

# 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.

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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 hoax's perpetrator was never identified. – some thought it may have been Conan Doyle, he of Sherlock Holmes fame.

In Cultural Studies, The Sokal Hoax of 1995 is infamous. Physicist Alan Sokal raided the Cultural Studies theoretical lexicon. He imported the passwords of postmodernism into quantum mechanics, and submitted the paper to an *au courant* journal. The published paper was then trashed by none other than the same Sokal in

another journal. His objective: to reveal the banality of certain forms of Cultural Studies that read like they have been written by a random word generator. The stringing together of meaningless jargon creates the appearance of logical argument despite empirical evidence to the contrary. The editors of *Social Text* were baffled and insisted that Sokal's arguments had merit even after he had exposed his own hoax.

"Not Another Soap Opera" continues the genre of hoax. This mish mash has nothing to do with the TV soap. The thesis deals with the author's invention of her own object of study, a sub-culture of style in which she includes herself. It's rather like the director of *Planet of the Apes* registering for an MA degree and then studying his own creation as empirical evidence of early hominids. One symbolic invention gives rise to another and eventually all semblance of reality is lost in an endlessly mediated haze of intertextual illusion, simulacra and parody. 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 propagate a mindless postmodernism – everything is a game to

them. Everything has to be subverted, even subversion itself. To answer the bewildered students, yes, the thesis is "for" real – it was approved, passed and now sits in a library. What is produced is a kind of relationless, meaningless, pseudo-intellectual porn, a genre of academic subversion, 250 pages of randomly generated words. Adequate referencing is not required. This supervisor will 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.

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. But the least educated, the students and admin staff who found the thesis, were able to tell the difference between hoaxes and soaps on the one hand and *bone fide* research on the other. One suggested burning.

But, unlike Chippy Shaik's plagiarism, there is nothing to be done. Con artistry that does not defraud is not a criminal offense.

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 conferal of 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. One commented: 'This thesis is fluff – 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 renditions of the genres the student seeks to emulate. It's narcissistic and indulgent. Postmodernism has been written about as potentially resistance or ludic and the former retains a concern with inequalities, the latter tends to a playful critique. This thesis attempts to be playful, but – sorry – it's banal and meets none of the criteria of demonstrating knowledge of a field, and no critique.' A more cautious student suggested that the compilation is designed to work at the level of the ordinary, that its lack of depth is the student's achievement.

Postmodernism when properly applied offers critique of what went before – the grand

narrative, single explanations, and absolutes. The ultimate irony is that a modernist bureaucracy conferred a degree on a post-modern expression that considers modernism, structuralism and accountability as enemy. What grabbed Cultural Studies' attention however was Sokal's deliberately misleading claim to have found a unified theory that supposedly legitimated postmodernism *via* Physics. Unified theories can only exist in modernist and positivistic thinking – the anathema for cultural studies.

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 closet Physicist.*

<sup>1</sup> Not the actual title. Take your pick from SABC.

## Sudoku

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|   |   |   |   | 3 |   | 2 |   |   |
| 6 | 1 | 7 |   | 9 |   |   |   | 3 |
|   |   |   | 2 | 4 |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   | 3 |   |   |   | 7 | 9 |
|   | 8 |   |   | 1 |   |   | 3 | 7 |
| 1 | 9 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
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## 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 Sejamoholo.

WORDS & PHOTO: LUNGA MEMELA



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