



BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 2019



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Experimenta Debate 2019

Transcript of group discussion: Rabz Lansiquot, Tanoa Sasraku-Ansah, Adam Farah and Kumbirai Makumbe

Rabz Lansiquot – [To Tanoa] One of the things that I really like about your work, and I was lucky enough to get to see it in Berwick, was the kind of materiality, the fact that you made the costumes, and the making of the set. Definitely, in the demonstration in Berwick, they were present, but it still feels like there's so much more going on than what is in the film. So I wanted you to talk a little bit more about that process, and how you feel like that has influenced your film work.

Tanoa Sasraku-Ansah - So, the process of creating the costumes? Yeah, so this idea of period costume, it's strange, when I had started the residency and was thinking about period costume, I'd always thought I hated 18th-century costume. Because I saw it in quite twee, royal, British film and television productions a lot. And yet I ended up creating 18th-century costumes.

The process of selecting textiles is the thing that I connected to most, in terms of creating costume. As I spoke about tartan, I find the storytelling in that textile really interesting, and my dad had a really deep connection with Kente cloth. He was a Ghanaian couture designer, and there seemed to be some sort of relationship between the two, him growing up in the environment of Ghana, and me growing up in the West Country. Tartan felt like this kind of tribal British textile that's still worn today, and has this really intense history that doesn't seem to apply to many other aspects of British life, that are all quite austere. So that was interesting to me, to be able to work with that textile in terms of the character of Pierrot.

This is the first time I've worked with costume, or clothes. I've worked with textile in terms of the flags that I stitch, and colour theory is really interesting to me, in terms of those, but working with bodies was really exciting, and particularly the Harlequin character, creating this looming form that would be towering over me was really exciting to play off of on set during the acting process. So aside from anything else, it was just really fun, and I really enjoyed injecting that into my practise. It made it feel a bit less heavy, I think, this time around.

Rabz Lansiquot - I feel like all of your practises deal with this, there's an aspect of fun, or of things that we do for pleasure. Like the engagement with music and popular culture in yours, Adam, and the engagement with science fiction in yours [Kumbirai].

There's an interesting thing that happens, particularly, I think, when you're a black artist, or an artist that is not "British" in the sense that they want you to think, where we kind of separate the things that we enjoy from the things that are in our practise. And then I've noticed, there's always a moment where we loop back to those things.

Coming off of that, I feel like whenever I engage with your work, Adam, it's a bit like with Zinzi, it reminds me of very specific things in my life. That I'd either forgotten about, or they're just in the back of the archive of my brain, and that's really exciting to me. And I think that I've never seen



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another artist who references that particular moment, of black British time, in the noughties. Where things like the PSP, and the Sugababes, and Mariah Carey on the shopping channel, these kinds of references come up. And I just was wondering, did you ever feel like you weren't able to do that, to explore those things? What brought you to that?

Adam Farah - Yeah, I guess I hint at that, with the weird art school experience. But also this whole general thing around the complexity of the sociality of class and stuff, when you grow up in London.

Maybe a bit of context is that I did go to a secondary school that was very shit, and violent. But like, great fun. And then, there was this scheme for us, where there was this quite prestigious sixth form college up the road, and we basically didn't have to get good grades to get in, some of us. So that kind of shook me up in terms of class, because with that sixth form college, it was a completely different mix of people than I was used to, and it made me think about code-switching, and especially about language, and how people might treat you differently because of the way you look, or the way that you use language, as well, specifically.

And at that time, I was also reading James Baldwin, who talks about that, and maybe you can hear a certain influence in the way that I speak. Which wasn't a really conscious way to change the way I speak, it's just kind of happened, because of my circumstances.

But, I digress, again. I went to art school and when I would bring in references, like Mariah or Janet Jackson, people would translate it as me being ironic, by default. Which was interesting, and obviously you can make conclusions about that. But I think that was also influenced a lot by the Post-Internet art movement that was at its height when I was in art school, and I went to Camberwell College, which was near Peckham, and that's where they were gathering. And yeah, that was annoying, and I wasn't trying to fight against that, but I was just like, "Hey, I'm gonna keep doing what I do, because I'm not really making my work for you. I'm making work for my friends back in ends."

But then there's this thing of when you leave art school, and that bubble bursts, and you go back to live in your ends. And that's when ends theory happened, because I was like, I'm starting to see these things, these really amazing and radical nuances that exist, that I felt needed to be highlighted. Not even for a different audience, but so that the people on my estate could actually give themselves some props for how they practise stuff, and the creativity that's involved. And I always say, the place that I experience the most kind of radical sense of creativity was secondary school, and I miss that.

Rabz Lansiquot - Yeah, I really hear that. And I really understand that alienating experience of being in certain spaces after being in other spaces, and then coming back to that space and trying to bring those two experiences together. That can be quite complex, and I think that what you do is really interesting in that sense. So, yes, thank you.

[To Kumbirai] So you talk about sci-fi, and also it's interesting to think about your work with the 3-D rendering stuff, I don't know if that's the right term, I'm not savvy like that. But using sci-fi in your work, how much are you interested in creating narratives, in the way that things like *Annihilation* do? And also, what are your thoughts about Afrofuturism? Because I think there's a difference



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between the way that you're talking about sci-fi and what people talk about as Afrofuturism, and I noticed that that was definitely stark.

Kumbirai Makumbe - Hello, yeah. So in terms of the narratives, I would say in the last video that I showed called *Evo's Turn*, that has quite a clear narrative in it. Basically, I cloned my voice using this app on my phone. I spent an hour reading sentences off this app, and it recorded my voice, and it essentially learnt how I speak. And I found that really interesting, because for a while, I'd been using text-to-speech software, I was getting these voices to narrate my videos, but there was no black voices. There was only like, "Emma from the UK," or "Jack from Dorset," or something. And I just really wasn't feeling it, and I found it really frustrating until I found this voice-cloning software.

For a while I've been exploring this idea of trying to open up a definition of blackness, because I've always tried to advocate for a multidimensional perception of it. And I was trying to think of how I could package that without it being very text-to-paper, and so I thought, "Wouldn't it be really interesting if I got my avatar to perform it?" And so, I literally just wrote this text down, and I got it to perform it, and then from there I was like, I can take this a step further.

I then thought, "What if I imagined that this avatar that I've created was artificial intelligence? And what if it was a character of its own?" I find it really interesting when artificial intelligence questions its own sentience in relation to humans. But, I'm talking about blackness, so the question would be, since I have created this avatar from myself, from recording myself, can you tell that it's black from the way that I've recorded it? Probably not, but maybe even yes. So I thought, wouldn't it be really interesting if I package this whole conversation in a monologue that's performed by my voice clone, made from me, which questions its own blackness in the same way an artificial intelligence would question its own sentience?

And I feel like I do make narratives like that. That was the first time I'd done it, actually, but I really enjoyed it. It's a really interesting mode of practise for me now, and it's definitely been highly influenced by science fiction. What was the second part of the question?

Rabz Lansiquot - Oh, about Afrofuturism.

Kumbirai Makumbe - Afrofuturism. I don't know, because I haven't really discussed it with anybody, but I actually had a big interest in Afrofuturism. I started looking it up, and I found, when it first came about, I think they were essentially trying to elevate black people to the same level as white, of white people, or to even go past that by kind of associating them with technology, and the future. And I don't know, whilst I was immersed within this world, it got to a point where it was just like, if I'm still doing the same thing they were doing back then, then surely we haven't really progressed? If I'm still doing the same thing.

So, it got to a point where I started thinking, surely I should just act as if blackness, anything black, and technology, are just naturally paired, instead of trying to prove that they're at the same level. For example with *Evo*, and thinking about whether there's blackness in *Evo's* code in the same way that blackness runs through my DNA. Or, in the same way that I have tried to visualise blackness, but only through a digital means, and never through anything actually physical. So those are my



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thoughts on Afrofuturism. I still think it's a really beautiful movement, and I think it's done so much, I just don't know whether it's for me personally.

Rabz Lansiquot - Yeah, I really resonate with that. Things that are created in response to things, rather than as a part of a thing. I think that's an interesting approach.

I wanted to ask all of you, because language came up in everyone's presentations, and that was quite interesting. And in quite different ways. So, I want you to speak a little bit more about language, and also maybe if there are things that came up in each other's presentations, that you wanted to riff on or think about. Whoever wants to go first, I don't mind.

Kumbirai Makumbe - Should I go? I guess I can keep on going, because I've got the momentum. Yeah, in one of my works, I decided to create a whole new word, called "X.y.n.ing." Because I was doing researching into care, for my FMP at uni, and the more research I did about care, it felt like whatever I was trying to say was being constrained by the limitations of "care" itself, as a word. I was trying to discuss something that surpassed the boundaries of the word "care," and delved into other things.

So, I decided to create my own word, and through that I can govern what it covers and what it doesn't. I can decide whether it's a verb, if it's an adjective. It gave me a power to articulate something that language wasn't allowing me to before. And I think it's a very useful thing to do. And also, creating something and then thinking about how that's disseminated, or whether certain words are capitalised, I think some new ways of thinking come out of that as well.

Rabz Lansiquot - Yeah, for sure. And Adam, you also create words, essentially, and in both of those ways, both of those things make sense. There's a re-making, or expanding of things that already exist. So I wondered if you could speak a little bit about that. And also about the way that you use language in your presentations.

You're referencing particular language, and particular words that are associated with working-class people, particularly black working-class people. But also you manage to weave that in with, I'm kind of assuming, what comes from being in an art school and being in arts spaces. You manage to seamlessly weave those things together in a way that maybe is jarring to some people, but I think that it's really quite amazing. So I wondered if you could speak about that. Maybe start with "momentations."

Adam Farah - Yeah, like I was hinting, like many people, I have a complex relationship to language. English language is the first and only language that I was taught, and it is a coloniser's language. It goes hand-in-hand with colonisation. And so, it's not ever going to be sufficient for everyone's experiences, and that's why you get people who "disidentify" with language, not just artists, but people in everyday life.

With all the words that you hear in ends, that also represent the very complex makeup of people in different parts of London, and their histories coming together, and their sociality coming together. I guess "momentation" came from the moment, and I was thinking about the way that, especially the



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language that I was taught in art school, wasn't sufficient enough for me to really try to get to the crux of certain things that I wanted to do with my artwork.

Also, it was a way to liberate me from this certain rigidity of how we're taught to look at art in art school. And the way that if I do something, for me, it might just be a moment; it doesn't have to be an "art," you know? Because there's a certain kind of permanent authority that's given to an "art," and especially if you make an art object, as well. Maybe that explains it a bit.

Rabz Lansiquot - For sure.

Kumbirai Makumbe - Am I allowed to ask a question?

Rabz Lansiquot - Yes!

Kumbirai Makumbe – [To Adam] During your presentation, I was really struck by when you were discussing the inaccessibility of language, and also structuring things inaccessibly. And I was wondering if you could explain that.

Adam Farah - I guess it relates to my experience. Because I've always been interested in words, and I remember when I was in year three and I just picked up this random book of poetry, and there was a word, the word "disintegration." And I was able to pronounce it, and my teacher was like, "Whoa, how can you say that word?" And then because of her reaction to that, I was really curious about, "But it's a word, like," you know, "What's that about?" And then I guess, yeah, it made me think about language.

I think another thing is that I struggled with language when I was writing my dissertation for my BA, which made me give it in a year late. It started to make me try to interrogate why that was. Also, when I went to talks, like at the ICA for instance, sometimes I just started to realise that, like, "If I break down some of the words that you lot are saying, I can understand it, I can go to a dictionary, and get the," what's the word, "definition of it, and keep that in my memory."

But there's different ways that people try to structure it, and I think sometimes people structure those "hard" words in such an unnecessary way, that make other people not able to understand it, because of the way that they look at words, and read, and think about things; people's brains work differently. So that's why I was thinking, I don't have to shy away from using these words. Because some of them are helpful! And I don't have to shy away from certain discourses that I learnt in art school, like queer theory, because it still talks to my experience. But I just wanted to complicate that, and say, "Look, you know, I'm a faggot from ends. That's my identity. And why can't I put these two things together?" But, it's complicated.

Tanoa Sasraku-Ansah - Yeah, I'm interested in the link between the sort of code-switching that you talked about, Adam, and Kumbi's ideas around black authenticity, and another one of your video works I think I saw at the BBZ show, this year, where there was a black guy talking about "Key & Peele." And as mixed-race people, whether they're "authentically black enough." And the conversation happening just now made me think of when I was at school, I would equally be made fun of for having an RP accent, which is what I was brought up being encouraged to have, but then at



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the same time, because I was one of five brown kids at the school, I would be dragged into English lessons.

They didn't check to see if English was my first language, they just assumed that I couldn't speak English, because I was brown. So I would be forced to go to English lessons every week, until I think one day they actually heard me talk, and were like, "Oh, you can go back now. To class."

So, I think in my film, there's a lot of confusion, both in the character of Harlequin Jack, the chronological structure of the film, and Pierrot's responses to everything, just being completely terrified and perplexed by everything. And that links a lot to the switch between stump speech and RP, almost Shakespearean English, spoken by Jack. Yeah, perhaps I didn't realise at the time, but it reflects how the English language and accents have made me feel inauthentic, or that I'm code-switching all my life and it's been quite a jarring experience to navigate blackness in terms of your voice.

Rabz Lansiquot - I think that's really true, and I've had times where, so I'm from Brixton, and I've had times where someone's asked me where I'm from, and I've been like, "Brixton," and they've been like, "No you're not. 'Cause you don't speak ... " and it's just like... But I think that there's something about code-switching, especially in the kind of spaces that we inhabit, that is both a really impressive skill, and a burden. And, yeah, I just wanted to spotlight that as, a really, it's a weird dichotomy. Between good and bad, I guess.

I wanted to talk as well, about, Adam, in the film work that you showed, and also in all of the works, there's something that you do with the music of that particular time, or R&B music, that makes me able to see it for its beauty. Which I think is something that is always taken away from it. It's always seen as this throwaway, kind of pop culture, crap. But I just wanted to bring that up, as there's something really beautiful about the way you work with that material. And actually, in all of your works, there's something about beauty, and aesthetics. They're all so different, but there's usage of a particular kind of aesthetics.

Adam Farah - There was this book that has been a big influence on me, which is called "Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste," by a writer called Carl Wilson. The whole premise of the book is that this writer goes on a journey to ask himself why he hates Celine Dion so much. And it's actually a really amazing book, because he really interrogates taste, and what surrounds that in terms of the classism, and the racism, and all these other structures that revolve around taste.

And I resonated with it because I've always loved pop music, I've always truly resonated with certain pop music in my heart, and I'll always remember, especially when I went to sixth form college, like, if I would lend people my iPod, and, I don't know, Britney Spears came up or something, they'd be like, "What the fuck?" But if you shuffle to the next song, there's something that you're gonna deem as, like, I don't know, more highbrow, or intellectual, or something. And I just thought that was so stupid, because at the end of the day, and back to this book about Celine Dion, even he couldn't deny the fact that when he went to speak to her fans, that she really touches people's emotions, and their heart. She really helps people, just like Mariah Carey has really helped me through really hard times, and the Sugababes, so how can I just deny that?



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Rabz Lansiquot - Definitely, there's something, yeah. I'm always really excited by seeing your work because I'm reminded of those things that I used to love, and that I've told myself to not love anymore.

And I feel like Kumbi, your presentation kind of did that as well, about sci-fi. That thing of not looking for the black figure in something, for me became a really freeing thing. Because at first I was like, "Ooh, I'm only looking for black people in things!" And then I realised that I wasn't seeing what I wanted to see, and I was bored of that, and blah, blah, and then you end up going back to things and realising that you can see what you wanna see. And there's quite a lot of theories about the resistant spectator. So I wondered if you have any thoughts around that.

Kumbirai Makumbe - Funnily enough, I was actually reading up on "The Oppositional Gaze" by bell hooks, and I was actually going to include it within my presentation, but I thought it would be too packed and get kind of abstract, so I thought I'd leave it out. But I was gonna say, I look at sci-fis as with an oppositional gaze.

And you were saying that's kind of freeing, not looking for the black in things, but the thing about sci-fi is that even though I try to enjoy it not looking for the black, it's still there.

And bell hooks discusses this idea of just being tired, but still having to look whilst knowing that you're tired, because if you don't then you won't really enjoy things from our perspective. And I think it is kind of freeing, and also it kind of opens up a space to create something that doesn't make you tired.

Rabz Lansiquot - Definitely, definitely. And then, my last question before we wrap up, I was wondering about what it was like for you, Tanoa, to move from working more abstractly, to creating a narrative, and particularly creating a narrative in the kind of silent-film way. I feel like that's something that people aren't really exploring right now, and it's quite interesting to see a work that's using that aesthetic, and using Super 8, and so I wondered if you could speak to that.

Tanoa Sasraku-Ansah - Yeah, when I was researching into silent filmmaking and the avant-garde, I mean, I already knew about *Birth of a Nation*, but I rediscovered it, and it's kind of touted as the most impressive piece of avant-garde filmmaking. For people that don't know, it's a pro-KKK, anti-black, three-hour epic that was one of the first avant-garde films to use special effects. It had a cast of about 300 people, and I was just thinking, "Wow, if that's the example to black people that are interested in film, of the origin of avant-garde film, where do you go from there?"

But, yeah, I've just been really, really drawn to the question of why I hadn't really seen any contemporary black fairy tale characters. And it seems like black people and black lives, and definitely, I related to what you said about finding blackness in sci-fi, our lives and histories are so fantastical that it seems strange to me that I haven't really seen many black fairy tales before. And it's nice to be able to privilege form over content, in the fact that I just love shooting on analogue. On set, the experience of hearing the Super 8 camera rolling, and everyone quiet and there being no playback, is just quite magical, and kind of fantastical in itself. So, I think those are two things that come to mind.



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Rabz Lansiquot - Okay, so that's the end, everyone! Thank you. Thanks to all of you for your great presentations, and to everyone for coming. I hope that it's been enjoyable. Thank you very much!