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Editorial: Some Notes on this Volume

Keyan G Tomaselli

This is the first Critical Arts issue devoted entirely to the study of the South African mass media. It is certainly one of the first major attempts to study these media from a radical point of view. As such, we hope that this issue will generate discussion and debate, with future issues building on the ideas explored here.

The first paper attempts to contextualise media studies in South Africa and tries to bring clarity to the complex notions of ideology, culture and hegemony. Pointing out that the liberal-humanist and radical approaches are essentially irreconcilable, a point emphasised by Brian Murphy and further examined in the interchange on the Students Film and Video Festival, the Tomaselli's contribution questions the value of bourgeois methodologies and theories. The paper ends with a discussion of the possible reasons for the government distrust of the English press. Certainly, this section of the South African press is seen as a prime cause of the country's bad overseas image. This is also the view taken by the Afrikaans press. Die Burger, for example, defending the government's actions at the Nyanga squatter camp where the shanties of thousands of people were torn down and burnt by police in mid-winter charged: "If there is one matter in which the Opposition and its Press have acquired a cunning proficiency over the years, it is in creating an image of a heartless inhumanity on the part of the government" (Translation). Condoning insensitive police action within the framework of "law and order", Die Burger claimed that it made no sense to abuse the government over a situation that was not of their own making. In contrast, the Rand Daily Mail reported the horrified response of a group of United States Congressmen on page one under the headline "Tears as US Team sees shelter misery" (12.8.81). Finally, SABC-TV News Review on Sunday 30 September, in an unprecedented three-quarter hour interview with the Prime Minister, asked the question: "Would it not have been more opportune to have raided the Nyanga squatters after the US Congressmen had gone home rather than while they were in South Africa, thus generating bad publicity?" (paraphrase).

It is against this range of attitudes that Jeff McCarthy and Michelle Friedmann's contribution on the way black housing questions are reported by the media, should be seen. This paper highlights the lack of interest on the part of the country's foremost business journal, Financial Mail, on the issues of black housing, in comparison with the now suppressed Post, which articulated the aspirations of the emerging black petty bourgeoisie. Fred St Leger's study provides further empirical evidence of differences of opinion and concern, this time from an examination of editorials.

The hegemonic position of capitalist relations is the thesis used by Christo Doherty in his analysis of the insidiousness of ideology in determining the way news events are interpreted, reported and how readers and subjects are led into believing contexts which are ideologically manufactured by the media, rather than the actual context within which the event occurred. This Editorial will sketch the background with reference to some of the petitions and memoranda made public on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) campus.

Doherty has clearly examined the press' response which is representative of the hegemonic bloc. A counter-argument was espoused by a staff petition (150 signatures) to the University following a spate of memoranda and press releases

emanating from the highest echelons of the University administration, including one from a member of the University Council who curtly detailed possible repercussions on sources of income. The staff petition points out that senior office holders of the University "confused the issue by references to infringements of academic freedom and to 'unscholarly' behaviour, notions which are hardly of prime relevance to a meeting of this kind". The petition tersely sketched the actual context of the incident in the following terms:

... the meeting was not an academic lecture, but an election meeting; that Dr Koornhof addressed it as a member of a political party and in an attempt to solicit votes for that party; that election meetings in South Africa are generally rowdy affairs, in which damage to property and even physical violence are not uncommon; and that by these standards the behaviour of the students at Dr Koornhof's meeting was relatively restrained.

This is especially apparent when one considers that Dr Koornhof represents a particularly harsh and oppressive regime, that he adopted at the meeting a provocative and pugnacious stance, and that many students are victims of the racist legislation and actions for which he shares responsibility. Furthermore, the meeting took place on the eve of the anniversary of Sharville, an event of deep significance to many of those present.

Dr Koornhof was invited onto campus by the Student Moderate Alliance and the Political Forum, and not by the democratically elected Students' Representative Council (SRC). It also needs to be pointed out that such behaviour is not unprecedented on the Wits campus where anyone to the right of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) has been invited to address the student audience. Dr Koornhof was not the first to be confronted with such behaviour, but, because of the presence for the first time of SABC-TV, which deliberately focussed on a relatively small group of rowdy students, the impression was gained that all 1 200 present behaved similarly. In this instance, this was not the case, although it had often been in the past. This event was thus defined by SABC-TV and packaged into its pre-existing political context that students fall outside legitimate politics. This interpretation was seized upon by all sections of the media, and the PFP. Thus classifying the incident as deviant action, SABC-TV not only repeated action clips the following night, but also attacked the students and University on Current Affairs, broadcast on radio. The English press responded in turn to a further threat now posed by the Nationalist press and SABC which were using this incident as a platform to attack the PFP, a competitor within the ruling alliance. Hence, as Doherty shows, the English press responded to the threat to hegemony posed by the students in the same way as the SABC and the Afrikaans press, but went to some lengths to dissociate the PFP from the students.

Of importance is that the English press had, a few days earlier, questioned the credibility of SABC-TV election coverage occasioned by the Prime Minister's address in Rustenburg. The Rand Daily Mail (March 18) report of the meeting stated that "Violence flared", "hecklers booed... shouting racist slogans" at Botha, while others sang the derogatory song "Bobbejaan Klim die Berg" (Baboon Climbs the Mountain). One hundred and thirty policemen physically ejected noisy Herstigte Nasionale Party supporters from the hall and prevented several others from entering. Commenting on the SABC's reporting of this meeting, The Star, which had simply described this event as "stormy" (although it was seen as a legitimate form of political expression), pointed out in its television "Point of View" column that the eight-and-a-half minute close-up of Botha gave no hint of heckling whatsoever. This newspaper went on to state, "a question mark hovers over the SABC's ability to portray the news honestly and accurately, especially after last night's speech ...". In view of this observation, it seems strange that only five days later, in a comment on the Koornhof incident, The Star (16.9.81) called for a "more rational debate", "more display of freedom of speech" and imposed a superfluous context of a "liberal campus" where "one expects rather

more than bullyboy tactics of the backveld". Claiming that there is a difference between "legitimate heckling and wrecking", The Star seemed to imply that the students were guilty of the latter, fearing "views (which) might actually carry some weight on campus". That the SABC had similarly distorted the event at Wits did not occur to The Star since, in this case, the newspaper took an equally distorted view in response to hegemonic pressure. The Argus, on the other hand, stated:

As for freedom of speech, the NP and the Government have been poor examples to students and others. People who lock up or ban political opponents without trial, who shut down newspapers and keep up a relentless propaganda assault upon a free Press cannot be taken seriously when they bleat about freedom ... For years Nationalist hooligans broke up the meetings of their political opponents. And ... students will remember being viciously assaulted by the Government's police ... Nobody in the NP had the decency then to condemn the police action and speak up for freedom (24.3.81).

Finally, this event was reported by the media and critics within the 'free flow of information' argument. The spuriousness of this belief is discussed by Brian Murphy in his paper which follows. The Wits Black Students Society, for example, dismisses this conception as a myth in relation to the Koornhof incident:

Free-thinking students have shown that while they do suffer oppression they will not tolerate its 'rational' basis being flaunted in their faces ... We had hoped that the University (with its tradition in mind) would have understood the motives of the students and not merely climbed on the bandwagon ranging from Gerrit Viljoen to Helen Suzman.

On a broader level, it is this type of misinformation, distortion and manipulation in terms of dominant interests that is the subject of Murphy's contribution. Unlike the conference reported on by John van Zyl which was concerned with distribution and access of pre-packaged commercial information, Murphy is concerned with the production of content and how this is determined by the very capitalist pressures which were the subject of the Coordinated Marketing Conference. That the latter's discussions not only took place outside of, but were totally unaware of the broader dependency and issues of class alliance discussed by Murphy is clear. Furthermore, as van Zyl's resume illustrates, these black marketing executives remain unaware of the class economic basis of apartheid whereby they themselves, albeit from a liberally critical point of view of SABC-TV, are inevitably co-opted by capital into reproducing the existing relations of production, and hence the present class structure. Far from capitalism providing a better quality of life, these technical intellectuals are merely aiding the accumulation of capital by identifying the means whereby the newly emerging black petty bourgeoisie and labour aristocracy can be co-opted into an alliance with capital and forcing a division between these and the black working class. Judging from the programmes broadcast on TV2/3 so far, there is no doubt that this station intends socializing the urban black into a consumer oriented lifestyle, while Radio Bantu will continue to anaesthetize the lower ranks of the black class structure, particularly those in the rural areas. Inevitably, much of the "Black Gold" will find its way into white pockets.

It is this question of content and capital interest which also sets apart the two reviews of the Film and Video Conference. Where Grove tries to separate out content from context, the Organizers argue that they are inseparable, a connection which is underlined and driven home by the reviewers of the books by Bozzoli, Masterman, Hunt and Godard. Kimberley Safford's overview of Peter Davis' films should also be seen in this context. Unlike their British counterparts, these films are not fooled by surface reality with religion obscuring materialism.

Notes on Contributors

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Brian Murphy is a freelance journalist based in Ottawa, Canada. Formerly associated with Carleton University School of Journalism, the Scottish International Institute and worked as Co-ordinating Editor for Print Materials and Broadcasting at the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre. Was also a consultant on the formation of community media in Cameroon. Presently working on a book entitled Unscrambling the New Communications Puzzle: satellite broadcasting, cable TV and teletext

John van Zyl is senior lecturer in film and television studies in the School of Dramatic Art, Univ. of the Witwatersrand

Kimberley Safford works for a broadcasting company in New York. She is an Associate Editor of Jump Cut and collaborator/researcher on a number of films, the most recent being one on Nicaraguan liberation made by Fred Taylor

Graham Hayman, previously producer of Portfolio on SABC-TV, is now lecturer in television in the Rhodes Dept of Journalism and Media Studies.

John Cundill is a UCT Drama graduate, ex-journalist and TV script-writer. His productions include The Villagers, Duet and Westgate

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