Debates

A Name is More than the Tyranny of Taste*

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First, permit me to unburden myself. A little bit of carping is essential for mental balance and, the Arts are no exception to this principle of psychological release. Indeed, that is an understatement. I should have said: the Arts especially are the supreme example of that truism. We all know that there is no other human preoccupation that so readily provokes either suppressed or exploding feelings than this singular expression of the human imagination and inventiveness that we call the Arts. Within the prolific field on which we are gathered here today – the cinema – there is a word that has become current, one that I still find difficult to utter. It sets my teeth on edge, this hideous child of lackluster imagination. And yet, it appears to be a source of pride to the practitioners it implicates. What one would have regarded as a singular aberration, a regrettable moment of a verbal infelicity, has developed into a child of competitive adoption, sustained by a number of would-be surrogate parents. One shudders to imagine how many other variations can be squeezed out of the original banality, as each nation evolves a cinema industry and strains to force the original horror into the tube of its own nominal identity – again, with pride!

Do I speak objectively? Of course not. I readily confess my subjectivity in these matters. Acknowledging this in advance makes it easier to for me to wear the badge of verbal fundamentalism without the slightest embarrassment. Having conceded that much, I also have to state, on my own behalf, that it has not been for want of trying that I have failed to reconcile my tongue with each new offspring of a nomenclatural misalliance. My main trading commodity, as you all know, is largely in words, so it is not surprising that there are some sounds that I find difficult to mouth – not simply in their own being, but on account of their histories, their association and their limitless capacity to proliferate and people the world of words with new infant monstrosities. This is said matter-of-factly. In addition however, I do propose that words are allied to images.

Now, I wouldn't go as far as Richard Ford, the American writer who, in declaring himself a dyslexic, adds that he actually sees words as images. No, I wouldn't make such a far-out claim. However, I do subscribe to the view that words have shapes, which are in turn evocative of more than the mere sound of them or their literal meaning. Indeed, one can claim that some images become eventually attached to words with such intimacy that they can no longer be prised apart – hm, I appear to be getting closer and closer to Richard Ford. All right, let us simply try and sum it up thus: the power of suggestion goes beyond mere suggestion. A word can distort the palpable reality that your own senses have already determined. Where such a word is deployed as values and summation, as a category of phenomena, even as a loose umbrella for a family of products, it can distort other entities under that umbrella completely, influencing their apprehension in our minds. Where we are concerned with creative activity, the word can contract the scope, or reduce the quality within the overall undertaking. In short, a word can inhibit or expand imagination. It can prove a curse or a blessing.

Regarding the creative process, let it be understood that I am not necessarily speaking of originality. I have read critiques of artistic works that appear to make originality the benchmark of creativity, blithely dismissing such a work on the grounds that it is not 'original'. Some masterful works – in all genres – have been produced that are based on deliberate imitativeness; or plagiarism. There are different kinds of plagiarism: some can actually emerge as a new product of its kind, a kind of creative provocation, or a commentary on the original, sometimes a sleight of expectations or attribution – what is sometimes called signification – especially in American literary discourse. So, we are not speaking here of originality.

We all share – with variations – a basic culture, and that culture places a heavy premium on – for instance – child naming. 'The child is father of the man', as the poet William Wordsworth reminds us. We can add, however that, for African societies, 'the name is father to the child' – such careful thought, sense of history, hopes and expectations ride on the name we decide to give a new human entity we have brought into the world. Child naming, on this continent, is itself a creative act. Only this last Friday, February 22, the following observation appeared in the Nigerian journal, *The NATION*, on the back page weekly column, Comment and Debate, an impeccably timed contribution to this address:

> Naming in Africa, especially in Yorubaland, is special gift that the ancestors as progenitors of the nation bestowed on the elders. Names have meaning, and – as they would have us believe – names push their bearers to actualize their encoded meanings. *Oruko a maa ro omo*, literally meaning 'The name may mould the child'. So you don't find any Yoruba parent giving to their babies names that embed evil meanings.

Let it be admitted, however, that all we do is play variations on existing naming templates, not that we strain to be fully original. The same process applies, as stated earlier, to the creative process – styles, themes and even – very often – content. Actually, this merely provides me an excuse to veer off and comment on a recent cinema controversy – the subject and directorial approach – but one that does concern us here most intimately.

I am sure you have all heard of this film; it seems destined to become what is sometimes known as a 'cult film', and largely because it so successfully plays variations on established genres. I am speaking of DJANGO UNCHAINED, starring the actor Jamie Foxx, with a superlative, though underrated performance in the role of the revolting, Uncle Toming race

traitor by Samuel Jackson. Its theme is Slavery, a subject that touches the historic sensibilities of virtually all of us. Now, just as an aside – one cannot ignore certain other aspects of the controversy it has stirred up. Slavery is a very serious, even solemn subject. Such a weight of history, of race recollection rests upon it that one cannot think of any aspect of that traumatic passage that lends itself to humour. AMISTAD, even The Birth of a Nation with its open derogation of black slaves, etc. – these films conform to the expected treatment of that subject – heroic, tragic, indicting, inciting, racist, etc, – certainly not mock-heroic. One's instinctive response to the subject is that it would be indecent and insensitive to extract any shred of humour from slavery, except perhaps what is known as gallows humour. Long before DJANGO, there was the stage play Purlie Victorious, later made into a film, starring Ossie Davies and Ruby Dee. The same complaints made about Purlie Victorious are what I have read during the past few months – that is, at least four decades later – by some black critics, among them, Spike Lee, a leading black American cineaste. This is a trivialization of my history, complained Spike Lee.

That commentary leads us conveniently back to the thread of our main theme – that criticism was based on a misconception – the director of that film was in fact doing what we have identified as 'signifying'. He was signifying on a number of cinematic genres, familiar clichés, not least of which was the Western, the Cowboy film. Beneath the spoof, there was serious thematic business. Even the sinister Ku Klux Klan was spoofed, and everyone knows that there was never anything remotely amusing about those Knight Templars of the trilogy of Lynch, Castrate, and Dehumanize.

By my reckoning, the film is most intelligently crafted, very much in the manner of Mel Brooks' BLAZING SADDLES, only, this time, our film is set in a slave plantation with opulent trimmings, generous close-up helpings of blood and gore, and flying flesh. The 'n' word, that contempt ridden version of the neutral word 'negro', was also in overabundant usage, a feature that also offended some sensibilities. I found this complaint rather strange, since it indicated a refusal to take into account, not only the fact that the word was historically accurate, but that its proliferation in the film was deliberate, tripping glibly off the tongues of the blacks themselves than off the white masters'. If excessive application has ever been claimed to take the sting out of the offensive, DJANGO was a definite proof of this.

So, we are speaking of an original work of art that is anything but original, filled with borrowings from so many genres. My complaint therefore is not against borrowings and adaptations as a principle, but against the lack of originality that translates as plain, unmediated imitation, or a tawdry, unenhanced borrowing that is conceived and delivered on the very edge of the pit of banality, and out of which it has no wish to clamber, once it has fallen in. It indicates a pre-set mind, a basically unadventurous mind dressed up in cast-off clothing, of which nothing can be expected except as a breeding ground, a reproductive automatism of its own kind – especially in taste. We move closer to the substance of my complaint – that of another unspeakable 'n' word that has taken such a hold on our homebred imagination. This 'n' word constitutes a mutative explosion that I consider most unfair to others in the same creative field – the cinematic – more especially as there have been predecessors who impacted on our cinema world without burdening themselves with such a verbal albatross. Again, I must hold you in suspense for just a little longer while I skirt around the subject, although I know that a number of you have guessed by now where I am headed.

I still recall the first Negro Arts Festival in Dakar, which marked the formal outing of contemporary African cinema, even as a rudimentary exploration of the genre. Yes, some of the products were amateurish, but they already bore the stamp of genuine exploratory minds at work, interrogating the new medium. Even the clumsiest was refreshing and, of course, the more skilled were inspiring. If my memory were not so clotted, I would reel off new names. I recall the young Djibril Diop however, and – I think – Oumar Sissoko from Mali. What remain fresh in my minds are snippets of scenes – such as the satiric use of the *tro-tro*, the passenger lorry, to ridicule the pretensions of a figure of the Europeanized black sophisticate – that species that is known in Nigeria as Johnny Just Come, or *Ajebota* (Weaned-on-butter). This figure of fun considered himself unfortunate to be compelled to ride in the same conveyance as peasants, workers and other 'uneducated' beings. It was a simple but hilarious film, I recall, that introduced the viewer to the makeshift existence of semi-urbanised life, a picaresque work filled with incidents along a journey that covered the gamut of daily survival and challenges, inducing the passengers of the *tro-tro* transportation into a transient community. Our principal, played by the young Diop himself, was reduced, coat-tails and all in that suffocating Sahelian heat, to push the *tro-tro* when it broke down.

Don't ask me why I recall that scene so vividly after so many decades, but I wish that the young aspirants to the cinema trade would have the opportunity to watch such films, if only as a basic lesson of extracting a film nearly out of nothing, on what must have been a shoe-string budget, bringing reality to life without the ponderous injection of excess craftiness. Beginnings can be very instructive, especially beginnings that are deceptively artless. They strike at recognizable truths without the cluttering of over-laboured techniques. Perhaps, at the back of my mind was recollection of one of my all-time favourites – Fellini's La Strada – with the unforgettable performance of Giulietta Massina in the archetypal role of the tragic clown. I am not making the same claims of accomplishment for both – by no means. They are both variations on the same theme – the many faces of The Road, my own favourite foraging ground, admittedly – and there the comparison ends. That touch of creative innocence however, is perhaps what sticks so charmingly to the mind.

And then of course, there was the already socially dedicated hand of Ousmane Sembene who grew in self-assurance as he tackled increasingly demanding historical, and contemporary social themes – one and all were gathered in Dakar, brimming with confidence in multiple disciplines, a churning magma of artistic forces of a post- independence generation. It is evidently too late now, to appeal to those who have embraced - yes, we come close to the 'n' word, I am gearing myself to utter it – yes, those nationals who have fallen for the hackneyed short cut to their own naming ceremonies. Even more thankless than preaching to the converted is preaching against the converted. When so much time has passed and a habit has become

deeply engrained, what forces of persuasion can one muster to undo that mind? As we say in Yoruba – *t'ewe ba pe l'ara ose, oun na a d'ose* (If the leaf wrapping of soap sticks too long stays too long to the soap, that leaf also turns to soap). So, peace unto all upon whose sensibilities I have certainly intruded! This drawn out exposition is not really addressed to them; rather, it is a simple entreaty to those who have not yet succumbed to the lure of the soap and leaf. To you, I plead: Imagine if the then putative film venture that made its organized debut in Dakar 1966 had been lumbered with the name – Dollywood? Every ensuing product is already doomed in the mind with its associated baggage of infantilism, even before its exposure. Just imagine the annunciation of – A Dollywood film festival; or perhaps, 'Sellywood' for Senegal? Nothing could be sillier.

If only it stopped at subjective revulsion? However, there are more provocative questions, such as: Does the branding influence the product? If you give a product a deleterious name, does it affect, in advance, the consciousness of future producers? If, on the other hand, a propulsive, challenging name, one that even intimates more than it presently is, would that provoke in the artiste a tendency towards adventurousness, experimentation and originality? Or are we merely indulging in self-flagellation? If the pioneers of 1966 had grouped themselves around the formulation – Dollywood – would we have produced today's Suleyman Cisse, Ola Balogun, Kola Olaniyan, Bello, and the rising generation of cineastes? Consider this: following the mentality at the base of this, FESPACO, because based in Burkina, would be Bullywood. Or perhaps, since that is so close to Bollywood – Bellywood. Try and think – just one more! – of anything more ghastly, more ghoulish than the contribution from Ghana – Ghollywood! Well, you know where it all started. However, do the emerging Nigerian new breed still deserves to be associated with that commencing second-hand clothes market tag, or with an evolving designer cut production, catering, not for the lowest common denominator in taste but for more discerning audiences, and/or raising – and surprising – expectations in their limited scope. Even a casual study of current film making indicates that the Nigerian film occupation is rapidly by-passing the stage of such retarded infantilism. So, why should the films of such artistes continue to be classified under that unprepossessing monstrosity of a verbal shroud known as – here it comes at last! – Nollywood?

How do we extricate – both for internal and external references, including potential markets and consumers – the grain from the chaff, the silkworm from the congealment of the pupae? See what the Indian film industry has churned out so prodigiously since it succumbed to the perverse name of Bollywood. Thousands of films emerged, mired in that same bollywood mush. It took a Satiyajit Ray to plot a truly original path through the morass with his masterful Pather Panchali, the first of a trilogy of ordinary lives that opened the eyes of viewers to the vast world of mundane rhythms, East and West Africa. See what toll this has taken in the conditioning of audience tastes, expanding to southern and West Africa. We must point out, however, that there may be a correlation between the product and the environment that brought it to life in the first place. Each phenomenon of naming is not unrelated to the social space of that naming ceremony. The social, political, business, religious… indeed the entire interactive environment of Nigeria, birthland of Nollywood – unpredictable, raucous, egotistical, callous, sentimental, irrational and pugnacious (all at the same time) – the manifestations that make up Nigerian reality are so grossly improbable that it sometimes appears to me that all you have to do is set up a camera in an office, in a market, in the motor park or indeed any street corner, go away for lunch, and return several hours later and – *voila*! – a film has already been shot, ready for only a little editing here and there, but virtually ready for release as a truthful reflection of Nigerian life. This, by the way, is not entirely speculative. Some Nollywood products have been made that way.

Indeed, the very material raunchiness of Nigerian life does create a tendency to reach out towards improbabilities. Nigerian social actualities are of such a nature that the film-maker's creative mind feels a compulsion to top it with excess in order satisfy the demands of novelty. In other words, life around the contemporary film-maker, where the grossest excesses take place every day but are treated as the norm, forces imagination to reach outside and beyond reality to convince itself that it is at work, that it is not merely imitating reality. Everything is oversize in the birthplace of Nollywood – oversize consumption, oversize class distinctions, oversize exhibitionism, oversize egos, oversize superstition, oversize dehumanization, oversize corruption, oversize inflation (both human and economic), oversize national real estate, oversize pugnacity, oversize garbage heaps, oversize decay, oversize media, oversize foreign investments, oversize churches and oversize mosques, oversize consumerism by an oversize elite, even oversize First Ladies with oversize vulgarity, oversize rapacity, avariciousness and 'over-reeachiousness'. You will not find that last word in the dictionary, but I happen to come from the land of Nollywood, where, if an expression is outside your non-existent vocabulary, you have the licence to make up your own.

As a dramatist, I think I can sympathize with the artistic representation that goes after the grossest aspects of the environment with a sheer oversize productivity at the expense of quality. After all, when I wanted to capture the sheer brutishness of existence under one of our most notorious dictators, did I not reach for the Theatre of the Absurd – in Alfred Jarry's UBU ROI? I proceeded, quite deliberately, to try and top the already grosteque excesses of Jarry's adaptation in my creation of King Baabu. Reality could no longer suffice. The same creative process probably affected those early video lords. The Nigerian creative mind opens his newspaper day after day, and what lurid headlines confront him?: *Ritualist caught with fresh human heads; body of one month old baby with missing vital organs – mother in custody; kidnappers invade church, abduct officiating priest*; *Boko Haram kills seven health AIDF workers; Boko Haram abducts seven construction workers; twenty-seven bodies washed ashore on the banks of River Benue; Prophet arrested with five human skulls and a baby feotus* … and so on. These are not made-up headlines. Is it any wonder that the film-maker goes for the horror genre where the staple news is that the local chief is cooking up his subjects piecemeal, in order to make millions or win a local government election?

An inclination towards accommodating foreign models of the sensational then follows, faced with such gargantuan proportions of societal reality begging for expression – and where is this to be found but in the ready-made formulae of cheap Hollywood? Cheapness calls unto cheapness. Where what are generally valued as social assets – and that includes human life itself – are held so cheaply, the artiste may consider it beneath him or her to expend more than the cheapest representational responses. The precedence is not lacking. The early contemporary African-American black directors rode to cinematic prominence on the shoulders – in case we have all forgotten – of what came to be known and early described as BLAXPLOITATION Movies, films that exploited Blackness, albeit in a stereotypical and imitative genre, substituting black actors for Grade B white actors, black environment for white, but catering equally for what was considered low taste – Richard Rowntree in the SHAFT movies, and even BLACKULA, instead of that classic horror genre of limitless exploitative potential – DRACULA, all blood and gore, only black blood this time, albeit red. What is the difference between Blackula's fangs fastened on the jugular of a prostrate black victim and, the fangs of the insensate ruler fastened on the life-blood of a prostrate generation?

All that conceded, the objective of art does not exclude transformation, and by that I do not mean, simply, societal transformation. Indeed, you may have observed that I do not say 'the objective of art is to transform society'. No, I deplore that familiar, ideological but dictatorial demand of art. The objective of art is also, among other purposes, Revelation. Whether revelation leads to transformation or not, is a different issue. The primary objective of Art is to constantly transform itself, its own modes of expression and representation. The objective of Art is also to be chameleonic and protean – that is, to change shape and colour at will, to supersede both reality and expectations. Yes indeed, the goal of transformation is not only desirable, it is an integrated element of what art does. We do not want us to get bogged down with that ancient, ragged discourse based on a one-track, reductionist relationship of art to society, what the artiste's obligation is, etc. Writers have put themselves through this wringer, especially during the phase of ideological self-bashings that all societies undergo, and in particular societies that have been victims of imperialism and colonization, including cultural degradation from external forces. Film makers should please understand that that discourse is daily overtaken by events, and we should now primarily interest ourselves in how the cineaste, as artist, transforms the material at his or her disposal. What applies to the writer, painter, musician, sculptor, even architect, is just as pertinent to the film-maker.

Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that there is a kind of imagic immediacy that is more applicable to the cinema than to other forms of expression, including even theatre. Cinema is a powerful tool for transformation, no question about that. However, just as in literature, the cinema can easily become a medium of crude propaganda that is totally devoid of artistic solace, blaring out an ideological line as a substitute for creative rigour. Art is its own rigorous master; it makes demands, and the primary responsibility of the artist is to fulfill those demands. This, for instance, is what makes Sembene Ousmane a cineaste of great versatility, one of the most consistent that the continent has ever produced – his ability to embed a social message in a work without sacrificing its artistic vision. I have singled out Sembene Ousmane because the same kind of artistic integrity is apparent in his writings – *God's Bits of Wood,* for instance – as in his films – CEDDO or XALA.

Must films carry a message? My answer to that is: Does Harry Potter carry a message? All we know is that those films – like the book itself – carry a wallop and generate envy in the minds of most film makers. There's nothing wrong with envy, by the way. Indeed, envy can actually be a good motivator. Even the Vatican is not free from it. About four or five years ago, the Vatican issued a condemnation of the film series as a dangerous endorsement of Satanism. Well, my reaction was 'oh-oh, here comes the green-eyed monster eyeing the greenbacks flowing into the box office'. After all, has the Church, ever since its mammoth success with the bible, ever come up with another literary success story? To 'rub pepper in the wound', each time some lavish, money-spinning production from the scriptures takes place – like The Ten Commandments, with the over-muscled Charleston Heston in command – the Church gets no royalties whatsoever. I think we should simply dismiss the Church's demonizing encyclicals. Fantasy is a different matter. Each time I see news coverage of mile-long queues winding round a cinema theatre where a new Harry Potter book is being launched, and the same endless queues when the next Potter film is due to open - grandparents, parents, children of all ages – I fantasize about meeting Madame Multi-billionaire Rowlings in a dark alley where there are no witnesses. As that opportunity became less and less likely, I began to think seriously of matching skills against hers, but based on our own African mythological resources. Needless to say, the very first step of the creative idea is always the easiest part – which is to think to oneself – 'hn-hn, that seems to be an interesting idea'. Then, the second step forward is – 'hn-hjn-hn, that is a very good idea'. Then the third, which is of course – 'wait a minute, that really is a brilliant, creative idea'. After that, other distractions intervene, and a dead-end looms in view. I know I shall never even succeed in setting down even the mere film treatment of a Harry Potter success. Others can, however, and should. Why should a Bambara equivalent of the Potter series not also take the world by storm? If anyone here has a new idea on the subject – but without the Nollywood stamp – let me announce right here that I am open to propositions. But don't even bother to get any ideas on the subject unless you have the preliminary, capital idea – which is how to raise the capital.

Motivation is a question that any serious artiste must face – and do note that I use that expression 'serious artiste' deliberately. Artistic seriousness is not a contradiction of material success – all it requires is honesty, the courage to come to terms with the question: Why am I in this occupation? Why did I choose to go into it? If it is to make money, then you must study the consumerist trends, and apply yourself to them. But then, if you are also a serious artist, you decide whether you wish to indulge that taste by remaining on that same level, or take it to a higher state, however slight, even though your starting blocks are set firmly on that track known as 'popular appeal'. Creativity lies in advancing the level of one's artistic choices. Yes, the practical

question of even 'breaking even' is not to be pushed aside – whether we like it or not, no serious film artist can blithely ignore the economics of taste – and there lies the tyranny. Taste in itself is a very ambiguous, indeed vexatious issue. Taste, one has to acknowledge, can be a snob affectation, or elitist consciousness. How does one define good and bad taste? Is minority taste necessarily the most refined, while the majority is despised as the fodder of the masses? Taste? The pulp video producer would probably sneer. Taste? The only taste I know is the taste of food and anything that puts food in my mouth – that's good taste!

Yes, Taste. The often intolerable weightiness, yet lightness of taste! Even censorship, ever opportunistic, cashes in on Taste – 'this or that is in bad taste because it goes against African – or increasingly, religious – culture', as if culture is static, not dynamic and evolving.

This is what many advocates of culture fail to understand. The extreme policy choice of outright and extreme censorship in the name of cultural purity – most notable in societies that are infected by the virus of religious fundamentalism – banning or controlling the means of reception, such as video cassettes, satellite dishes and, even, books, are of course futile and retrogressive. The incursion of the negative or dubious alien cultures, values and tendencies, is best countered by the strengthening and exposure of indigenous cultures, ideally in innovative ways, not by creating a hermetic society, closed to all external development. Even BIG BROTHER AFRICA, a series I thoroughly detest – suitably overhauled – is not, as a format, without cultural and transformative possibilities. To be able to watch, for instance, a group of young people – christian, moslem, buddhist, traditional believers such as the *aborisa* – interacting as normal beings, worshipping in their own way day in day out, indifferent to the frenzy of religious extremists, within an intimate environment – now that may speak meaningfully to viewers regarding one of the most devastating crises of cohabitation that currently confronts us – the crisis of the aggression of faith, now ravaging swathes of our continent.

Images are the most powerful ambassadors of the cultural exchange; and thus, the cinema and video can affect modes of thinking, perception and, most pertinently, human regard. The temptation for the African film-maker is to attempt to be a Stephen Spielberg when it is possible to make a small classic of memorable dimensions. Such gems exist, manifestations of the claim: Small is beautiful. Having served on quite a handful of film juries since the sixties – African, Asian, Latin American, Eastern European and others, I do confidently assert this. It should not suffice to display only new films on occasions such as this. There are some modest but inspired works that require to be made more accessible, films that were made when Africa had greater leisure, when internecine wars had not worn out the creative resources of the younger generation, driven into exile, lodged in dungeons for expressing dissident views through their art, turned into child soldiers or driven underground by the rampaging virus of bigotry, and vulgar, murderous religious fundamentalism. Courage is constantly on call.

Try and recall the number of film-makers – in company of writers, painters and other creative individuals – whose lives have been snuffed out for attempting to actualize their vision of humanity; and I am not simply speaking of cases that made international headlines, such as the Dutch film maker, Van Gogh, who was gunned down in the streets of Holland for a film that denounced the oppression of women under narrow, twisted, chauvinistic interpretations of scriptural texts. Before van Gogh, film-makers had been routinely cut down in their prime during the fundamentalist upsurge of Algeria; in some cases, sent into exile. I recall the case of one film-maker who resisted all efforts by concerned friends and colleagues to make him relocate to Europe for his own safety. He however made a habit of spending at least two months a year away from the Algeria of that time, as a therapeutic regimen, simply to decompress, to ease off the tension of daily survival in his homeland. These are themes that you will confront sooner or later. You will be confronted with life-impacting choices. The video cassettes, DVD, CD-Rom, etc., are our allies. They are handy weapons in the battle for creative freedom; let us not hesitate to use them. It is only a matter of time – if it is not happening already – when we shall be able to download entire films via satellite onto hand-held phones, escape into a transformed vista of humanistic possibilities, uncensored, snatching hours of refuge from the agents of mind-closure, from criminal minds masquerading under religious fervour.

Let us not mealy-mouth about, or underestimate the enemies of creative life – they are in reality no more than brutal, unconscionable replacements for the old order of political repression by alien imperators, from which our nationalist pioneers have laboured and sacrificed to extricate our humanity. If you made a film today about paedophilia in Nigeria, and the plight of girl children who, victims of so-called religious permissiveness, end up as pathological wrecks of vestico-vaginal fistula, be sure that you will incur the ire of those perverts who, exposed as confirmed, serial paedophiliacs, actually sit at the apex of your law-making structures – as in my own Nigeria. They will team up with the homicidal deviants of the religious mandate and attempt to snuff out your existence, be they called Boko Haram or whatever else.

We are all living on the edge or daily survival – if you are still in the exemption zone, if you think you are immune, take it from me, you soon will discover different. It is a virulent contagion. And so, you must not only make up your mind; but also make your choice. In the early days of this now notorious insurgency, a television newscaster was deliberately shot and killed by one such group. Deliberately, I said, with murder aforethought, since the killers sent a message afterwards that this was a collective punishment for journalists who, in their view, had distorted accounts of their activities – as if it was possible to distort a pattern of activities already more bestial than anything the Nigerian people had encountered in post- colonial times. So, just think what the risks are when you confront such retrograde interests with stark, realistic moving images of their anti-humanist mission. The creative founts are being shut off every day, and the mere business of survival is driving potential talent off the abundant terrain for the flowering of their genius. Reminders of what was produced in African film immediately before, and during the continent's early energized burst of creativity – that inspirational surge from the flush of independence – should always be made available as yardsticks

of the possible, and the relevant. This is what guarantees continuity, and continuity in the Arts is as essential as the DNA spiral is to human evolution.

Themes change, as does fashion, but art is constant. If you asked me what is the pressing theme of this moment for us on the African continent – for those who feel compelled to be socially relevant, who do not feel artistically comfortable or fulfilled unless their lenses are directed inwards into the anomalies of society – permit me to isolate that perennial theme that weighs us down on this continent. It is an answer you should have discerned from the foregoing, but let me spell it out even more succinctly by calling your attention to events that are undoubtedly very fresh in your minds.

The literary treasures of Timbuktoo are invaluable. As a writer, I experienced days, weeks of anguish when the neo-barbarians of our times invaded Mali, with the avowed mission, already brutally executed in other places, such as Somalia and Northern Nigeria, of resuming an age of censorship that one thought the world had repudiated at least a full millennium before. Valuable as these manuscripts are however, perhaps filled with hitherto unheard-of narratives for the jaded film-maker seeking to break new grounds – but never mind even if they are devoid of such – they mainly serve as a solid, prideful foundation, as heritage. They are monuments to the past, the measure of a people's creative, and potentially transformative signposts of the future. That tangible future however, is what we read in the products of the contemporary artistes, and most especially those artists who employ the most contemporary medium of expression – the cinema.

Then, ask this question: What is the social condition of such artistes? What would have been their fate if the zealots had been permitted to retain and consolidate their asphyxiation of culture in Mali? There is no need to speculate. Simply demand of the Suleyman Cisses, the Oumar Sissokos of that nation, ask them from which direction they encountered the greatest obstacles in the practice of their trade – directly or indirectly – over the past decades of cinematic engagement. I am speaking of those entrenched censors constantly spreading their shadows over creativity. Enquire what themes, so pertinent to the present and the cause of full artistic expression, have raised the hackles of the religious irredentists of society, to the extent that governments have often been obliged to ban the screening of such films, in order to appease such atavists.

Yes, indeed, if you seek the iconic images of our time, you will find them in the plight of women who are being lashed publicly for showing off an inch or two of bare flesh above their ankles. They are to be found in the disfigurement of individuals whose hands have been amputated, equally on account of stealing a loaf of bread as for shaking hands with a human being of the opposite sex. You will find them in those blood-drenched pits where women have been buried to the neck and stoned to death by a public for the crime of giving their bodies to whomsoever they please. They proliferate in images of men awaiting execution for yielding to the impulses of that biological make-up that responds only to others of the same sex and result in homosexual relationship. You will find them in the ruins of the heritage of the past as well as the rubble of the centres of leisure and enlightenment – the theatres, the artiste clubs and the cinema houses. We cannot all, and for much longer, evade the call of re-constructed images of nine female health workers, shot in cold blood for the incredible 'crime' of inoculating our youth against the polio scourge that fills our streets with human millipedes crawling in between vehicle wheels in traffic, eternal beggars from the leftovers of our indifferent elite. Yes, you, our front-line film makers from West to Southern Africa, who have used these very images of the cripple, the blind, the amputees, the stunted, the twisted and mangled from birth to press your message of responsibility on society, or even simply – as in Ghollywood, Nollywood, Bellywood, etc. – to pander to the thrill of the grotesque in voyeuristic audiences , maybe it is time to delineate a cause-and-effect between the prevalence of those unfortunates on our streets, and the brain infection that leads to the deaths of nine health workers, women who are dedicated to preventing the very ailments that produce such malformed humanity. Or the three foreign doctors from North Korea whose throats were slit for no other crime than that of ministering to the ailments that must beset a people with a grossly deficient proportion of medical practitioners per populace.

Yes, these are impositions from the hands of the latest in the line of internal neo-colonialists, and their backers, the external imperators. And such pressing issues of our post-colonial times, alas, are obscuring the battle against corruption, camouflaged dictatorship, social marginalization, hunger, lack of shelter, and the brutal alienation of political practice – that urgent issue is easily summed up as bigotry, intolerance, the degradation of our own very humanity in the name of antique interpretations of sectional scriptures. The prime issue of our time, however, remains painfully the same, the ultimate battleground, as ancient as it is eternal: that battle is one between Power and Freedom. Power as exerted, not this time by the state but by quasi-states, without boundaries, and without the responsibilities of governance. History demonstrates, however, that Power is transient, while Freedom is eternal. Let our film practitioners engage in this battle – but only if battle is in their blood. If not, do not despair or burden yourself with guilt: simply, make – films.

But films need capital. They require subsidy. For the younger generation, a fraction of what governments waste, what politicians steal, what civil servants divert, the total value of the holdings of two or three indicted or fugitive governors from Nigeria or elsewhere on the continent, stored in offshore businesses with their mattresses stuffed with cash in place of cotton or kapok, the sum of offshore properties, of which more and more are being confiscated – thanks to a slowly evolving conscience of some European nations – and occasionally restored to national ownership ... a fraction of all this is more than enough to turn the African continent into – do excuse yet another neologism – the Fespascene – or perhaps the Fespacity of the world; or whatever. A veritable film Valhalla, if you prefer, only anything but, absolutely not yet another exocentric, dumbing down, brain-dead cliché such as – Africa's – Allywood!

* The original text of this piece from the Nobel Literature Laureate was first delivered as the Keynote Address at the CODESRIA-Guild of African Filmmakers-FESPACO Workshop on 'Pan-Africanism: Adapting African Stories/Histories from Text to Screen', held on 25 – 26 February 2013, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.