

*[Sword or ploughshare? Bridge or dynamite? The arts as vehicles for  
intercultural dialogue*

“Meeting of Cultures: Creating meaning through the Arts”

There is a story that gets repeated like an urban legend on some university campuses in South Africa. It is used to illustrate what happens when histories and cultures previously running parallel are suddenly compelled to come together. In this case, universities in South Africa that were designated for white people, came under pressure to change their predominantly white enrolments, began to admit more and more black students. I first heard such a story at the University of Cape Town

It goes something like this: students in residences at the University of Cape Town often met, as do others at any university in the world, for some entertainment over weekends. Girl meets boy on such occasions, often with lifelong results. Music and dance are often a good way to initiate contact and to let things take their course. In the particular situation we are recalling, at a historically white university, what type of music was danced to, was never a problem as such. Music was music: it was everything that the white students took for granted, until black students began come to the dancing sessions in larger numbers.

At first, perhaps somewhat bemused, black students had no option but to do their best, first to watch and then to dance to all the rock music of the kind the Rolling Stones were known for: the wild beat that worked well with long hair, causing it to waft riotously up and down, sideways, or in circular swirls to the frenzied movements of the heads of enraptured dancers. It was a picture of complete abandon that the black students watched at first with curiosity, then with some amusement. How could such wild, uncoordinated movements be called dancing? But not having enough power to change the situation, black students watched with increasing resignation, until they gave in to a creeping sense of insurgency, which then turned into open revolt.

A full scale revolt occurred when the black students, now larger in numbers, and even controlling some of the residences, would come to the party on the lookout for an opportunistic moment that would allow them to take over the CD player, perhaps when the DJ had to respond to a more urgent call, and it

was time for everyone to take a break. It was at that point that the black students seized power.

Soon, reggae, soul, rap, and South African or Congolese beats filled the room, and black students, largely cautious spectators until then, took over the dance floor. The white students watched at first and then miraculously vanished instantly from the scene of the party. This invasion held on for some time until the white students regrouped. They learned to return later in the night with their own CDs to initiate another miracle: the vanishing of black students from the party.

What the students were involved in, in this story were low-key cultural wars. The black students clearly responded to a sense of discomfort that comes from a situation in which although they were participants in the entertainment event, they did not fully recognise the mode of participation they were exposed to, until they changed it into their own mode. In taking over the CD player they turned the tables in such a way that the white students, who took for granted the primacy of their preferred music as the norm, or universal standard, experienced alienation in a most unexpected and dramatic way.

Both sides sought to deal with their exposure to new experience; to something unfamiliar that intrudes into their lives. The unfamiliar has the capacity to undermine, to unbalance, and to disorientate. What is familiar, on the other hand, restores balance. It is in dealing with this disorientation that we can either be creative or destructive. It is about coming to a decision whether it was still worthwhile to retain the old balance, or to dispense with it in favour of a balance that includes a new set of experiences as frame for fresh perspectives on one's life. The space in which such an internal or interpersonal dialogue to take place is vital.

These reflections allow us to conclude that intercultural contact is at bottom about being exposed to the unfamiliar and then having to decide to accommodate the new experience or to resist it. There are threats and opportunities both ways. I will return to this issue later.

Our story of multicultural and multiracial students points to how human beings encounter what I choose to call strangeness rather than difference.

Strangeness is not necessarily about difference. It is about figuring out new

experience; the uncertainties that accompany our encounter with what is unusual. Strangeness invites curiosity. It engages. It accepts the lack of prior knowledge and engages without judgement. It works with open-mindedness.

The notion of difference is different. It postpones engagement by setting up an immediate boundary of untouchability by default. Something different, as we have come to understand it to-day in many multicultural democracies, has been accorded autonomy that puts it beyond question; its separateness putting it almost beyond the need to understand it. In this context, it might be sobering to consider that “celebrating difference” stands uncomfortably adjacent to the notion of “separate development” or “separate but equal” which flourished during the days of apartheid in which difference was also promoted, but was actually experienced as divisive as well as being an index of power and privilege or the lack of them.

The new democracy under Nelson Mandela chose to live with that difference now understood as “diversity” and meant to convey positive connotations. “Celebrating difference” meant: “we may be different, but not only do we belong together, we also value and appreciate our difference. This was a natural reaction against the racial, ethnic, class, and cultural divisions and prejudices of the past.

But we do need to be mindful of the risks that “celebrating difference” comes with in this transition. The different entities being celebrated for their difference really still remain separate, despite any political intention to suggest otherwise. The risk in this situation is that unity and solidarity are more evoked than experienced. This suggests that “celebrating difference” if it is to be meaningful and sustainable, requires a prior step: engaging with the strangeness that can sometimes result in the perception not only of difference, but also of familiarity, or even similarity. What is experienced as strange is not always different. Thus the celebration of difference or diversity, without a prior process of engagement with the experience of strangeness, may lead to the appearance of bridge-building, and restore by another name, the past divisions it was intended to overcome.

Our student contests over musical and dance forms are in comparison, relatively benign. There have been some particularly spectacular, if painful

intercultural confrontations that have occurred in different parts of the world. We are familiar with some of the more recent ones. They include, for example, the international turbulence caused by Danish cartoons which depicted the sacred figure of the Prophet Mohammed in a manner that wounded the sensibilities of many, particularly of Islamic faith, around the world? This incident reverberated around the world.

A year or two before then, I viewed a DVD of the movie called "Fire" by Deepa Mehta and learned of the controversy it caused in India after it was released in 1998. The movie was about two Indian women married by brothers and unhappy in their marriages. They find solace in each other and eventually come so close as to enter into a lesbian relationship. This incident resonated more nationally than globally.

But more closer home, in June 2002, a song by South African musician Mbongeni Ngema entitled, "Amandiya" (Indians) was broadcast by one of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio stations, the isiZulu Ukhozi FM radio. Although the lyrics of the song are in isiZulu, it "opens with an introductory voice-over in English stating that 'this song represents the way many African people feel about the behaviour of Indians in this country. It is intended to begin a constructive discussion that will lead to a true reconciliation between Indians and Africans.'" <sup>1</sup>

The lyrics then go on to allege racial and economic prejudice by South African Indians against Africans and the silence of political leaders in addressing the issue which, in KwaZulu-Natal, has a long history. It sparked off a national controversy which polarized the country not necessarily around racial or even ethnic lines. Didn't the song generalise too much? A small group of Indian businessmen agreed with the song. The song was explosive and tantamount to hate speech. The public debate went to and fro.

Clearly the song may have appeared in a climate in which South Africans blissfully felt or thought they were well on their way to achieve their multicultural paradise of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's rainbow nation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gary Baines, *Racist Hate Speech in South Africa's Fragile Democracy: The Case of Ngema's 'AmaNdiya'* in Popular Music Censorship in Africa. Michael Drewett and Martin Cloonan (eds.). Hampshire, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2006. 54-55.

Mbongeni Ngema rudely interrupted the glow of warm feeling, by calling for a dialogue in the manner that he did on a niggling issue, one that many would be embarrassed to face openly. It suggested that there were inter-ethnic, inter-cultural issues that were not being addressed in the KwaZulu-Natal province, and which were being papered over by the mantra of “unity in diversity”. How much did “celebrating difference” actually hide of the realities of inter-cultural contact?

Perhaps the appearance of unity was far more important at a particular point in the process of national reconciliation than the unpredictable outcomes of a debate on a sensitive issue. The song was subsequently banned from the air waves. Even the towering figure of Nelson Mandela felt compelled to enter the fray and call on Mbongeni Ngema to apologise. Ngema reportedly refused.<sup>2</sup> The matter ended there. It is still there under the table, or in a bottle like a genie. No one is prepared yet to take the risk of opening the bottle, until another artist comes along to pull out the cork.

But for now, I am more interested in reflecting on an observable pattern in the reception of cartoons, a film, and a song which, in their different ways, all provoked controversy. In each case extreme reaction did not occur instantly. There was a time lag of a couple of days, or a few weeks as in the case of “Fire”. This makes sense, for the music, or artwork, or a play, film, or narrative has to be experienced first and absorbed to assess and to respond to their impact. It is this process of exposure, reflection, absorption, and decision-making that has to be understood more. It has implications, I believe for public policy regarding the reception of works of art in the public domain.

It is useful to remember that there is always more than one reaction to art that disturbs. Although public attention through the media tends to focus overwhelmingly on agitation publically expressed, there are also those who appreciate and support the artwork. Typically, those who approve do so quietly with a confidence that might open them to the charge that they assume the universality of their point of view. They tend to be shocked by the opposite reaction, not understanding why there should be such strong resentment.

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbongeni\\_Ngema](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbongeni_Ngema)

But it is those that disapprove strongly who, as in the case of our students after their own reflective process, decide to take matters into their hands.

I would like to suggest that the reaction of disapproval to artefacts given the sometimes violent forms such disapproval may take has sources or origins that may not be as irrational as the strong action and violence that follows may accompany that reaction may suggest. On the contrary, the sources of strong reaction may be based on moral and ethical concerns that may be genuine to those who are affected by the artefact. Even where they ostensibly result from politically opportunistic circumstances, there is a domain of explanation, whether we accept it or not.

Either way, the time lag before the explosion suggests a remarkable irony: that whether the artefact was accepted or rejected, it was actually contemplated. It received attention. The strong public reaction must be seen in itself as a form of acknowledgement of the impact of the art work. Acknowledgement in this case clearly does not mean agreement with the form of the artwork and its message. It is an acknowledgement that the artwork has communicated something in most powerful way. Thus the strong public reaction against the artwork is a retort in a communicative space. For this reason, it deserves attention and an understanding of its real sources.

I think it all comes from the crucial process by which the artefact is first encountered as a strange, if disturbing object. There is involved here a process of taking in the artefact, registering the fact of its destabilizing and disorientating impact, and then making decisions around the emergent implications of that disorientation. In this connection, it is not that art is a sword or a plough, but that it can be a starting point for reflections whose outcome can result in potentially divergent implications. Because such divergence is the very stuff of life, particularly in a democracy which recognises the expressive legitimacy of divergence and convergence of opinion and perspectives of understanding, the challenge of statecraft is to create less fractious conditions for the reception of artefacts in to the public domain. Whatever the case might be, such artefacts never leave the world the same as it was before.

As so we pose the real question: what happens at the point of dissonance where the unfamiliar occurs instead of the expected? I believe this question takes us to the terrain of leadership.

I return to our students once more. In our story, black students, later followed by their white counterparts, withdrew from the dance floor in order to return with a strategy of self-assertion. The white students learned to do the same. But neither of these strategies are ultimately satisfactory because they can result in a cycle of repetitive invasions and withdrawals which lead nowhere. Something is required to break the cycle. More so since the conflicting parties may be too involved in the self-perpetuating cycle to achieve the critical distance that would reveal to them the futility of their actions.

Where in an institution such as a university such critical distance would need to come from the University leadership from whom it is expected that they would understand fully the implications of societal transformation on their campus and on the behaviour of their students and teachers, in the public domain, such leadership would have to come from policymakers, government institutions, and civil society organisations, many who are at this conference, and who share a fundamental understanding of and appreciation for the reflective and transformational capacity of art. It is an understanding that goes with the willingness to carry the institutional burden and responsibility to expect the potentially disruptive effect of powerful art, and to learn how to work with its disruptive capacity when it occurs.

This suggests that in multicultural societies the publication of new books, the holding of new art or photographic exhibitions, the release of new films, requires that arts and culture institutions present an opportunity for the reception of artwork to be a social learning opportunity. It is about situating oneself in the time lag between the absorption of the impact of the artwork and the reaction that may follow from that impact. That is the space of planning, of designing school curricula, of holding festivals, of engaging communities in communal artistic activity designed to enable them to encounter the strangeness in their midst, as has happened in many communities around the world through communal photographic exhibitions consisting of photographs taken by members of the community.

The intent is never to prevent controversy, for the artwork *has* to be encountered. Rather, it is to acknowledge its potential and capacity to unsettle, and how to seek to achieve social cohesion from creatively disruptive artistic encounters. How do we get dialogue out of agitation? Clearly, the case of our students, points to the necessity for dialogue to occur among them to probe into and to enhance their understanding of the situation in which they were caught. Of course beyond the university, in the larger society, situations of this nature can be infinitely more complex, which is why we require government or non-governmental institutions concerned with the arts to have an equally complex and nuanced perspectives on cultural interventions.

Leadership in multicultural societies is about sensing, observing, reflecting (something artists do all the time), and anticipating. It about recognising those moments of dissonance that are difficult to be in but could be fundamentally creative.

So what should have happened in South Africa in the wake of Mbongeni Ngoma's song? It is difficult to say for the answer is not a simple listing of measures to be taken. It is about the quality of understanding in how to relate to the song by acknowledging among other things, its disruptive power and the measure of its honesty on the one hand, and by the same token, on the other hand, to acknowledge the social dissonance that has resulted, not to encounter it with platitudes that fudge, but with the honesty that makes for sustainable communities.

It is fundamentally a question, in South Africa, about the rebuilding of communities, starting at the local level, in which the emergence of new social identities is partly informed by a socially grounded tolerance for artists' open-mindedness and the unforeseen journeys the artistic imagination can take us to. We need to create the disposition to encounter the strange, to ponder it, to be enhanced by it, and to grow with it. How to work with this to evolve policy is the challenge of this summit.

If as we like to say, we live in a global village, then there must be a way that the village can look at itself through the many lenses that reveal the multiplicity of strange reflections of that village. We can do this not by celebrating difference, in the first instance, but by encountering the curiosity



that the strange engenders, pondering it even at the very moment that it unsettles us. Perhaps we may, after that, celebrate difference, because we will have deepened our understanding. This ensures that we emerge different, hopefully better, from who and what we were before.

Njabulo S Ndebele

The 4<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Culture 2009

Johannesburg

23 September, 2009