

NOTES ON A VISION FOR CARIBBEAN PROGRAMMING

Wesley Gibbings, General Secretary, Association of Caribbean Media Workers

San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 11, 2006

It is extremely difficult to discuss a vision for regional media programming without addressing fundamental issues related to a broader vision for the Caribbean. The difficulties we have had in bringing indigenous media outputs to the broadcasting mainstream owes as much to questions of production values as to an underdeveloped sense of self.

It is not that we have been completely oblivious to the requirement of a new Caribbean aesthetic in the development of our own media, but that we have somehow always embraced issues of marketability in terms solely of what is externally acceptable. This now happens even as the global market is turning in on itself to the extent that internal/external dichotomies are fast disappearing. It would however appear that cultural products remain among the last bastions of continued discrimination ... some say protection.

I have never, in this regard, supported official regulation as a device to guarantee airplay for domestic programmes and music. It contravenes basic principles of free expression and fair business practice and vainly attempts to legislate taste. Hopefully, greater numbers of Caribbean media people will strongly repudiate attempts to impose quota systems in their respective radio and television systems.

Current parochial formulations also willfully dismiss notions of a Caribbean paradigm. The current formulation in Trinidad and Tobago, for example, would place the music of Bob Marley – the greatest West Indian that ever lived - in the category of foreign content. No one has also thought about where we would place externally-located musicians such as Sean Paul and Heather Headley or filmmakers Horace Ove, Menelik Shabazz and Isaac Julien.

This belief that we can be in the world and not of it betrays a deficient sense of self-worth and our people would do well to snap out it sooner rather than later. West Indians understood and defined the global system long before almost everyone else. Our past was founded on the principle of a global marketplace. We participated both as subjects and as objects of the process.

There are few lessons of globalisation we can be taught but yet so little we seem to understand.

Our approach to tourism as a viable source of income and a generator of economic activity suffers from the same malaise. There is no way we can reasonably address questions of service in the sector without understanding the psychology of entrenched

servitude. If you also want to talk about branding and selling you have indeed come to the right place! The double entendre is absolutely intended.

This is why, for example, the dissonance between indigenous food production and tourism in most of our countries. There is no sense that the activities of the past can so intrinsically contribute to imperatives of the present and future. Instead, we continue to display a far more remarkable ability to feast our visitors than to feed ourselves. The tourists bring the foreign exchange in and our food import bills take it out again. In the language of the Trinidadian school child, we are spinning top in mud.

The vision must first turn inward to see what we can see of ourselves. This is not to suggest that we repudiate the vast contributions of those who have sped along the highway of development, but that we also look now at the footprints we leave in the wake of the steps we take on our own narrow, dusty path with far more confidence than we have in the past.

Our mass media and our own faltering, uncertain and sometimes maddening steps also provide cause for concern for some of the same reasons. Cable television, satellite broadcasts and the Internet have helped defy attempts by our societies to impose regimes to control and regulate what we see, read and listen to. The new technologies have, gladly, made nonsense of attempts at regulated cultural protectionism, censorship and other forms of official control.

So concerned have we been with imposing new and higher levels of regulation and control that we as societies have abandoned the injunction to seek the creation of better societies – people equipped with the skills to distinguish between trash and treasure. This, to me, is our task. Not to write more laws that stifle free expression. But to reach the hearts and minds of people under siege from violence, inequity and poverty.

My vision for Caribbean programming thus embraces all that there is in the world, because we are in the world and the world is in us. Here in this oasis of movement and sound and colour and great love, it is a vision of a better place. A place that is free. A place the songwriter calls the land of hope and glory.

There is much for our cameras, sound recorders and pens to capture and much more for us to set free. It is time for us to move forward with far more confidence than we have in the past.

Pablo Neruda, said these word when he accepted his Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971:

“Each and every one of my verses has chosen to take its place as a tangible object, each and every one of my poems has claimed to be a useful working instrument, each and every one of my songs has endeavoured to serve as a sign in space for a meeting between paths which cross one another, or as a piece of stone or wood on which someone, some others, those who follow after, will be able to carve the new signs.”

Writers, producers, broadcasters, these are your marching orders for this century as a Caribbean people, engaged in building a future, committed, confident and free.