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K G Tomaselli. *Contemporary Cultural Studies and the Unit at the University of Natal. Seminar in Contemporary Cultural Studies 1 (5), August 1985.*  
Reviewed by Les Switzer

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As the title suggests, this monograph seeks to locate the University of Natal's new Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit (CCSU) within the ongoing debate on cultural studies and its significance in explaining the dynamics of dominance, dependency and resistance within a given social formation. As director of the CCSU, Tomaselli sees the Unit as a kind of South African version of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham which, in turn, was at least partly inspired by the work of scholars associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany and North America between the 1930s and the 1960s.

At present, the CCSU offers post-graduate courses leading to Honours, MA and Ph.D.-level degrees. Four faculties and 18 departments at Natal University (Durban) participated in the 1985 inaugural programme. All students must take two core courses (Theories of Media and Theories of Culture) in addition to courses in their areas of specialization (such as film, press, broadcasting, literature and the performing arts). Each of these options offers a special seminar for the Unit as a whole at the end of the course. The Unit publishes *Critical Arts*, *SAFTTA Journal* and seminar papers such as this one which are contributed by staff and students engaged in research in cultural studies.

In this monograph, Tomaselli discusses the teething troubles experienced by the Birmingham School as it sought to define its mission

amidst the ferment in Marxist-oriented studies attempting to redefine the concepts and analyse the relationships between culture, ideology and class formation in advanced capitalist societies. Tomaselli focuses on culture as the key concept in this debate. He cites in particular the contributions of Birmingham luminaries Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson in the process of reformulating culture as "a signifying system through which a particular social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored".

As used by CCSU, culture "is the process which informs the way meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed by social actors themselves." Every social formation possesses a varying number of cultures which "are distinguished in terms of differing responses to the same social, material and environmental conditions." Cultures, however, are not "static" nor "necessarily completely coherent." They are "subject to change, fragmentation, reformulation... adaptive, offering ways of coping and making sense, and strategic, capable of being mobilised for political, economic and social ends."

Tomaselli explains what is meant by a 'signifying system' by examining two case studies — an Afrikaner film group (RARO) operating during the late 1930s and early 1940s, and contemporary African resistance literature as seen through the critical eyes of writer Njabulo Ndebele. The monograph concludes with some hints at an appropriate methodology to be pursued in determining exactly how media construct reality.

Tomaselli sometimes poses questions that are not resolved<sup>1</sup> and he occasionally uses terms — such as paradigm<sup>2</sup> — that are inappropriate in this context. The graphics, moreover, have intruded in places where they hinder the text.<sup>3</sup> But these are minor



points. The monograph offers a new level of praxis in linking the organisation of knowledge in cultural studies to socially-relevant programmes that could be of practical benefit to the subject communities of South Africa.

The CCSU insists that its students move from theory to practice:

The Unit will not blithely assume that knowledge resides solely in universities... the assumption will be that there is a valuable store of knowledge and experience residing in the popular memory and cultural practices of the subject communities themselves.

In this reviewer's opinion, what Tomaselli and his colleagues are doing is unique among academic communication/media studies programmes in South Africa. One can only hope, and pray, that they will succeed.

- 1 Tomaselli refers to the term 'culturalism' but ignores 'structuralism', for example, when he quotes historian Richard Johnson on p.6: "neither culturalism nor structuralism will do."
- 2 Cf. Thomas Kuhn. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 (2nd ed.), esp. chap. 5.
- 3 At times, the graphics threaten to overwhelm the text (see pp. 3-4, 9-10). On p.7, for example, Tomaselli says "see box on Race" which turns out to be a graphic on p.9. But the graphic refers to a paper which is not identified and which the reader initially assumed was part of the text. A preceding box (which referred to Louis Althusser on p.6) was indeed part of the text.



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Watson, J 1985: *What is Communication Studies*. Edward Arnold, London. 88pp. Index. List of Communication and Media Studies courses offered in England.

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This book explains the aims and scope of communication studies assuming no prior knowledge of the subject. It looks at the relationship between the study of communication and the practice of communication skills. Watson identifies and defines some of the most important terminology used in communication studies, the theories which underpin the subject and the issues which give it its focus and excitement. The book describes what is involved in undertaking a course in this broad subject and the qualities the student will need to develop. Finally, it provides guidance in what sort of jobs a course in communication studies is useful for.

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White, L and Couzens, T 1984: *Literature and Society in South Africa*. Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town. 220pp. Index.

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A collection of essays by some of the field's foremost writers and scholars based on papers given at a conference on 'Literature and Society in Southern Africa', held at the University of York, 1981. The essays form a wide-ranging survey of the relationship between black and white literature and society in the development of South Africa. Xhosa and Zulu-Ndebele praise-poetry, the 'colonial' novel in English and Afrikaans, and black theatre and writing of the last hundred years are explored afresh. United in the belief that literature and literary criticism can never be autonomous activities, the contributors argue that criticism of literature is inextricably linked to criticism of society.

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Pungente, JJ 1985: *Getting Started on Media Education*. Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, London. 87pp.

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Walder, D 1984: *Athol Fugard*. MacMillan, London. 142pp. Paper and Hardback. Index. Part of MacMillan Modern Dramatists Series.

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Chapters: Media Education — What Is It? In search of a definition: (i) What are media? (ii) Media in Education. A definition of media education. Media Education — Why Teach It? The case for media education: (i) In support of media education. (ii) Media education as a 'basic' subject. (iii) The media and their influence. (iv) Students and media education courses. Looking at the Objections. Media Education — Methods and Courses. Annotated Bibliography

In this first full-length study of Fugard, Walder shows the development of intimate personal revelations and social concern which has gained Fugard world-wide recognition. Drawing on interviews with the playwright, with his actors and others involved in South African theatre, Walder provides a general introduction to the context of Fugard's theatre, his career to date, and an analysis of his plays.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Luli Callinicos** is Research Officer for the History Workshop at the University of Witwatersrand. Between 1974 and 1975 she wrote the history page for *Abasebenzi*, the newspaper for the UACC in Natal. In 1977 up until its banning, she wrote a history series for People's College in the *World* newspaper. She has published two volumes in a series entitled *A People's History of South Africa* through Ravan Press.

**Nico Cloete** is Deputy Director of the careers and Counselling Unit at the University of Witwatersrand. He was formerly Professor of Psychology at the University of Transkei.

**Linda Cooper** is a research assistant for the International Labour Research and Information Group in the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town. She is also a member of the Labour History Group.

**Johan Muller** teaches sociology of education in the Education Department at University of the Witwatersrand. Muller, Cloete and others worked on a project relating to community perceptions of Universities with a view to facilitating their impact on policy directions in post-apartheid universities.

**Kate Pfordresher** is Assistant Art Director for the American Social History project, City University of New York. She is currently working on a television series on the emancipation of slaves after the American Civil War. She contributes to *Labour Against Apartheid*, a New York area newsletter.

**Tina Sidaris** has worked as a researcher for the SAIRR Oral History Project. She studied oral history with Paul Thompson at Essex University.

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