The UKZN Griot
Of Hoaxes and Parody

Sniggering 20-something female staff and students, huddled around a desk, caught my attention. They were like pre-pubescent teens who had jointly encountered their first exposure of pornography: bewilderment, fascination and disbelief characterised their responses.

But they were not looking at porn.

They had just found an intriguing MA thesis called “Not Another Soap Opera”. I kid you not. Their descriptions of it included ‘wackypedia’, ‘catalogue’, and ‘juvenile’, my kid sister makes drawings like these. Beyond the gold braided leather cover they tentatively paged through 250pp of bits and pieces, extracts, pictures, a magazine insert, dialogue, comics, and other stuff. “Is this thesis for real?” a hovering professor was asked.

This reaction got me thinking about academic hoaxes. Piltdown Man fooled the archaeological community for 50 years. It was finally exposed by two researchers who got their hands dirty. The ‘fossil’ comprised a human skull and an orangutan jawbone. The ‘fossil’ was identified. — some thought it may be a Luddite living in the academic past. So I consulted some peers.

One commented: ‘This thesis is fluffy—it skates over real intellectual work and so is dismissive or contemptuous of it … could it have passed as a production for a MA in creative writing — but no it’s not even good prose or contemptuous of it.’

But what if we expand the argument? Quantitative researchers scorn qualitative inquiry. Cultural Studies is terrified of numbers. Many scientists dismiss the Humanities, and the Humanities dismiss scientific positivism.

While Archaeology has learned from Piltdown, Cultural Studies has conveniently forgotten the lessons conveyed by Sokal.

The least educated, the students or contemptuous of it … could it be rewarded with credits, while the gigglers may find yet that the entire academic enterprise is discredited by the skeptics who belittle the BA as the Bugger All Degree.

One synonym invention gives rise to another and eventually all semblance of reality is lost in an endlessly mediated haze of intertextual illusion, simulacra and parody. And the reality becomes illusion and it is illusion that is now studied as reality. Every discipline has a story to tell in this regard.

Supervisors of this kind of stuff are like religious zealots. They apply offers critique of the compilation is designed to work at the level of the ordinary, that its lack of depth is the student’s achievement.

Indeed, it was the academy that accepted the proposal, approved its submission, and appointed examiners whose reports were assessed by the relevant committees which agreed to confer the degree. Collective responsibility must be taken by the institution at which this thesis was registered. Or, am I missing something here? Maybe I’m just a Luddite living in the academic past. So I consulted some peers.

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The editors of SABC 1 have passed as a production for a MA in creative writing — but no it’s not even good prose or contemptuous of it. Their descriptions “Not Another Soap Opera” are like religious zealots. They apply offers critique of the compilation is designed to work at the level of the ordinary, that its lack of depth is the student’s achievement.

Does the thesis have any academic value? It does represent a serious criticism of the academy’s attempts at quality control, and maybe this is its prime academic achievement. Is this the reality of the contemporary academic enterprise? If porn is nothing more than parody and illusion offering the vicarious promise of release, just what is it that we are doing in the academy?

Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. There is no truth in the rumour that Tomaselli is a clout Physicist.

1 Not the actual title. Take your pick from SABC.

Music students drum up a storm

“TALKING DRUMS: African drumming meets Western Drumming” was presented by students from the School of Music’s African Music and Dance Programme on March 7. The Lunch-hour Concert captured the musical magic created by the collaboration of African and Western musical instruments. The performance was conceived by final-year student, Mr Lebogang Sejamohelo.

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