

*The 4th World Summit on Arts and Culture 2009
Wed, September 23 2009, 14:00-16:00
Roundtable discussions 1. Freedom of Expression versus Cultural Sensitivity
Africa Museum, Johannesburg,
South Africa.*

Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity: A Way Forward

I cannot tell how humbled I am to stand before you today here in South Africa, in Johannesburg, in the Museum Africa. It is a museum for all mankind, for all human beings. I am humbled to set foot on this great land of Nelson Mandela, of Athol Fugard, of the Market Theatre. This land which welcomed Mohndas K Gandhi long before he became the Mahatma, and was claimed by India. It is easy to be struck dumb in moments like this, for it is so overwhelming. But I am here to speak.

I stand before here as one man, but I assure you I am not one thing. I am not singular, and if my life has been anything at all it has been a proclamation of my plurality. The “I” that I speak of, the I that speaks, is a contested, vexed, confused, co-mingling of contingencies and necessities. This “I” is confluence of histories and environments and choices and chances. The person who stands before you today is an artist, a father, a son, a husband, an employee a Hindu, a Singaporean, an Indian, a pro-lifer who is for abortion, a lover of Manchester United, a hater of Liverpool, a lover of philosophy with a weakness for song and good wine.

I am all of these things at once. Yet I am none of these at any one time for I constantly crave to be more; to be more than the mere sum of my parts. Who does not? I am plural and diverse, and two are not the same, so deal with it. I am a whole and a fragment, connected and disjointed, in-situ and displaced. I am part of one of the oldest living civilizations on earth and yet nothing more than a washed up immigrant on a sliver of an island at the tip the Malaysian peninsular, the farthest point southwards that Asia extends to; flotsam and jetsam of a diasporic dispersion long before the Second World War. If I can be certain of anything at all it is that my children will be far, far more plural and diverse than I can even begin to imagine. This is what is to be alive today. We are many, many things and many things are within us.

Allow me at this juncture to quote a contemporary philosopher from Orissa in India, J.N. Mohanty, who in his book *The Self and Its Other* says:

‘A culture is not a self-enclosed world. It is not an identity but a system of differences held together by history. Not being self-complete, it opens out to other possibilities. Then one finds the other within oneself. I do not understand all my motives, choices, and desires. The stranger and the foreigner are right in my neighbourhood. My culture and the other culture are not separated as the known, the familiar and the unknown and the unfamiliar, but rather by degrees of familiarity, foreignness, strangeness. Sometimes, I understand myself only through the other, at other times the reverse happens. The boundaries are shifting.’

This is precisely why I am so troubled by the framing of the discussion topic this afternoon.

Freedom of Expression versus Cultural Sensitivity, is a travesty. Its simplicity belies the complexity of our being. It belies the complexity of its own terms; in short, topic belies itself. The logical assumption is that the terms Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity are separable, distinct and discreet categories, that they are mutually exclusive and so the determined and stable, boundary of one will necessarily determine, fix and stabilize the boundary of the other. That although we may have to consider differences in the determination of Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity arising from cultural relativism, these terms are logically, inherently, separable.

This is false, it is a category mistake. It is utter nonsense and there is indeed a double duplicity involved. For framing the discourse in this manner, which is undoubtedly common and is widely accepted as legitimate, only results in surrendering intellectual and moral ground to the powerful. It is a clever trick and only aids the bureaucrats and the politicians. Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity cohere within each other in a continuous and going dialectic that is both dynamic and unceasing. It is not a zero-sum game. The one does not diminish the other.

There can be no Freedom of Expression without Cultural sensitivity and no Cultural Sensitivity without Freedom of Expression *not* because the one limits or determines the bounds of the other, but because the one *is* the other; each is continuous, co-mingled with the other, inter-penetrated and pervious to the other. Both, as a whole, must necessarily be contextualized within

the wider socio-political sea wherein the discourse is situated. Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the realm of the intercultural.

The intercultural was brilliantly depicted in 3 Colours, a mixed media event we which had the privilege to see last night. Of the myriad of images we witnessed at the Alexander Theatre none to my mind captured the terrifying brutality of getting the discourse on the Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity wrong, than that of the White Policeman fucking the powerless, beaten, supine being on the floor. Do not make the mistake of presuming, for one minute that the White Policeman represents the state and that the one on the floor is the artist. Although that is often the case, it is merely contingent; not so necessarily. History is full of countless instances, from Stalin and Mao to Hitler and Pol Pot, when artists and their art were only too willing to stand with and share common cause with tyrants. This discourse between Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity will never be settled by metric involving frameworks, force, legalities, economics or administration. It will only be resolved in the depths of the human heart by imagination, trust and magnanimity. There is, as far as I know, no metric for that.

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