engaged artists, of cultural workers, in this country, and certainly within my community, is what role can, should, or must the film practitioner, for example, play in producing a desirable vision of the future? And the challenge that the cultural worker faces, myself for example, as a writer and as a media activist, is that the tools of my trade are colonized. The creative imagination has been colonized. The global screen has been colonized. And the audience—readers and viewers—is in bondage to an industry. It has the money, the will, the muscle, and the propaganda machine oiled up to keep us all locked up in a delusional system—as to even what America is. We are taught to believe, for example, that there is an American literature, that there is an American cinema, that there is an American reality.

There is no American literature; there are American literatures. There are those who have their roots in the most ancient civilizations—African, Asian, or Mexican—and there are those that have the most ancient roots in this place, that mouth-to-ear tradition of the indigenous peoples that were here thousands and thousands of years before it was called America, thousands of years before it was even called Turtle Island. And there is too the literature of the European settlement regime that calls itself American literature.

There is no American cinema; there are American cinemas. There is the conventional cinema that masks its ideological imperatives as entertainment and normalizes its hegemony with the term “convention,” that is to say the cinematic practices—of editing, particular uses of narrative structure, the development of genres, the language of spatial relationships, particular performatory styles of acting—are called conventions because they are represented somehow to be transcendent or universal, when in fact these practices are based on a history of imperialism and violence—the violent suppression of any other production of cinematic practices. Eduardo Galeano, the Latin American writer and cultural critic, speaking to this issue of convention and imperialism, once remarked that if Hemingway had been born in Turkey the world would never have heard of Hemingway. That is to say, the greatness of a writer or the greatness of any cultural production is determined by the power of that writer’s country.

So there is the commercial cinema; there is also in this country the independent cinema or new American cinema or the new alternative American cinema, and it’s being advanced by practitioners, theoreticians, programmers, and supporters of various cultural communities: the African American community, the native American community, the American Latino community, the Pacific rim and American Asian community, and the American European community. And they insist on, or rather by their very existence challenge, the notion that there is only one way to make a film: Hollywood style; that there are only two motives for making films: entertainment and profit; and that there is only one set of critical criteria for evaluating these products. Within that movement there is an alternative wing in this country that is devoted to the notion of

socially responsible cinema, that is interested in exploring the potential of cinema for social transformation, and these practitioners continue to struggle to tell the American story. That involves assuming the enormous tasks of reconstructing cultural memory, of revitalizing usable traditions of cultural practices, and of resisting the wholesale and unacknowledged appropriation of cultural items—such as music, language style, posture—by the industry that then attempts to suppress the roots of it—where it came from—in order to sustain its ideological hegemony. And so, there is no single American reality. There are versions, perspectives, that are specific to the historical experiences and cultural heritages of various communities in this country.

Many contemporary independent filmmakers were provoked into picking up the camera and trying to devise filmic equivalents for our cultural and social and political discourse as a result of their encounters with the guardians of English language purity. That is to say, they were moved by the terrorism—systematic, random, institutional, and personal—of those thugs who would have youngsters going through their educational careers believing that they need remedial English, that the language they speak at home may be okay for home but in the real world they are going to have to learn standard English in order to participate in this society. Many of the independent filmmakers have been hearing all their lives that you can't speak Spanish on school grounds, what you're speaking is not standard, is not appropriate, or you Chinese people have got to learn how to speak up and stop squeaking.

Before we get to the issue of what idiom should one speak in, there is the prior struggle of who may speak. The normalization of the term minority—for people who are not white, male, bourgeois, and Christian—is a treacherous one. The term, which has an operational role in the whole politics of silence, invisibility, and amnesia, comes from the legal arena. It says that a minority or a minor may not give testimony in court without an advocate, without a go-between, without a mediating something or other, without a professional mouthpiece, without someone monitoring the speaking and the tongue—which is one of the many reasons I do not use the term “minority” for anybody, most especially not myself. The second question is what will be the nature of the tongue? The independent filmmaker, who may not have any particular political agenda, who may not even have coherent politics but simply wishes to tell a story, discovers all too soon that the very conventions—the very tools, practices—in which that filmmaker has been trained were not designed to accommodate her or his story, her or his people, her or his cultural heritage, her or his issues, and that filmmaker will then face a choice: either to devise a new film language in order to get that story told or to have the whole enterprise derailed by those conventions.

If time were to permit it, I would look at the career of Luis Valdez, looking at two films, “La Bamba” and “Zoot Suit,” the first made for so-called cross-over audiences while the second was made for his authenticating audience: the Chicano community. So we can see the difference in film language, the difference in film practices. But we'll jump over that.

The importance of Sembène, as a practitioner, is an occasion for twenty-five years of film talk throughout the African diaspora, indeed throughout world film culture. And Sembène as an exemplary model of persistence and insistence on cultural integrity

is at the moment immeasurable. So I'll jump over that and simply call attention to the language of space in Sembène's work. In Hollywood, space is hidden as a rule. For a more cogent, comprehensive and coherent version of what I'm getting ready to say, I would refer you to an interview conducted in Ouagadougou at the Pan-African film festival in 1989 with Sembène by Manthia Diawara, the African cinema theorist, but here is the short drift: In Hollywood space is hidden. Once you get an establishing shot—Chicago skyline, night, winter—most of the other shots are tight shots. We move up on the speaker, we then shift for a reaction shot, tight space, and the spectator is supposed to do the work and figure out what is happening outside of the frame. But for a people concerned with land, with turf, with real estate, with home, with the whole colonial experience, with the appropriation of space by the elite or by the outsider, the language of space becomes very crucial within the cinematic practice. In "Mandabi," recall the women in their space: the shadows from the building, the sun, the legs stretched out, the calabashes. We don't have to work to invent or re-create contiguous reality; we are very aware of the space, so that when someone intrudes and messes it all up, a tremendous statement is getting made that resonates historically.

In "Ceddo," in the re-creation of seventeenth-century Wolof society, we don't get any tight shots because we are very much concerned here with the whole history of the appropriation of space. The king and the spokesman have their space, the imam on the blanket has his space, his people around him have their space. The princess and the *ceddo* are in a particular space, and he even throws a rope on the ground and says, "You stay on that side of the space or I will cut your throat." The Christian missionary is in his space. And then there is the space of future time: the fast-forward space. Further, there's the space when people are being hemmed up, shaved, renamed, and are about to undergo this traumatic experience. Just in front of the hemmed-up folks is a space that Sembène leaves vacant. In a non-African film that space would be taken up with pictures and actions, namely the affixing of shackles and chains, the building of fires, and the use of branding irons to explain what is going to happen. Sembène leaves that space vacant and moves to the soundtrack. And on the soundtrack we get African-American music; we get spirituals to tell that story that will take place in another space. It's not Wolof music; it's not African music—that's from that other space. Rather, it's African-American music—a moment of diasporic hookup.