

Transcription for Episode 5: Interview with Dennis Trainor Jr.

Run time: 12:26

- KS: Karriemann Soto (host, producer)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (host, co-executive producer)
VT: Vlad Teichberg (clip from *American Autumn*)
DTJ: Dennis Trainor Jr. (guest, filmmaker of *American Autumn*)
MB: Medea Benjamin (clip from *American Autumn*)

Cue music. All music audio for this podcast comes from American Autumn: an Occudoc.

KS: Welcome to “This Rhetorical Life,” a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives. In this episode, we’re taking a look at the rhetoric of Occupy Wall Street and talking with Dennis Trainor Jr., the filmmaker of a new documentary called *American Autumn* about the movement. We’re your hosts, Karriemann Soto...

BK: ... and Ben Kuebrich.

There are many rhetorical issues to explore through the Occupy Wall Street movement: the framing of the 99% vs. the 1%; materialist physical rhetorics of occupying space; and so on. We’ll get to those. But it’s also important to note that the most commonly stated victory of the Occupy movement is a rhetorical one. That is, we often hear about the movement changing the national conversation. Todd Gitlin, sociologist at Columbia, for instance, writes in his new book *Occupy Nation* that “The sort of sea changes in public conversation that took three years to develop in the long-gone sixties—about brutal war, unsatisfying affluence, debased politics, and the suppressed democratic promise—took three weeks in 2011.”

KS: Added space then, a social movement like Occupy Wall Street, is about the story it can tell. Let’s start with a clip from the film where Vlad Teichberg of the Occupy Wall Street Media Group talks about the exigency of the movement and the importance of story and framing. He says that while some are trying to keep the issues confined...

VT: (clip from the film) ...confined to an economic crisis, it’s also a crisis of morals and it’s a crisis of values. A big part of it is storytelling. Our duty to tell the story and propagate it to the greater world in various ways pretty much determines whether [the stories survive or get buried under the onslaught of propaganda.

BK: Before a local screening of his new film, *American Autumn*, I sat down with Dennis Trainor Jr. We're talking to him as a filmmaker but also as a very early participant in the movement. Even though, as Trainor Jr. mentions...

DTJ: ...I should say what, what everyone in the Occupy movement will say is I'm certainly not the leader of spokesperson for *any* occupy anything.

BK: He's not the leader, but he was there at the very beginning of the Occupy movement, which started in...

DTJ: ...March, April or March of 2011. I started working with a group called the October 2011 Coalition. The October 2011 Coalition was a group that was inspired by Wisconsin Wave and inspired by Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring—was calling for and organizing around an indefinite occupation of public space in Washington D.C. that was going to start on October 6, 2011. We chose that date because many in this October 2011 Coalition were long-standing members of one faction of the peace movement and the anti-war movement. And October 6th happened to be the eve of what would be the beginning of our second decade—the 11th year of our occupation of Afghanistan.

It was also the eve of a congressional session that promised debates around austerity, so we were trying to bring all these ideas under a big tent. And we were doing it not like what started to happen in New York later where anarchists were organizing horizontally autonomous groups to get things done. That was kind of a buzzword, but really still we were operating in an older model, a kind of top-down organizational model where leaders who have specific skill sets and specific expertise were taking on leadership roles within the areas of their expertise or skill sets.

One of the things that I did was video, so I started helping. Instead of being a policy wonk, I started helping them create promotional videos for this. And there started to become a little bit of momentum surrounding this October 2011 event. This is before Adbusters put out the call for Occupy Wall Street. So, I'm married and I have two kids, and I just thought the revolution was going to start on October 6th in Freedom Plaza, so I said to my wife, I said, "I'm going to go live in a tent in Washington D.C. for a month, and I'm going to make a documentary."

BK: But, as Trainor explained, then something big happened.

DTJ: Obviously during the organization of all that, Occupy Wall Street sprang up, and the movie that I was going to make, which was going to be called *Taking Freedom Plaza*,

became just one chapter in a much, much, much bigger story—over 900 encampments all over the country.

KS: To get at the story that Occupy tells—the argument it makes—we have to understand their framing of the problem.

BK: And as George Lakoff argued in an article about the rhetoric of the movement, it is a consciously moral framing.

DTJ: The old cliché is human needs before corporate greed, but the idea is when is enough *enough*? Constant growth is not sustainable. This quarterly kind of shareholder capitalism where if you are running a company you have to answer to shareholders every quarter and constantly grow is *literally* a homicidal force, right? So that concept *literally* stops us from getting Medicare for all, for example, which literally kills almost 18,000 people a year. That's six 9/11s. That's the Twin Towers coming down six times, every f-ing year.

Now, if the government knew that we were going to get attacked six times the scale of 9/11 next year, I think we would pass several Patriot Acts, we would lock a lot of people up, we would go to town to do it, but we *know* that next year in 2013 about 18,000 people are going to die because they don't have access to healthcare. That's insane.

BK: And Trainor explains this problem stemming in part from the ideology of meritocracy, the American Dream story we've all been told.

DTJ: I think that the American Dream has been, for better or for worse, described as this *myth* of this kind of rags to riches. Everyone in the middle class, which both the Democrats and Republicans seem to love and court, seem to think that they're temporarily embarrassed millionaires. That's why, not Socialism or Communism per se exactly lifted, but elements of those kind of philosophies aren't embedded in our society because everyone feels like, *If I just work a little harder then I could be a millionaire.*

BK: And that, of course, gets us to a critique of capitalism.

DT: And so that's the big elephant in the room. Is the capitalist structure that we organize ourselves under as a society... If we could press the reset button, would we organize ourselves that way?

KS: This critique isn't necessarily new. What Occupy brought is a new way of telling the story and organizing around these issues—a new public rhetoric of protest.

DTJ: A new way, a new tactic. One of my favorite quotes in the movie is Medea Benjamin, a friend of mine from Code Pink, who said...

MB: ...Thanks to Occupy Wall Street, there's a lot of new ways of organizing which is not just calling people to participate in something you came up with but giving people the opportunity to create themselves and to be part of the original brainstorming about what to do so that they feel empowered in this movement. It's also, I think, finally put the kibosh on, *Let's organize a rally on a Saturday in Washington DC when everything is closed and people come from around the country and spend a lot of money to walk around in a circle and then go home.*

DTJ: Occupy is about living our demands. So while the younger crowd that sprung up in Zuccotti Park in Occupy Wall Street was trying to say, *We're just going to live a model of the kind of world that we want to create.*

BK: So the difference that Trainor Jr. and Medea Benjamin emphasize is that the process of decision-making is different and this matters. It's what David Graeber and others call prefigurative politics—what Trainor Jr. is calling here living our demands. It is the notion that the means and the ends are exactly the same. Instead of demanding something from a power holder, they're just going to start living the world they would be demanding. This happened in the physical occupation of Zuccotti Park. For instance, where they model that everyone can be cared for in this society by caring for everyone in the park and by practicing a capacious participatory democracy there.

KS: But is this just a short-term tactic that has lost its power? Is this occupying the public space the only means to the argument?

DTJ: Certainly, the Occupy movement has never been about the right to occupy public space. It's a *tactic* to draw attention to engage in dialogue. So I think that that's what happened. I don't think that that particular tactic of occupying public space indefinitely is going to happen again. I think you'll see it flash mob style, like we're going to occupy the capital building for a weekend or a week to draw attention to specific matters, but the idea that we're going to just set up camp and stay there indefinitely, I don't think, is going to happen again.

Of course, Occupy has still been doing the things they've been doing since October 17th, but because the encampments, the indefinite physical occupations are no longer there, that there's not a visible component to what they do. So there might be some thinking around *what's that doing?* What happens is that small groups empowered by the concepts and theories of Occupy set off on autonomous actions.

Cue audio: It's enough. It's enough. It's enough. We're not going to take it anymore.

KS: Obviously the most visible slogan, the thing that has entered daily discussion, is the notion of the 99% and the 1%. So on the idea of this movement being a movement of the 99%, Trainor Jr. says...

DTJ: ...Clearly, clearly it's a wish and not an articulation of where the movement is. But clearly, when I've been arrested twice in the movement, it provides opportunities for you to talk with people who've arrested you—there's a lot of paperwork to get done. So the police officers in Washington D.C. were working without a contract and working without a pension, so we could talk about them and talk about these things. In Tahrir Square, you could have had all those people out in the streets, but until the military stepped back and let the people take over the TV stations and until the forces that are protecting the empire—protecting the 1%, protecting the ruling class—step back, we can't get anywhere. So I think it is actually pretty smart and pretty fortuitous to include everybody in this idea that we are the 99%.

Something that is happening that's really dynamic happening right now in New York with Occupy Sandy in the wake of Superstorm Sandy and the kind of slowness that Red Cross and FEMA are in getting to some of these poorer neighborhoods. And there's a very blue-collar, very conservative neighborhood out in Rockaway that would *not* be—not consider themselves—part of the Occupy movement, but they are very grateful that the Occupy Wall Street movement has organized around mutual aid. Mutual aid is love, and they're taking care of their neighbors. They're filling a huge void. So I think it is a smart branding tool, to use a verb of Madison Avenue.

Cue music.

To me I think this is, I still believe, this is the most exciting thing to come along in my lifetime—I'm 43 years old. When I look—when I'm editing footage or when I'm with friends in different cities through the Occupy movement—and I look at their faces and I see them as part of something that history is going to remember as a really positive force in the world. We live in a generation and in a time where people expect instant gratification and people expect things to happen instantly, but if you look at any civil rights struggle or any human rights struggle—any struggle for social justice—things just don't happen that quickly, right? There's just too much—there's too much *force* and interest in keeping things the way they are by the people, the small 1% or the 1% of the 1% who benefit from keeping things the way they are.

Cue music.

BK: Great, thank you so much, Dennis.

DTJ: All right, thank you.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Allison Hitt and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.