ENCOUNTERING MODERNITY

Twentieth Century South African Cinemas

Keyan G. Tomaselli

Foreword

by Ntongela Masilela

South Africa has been fortunate to have had two brilliant scholars of film in the twentieth century. One was Thelma Gutsche and the other is Keyan Tomaselli. Both imported in an original manner two distinctive forms of intellectual practices that were to prove critical to the modernizing process of the country: the former, Film Studies, and the latter, Cultural Studies. Both were modernizers in line with the historical project of the nation. Hans Rompel (1942a/b), a film critic and Afrikaner cultural organiser, is a problematic figure not only for his anti-modernist tendencies but also for his Nazi alignments. For these reasons he does not merit consideration in this Foreword and is not of the intellectual caliber of the other two figures. Nonetheless, Rompel will have to be considered elsewhere. Paradoxically, his anti-modernism was itself a modernizing project, as is indicated later in this book, *Encountering modernity: Twentieth century South African cinemas*.

I came across Gutsche and Tomaselli simultaneously while living in exile in West-Berlin in the mid-1980s. In fact it was Tomaselli who led me to Gutsche. It was while working for the German scholarly dance magazine, *Tanz Aktuell* ('Contemporary Dance'), sitting on its editorial board charged with the responsibility for theory of European dance history, while at the same time contributing essays to my compatriots Vusi Mchunu and Mbukeni Herbert Mnguni's cultural quarterly *Awa-Finnaba* ('Freedom for All'), that I came across a footnote that mentioned Tomaselli's book on *The South African film industry* (1979). It elaborated that only a few copies had been published in South Africa and that the book had originally been an Honours thesis. This was exciting as in my ignorance I had assumed that nothing had ever been published about film culture in South Africa.

Since the footnote indicated that the thesis had been submitted to the School of Dramatic Art at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, that is where I addressed my letter of admiration, without knowing who Tomaselli was and having never read anything written by him before. I wanted him to respond in order for me to understand the thinking of white South African intellectuals as the country was lurching into deeper political and social crisis. I had been living in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Poland from 1980 to 1983, in deliberate isolation from what was happening in the West, consequently in Africa and in the Third World. The reason for this largely self-imposed isolation was the same reason why I moved from Los Angeles through Nairobi to Lodz in Poland: since I was a Marxist by conviction, I wanted to see socialism in actual practice with the aim of seeing whether it would be a viable alternative to capitalism in a post-apartheid South Africa. My preference was to go to Cuba because of its large black population. When going to Cuba proved complicated, Poland with its great Slavic people proved a very instructive alternative at that particular historical moment.

The imposition of Martial Law on the Polish nation on 11 December 1981 by General Jaruzelski, 15 months after my arrival, triggered in me a deep intellectual and moral crisis. Periodically I took a two-hour train ride from Lodz to Warsaw to read magazines and journals at the American Embassy Library and British Council Library to find out as to what was happening in the West and Third World countries. It was on

one of these visits to the American Embassy Library that I read Nadine Gordimer's essay, 'Living in the Interregnum,' that appeared in the *New York Review of Books* of 20 January 1983. The impact of this essay transformed me in profound ways. It immediately uplifted me from my intellectual psychosis by reminding me that I was an African and there was a place called Africa where I was born. Without a doubt, this essay is one of the most important documents I have ever read.

It was in this vein of intellectual awakening and intellectual combativeness that I wrote to Keyan Tomaselli. In a real sense, it was Nadine Gordimer who led me to Tomaselli and Tomaselli himself who led me to Thelma Gutsche. As the crises in 1980s South Africa became sharper and the country was edging towards the abyss, Mchuni and Mnguni made a determination that *Awa-Finnaba* would launch an all-out intellectual war against those white South African intellectuals who were against the developing democratic process. I promised my friends/editors that I was with them all the way in this war regarding our cultural patrimony and intellectual history. The upshot of the magazine articles we wrote is that we received death threats from people whom we thought were closely associated with the South African Embassy in Bonn. We had sent the magazine to many political and cultural organisations in South Africa. We were enthusiastic when we received a letter of commendation from Mbulelo Mzamane, then at the University of Vermont, who emotionally praised our intellectual efforts. We wondered as to how he had received a copy in United States, of all places! A few weeks after our initial launch of war on the cultural front we read in a White Gazette of the South African government that *Awa-Finnaba* was banned in South Africa, but knew that we were having some success in other areas.

Receiving a warm and positive letter from Tomaselli inside South Africa was gratifying and healing when one was in a state of intellectual and political anger and moral outrage. Reading Tomaselli's *The South African film industry* (1979), sent by him, convinced me that not only were there many progressive white intellectuals but also that a post-apartheid South Africa was possible without a civil war. The political and intellectual anger we expressed in *Awa-Finnaba* was mediated by this awareness. My immediate response to his book was governed by the fact that by then I had had a deep interest in film culture from about twenty years earlier when I was introduced to European modernist classics such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le mepris* ('Contempt', 1963) and Miklos Jansco's *The Round-Up* (1965) by European expatriates at the Kenya Film Society.

Tomaselli's book led me to Gutsche's *The history and social significance of motion pictures in South Africa, 1895-1940* (1972). I did not believe the book was available anywhere outside South Africa, perhaps only in one or two libraries in the United States and Britain. How extraordinary to discover that it was available not more than an hour away by metro at the West Berlin Film School Library! The copy the library had was number 262 of the thousand copies which were originally published. I carried the book with me wherever I went for about two and half years before reading it. I do not know what the reason for this ritual was.[1] I read the book quickly and superficially as I was about to leave West Berlin for Los Angeles in early 1989. I was not sure whether it would be available in Los Angeles, although the city had two great film schools at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) and across town at the University Southern California (USC). Both schools had copies of the book, and most surprising, the Los Angeles Public Library had its own copy. I speculated that Thelma Gutsche must have half jokingly sent several copies in Hollywood's direction, despite her low estimation of the American cinema.

On my second reading of the book, I exercised a 'symptomatic reading' as the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1971a) had advised, or a 'contrapuntal reading' as the great Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said (1993) had suggested, in preparation for an African Studies Association panel on South African cinema. The resulting paper, 'Thelma Gutsche: A great South African film scholar', was presented in San Francisco in 1995 and was published by Tomaselli in his journal *Critical Arts* in 2000. I suggested in it that what Gutsche was struggling with was the nature of modernity in the process of formation in South Africa, rather than South African film per se. Reading her between the lines, I thought she was prescient in observing that film was one of the cultural facilitators of South Africa's imaginary entrance into modernity. This was important for my own intellectual and historical understanding of our country because I believe, with hindsight, that she is the one who made me aware that the central issue across the twentieth century was the construction of modernity in South Africa, as is further discussed by Tomaselli in this book, *Encountering modernity*. I had already encountered the concept of modernity in what is to me C.L.R. James' most fascinating book, *Modern politics* (1960), which many of James' scholars dismiss as a book of no importance or consequence. Gutsche helped me associate modernity with my own personal history as an African. Her postulation was confirmed when I subsequently came across Pixley ka Isaka Seme's manifesto 'The Regeneration of Africa' (1906) in which he proclaimed that the central project in the unfolding century was the making of modernity across the continent. Reading the voluminous writings of H.I.E. Dhlomo (1985) and R.V. Selope Thema (1932-1952) convinced me that there must have been an intellectual process or movement, which I characterised as the 'New African Movement', that undertook this monumental project of constructing modernity in South Africa. Like her compatriots, Gutsche willed herself into the Movement through her intellectual brilliance and political commitment.

Tomaselli also sent me copies of his journal *Critical Arts: A Journal of Media Studies* that he and John van Zyl had founded while still at the University of Witwatersrand in the early months of 1980. He later moved with the journal to Rhodes University in Grahamstown, and then to the University of Natal as (now the University of KwaZulu/Natal) sole editor in Durban. With hindsight, the founding of *Critical Arts* was the beginning of an intellectual constellation that would make possible within a few years the launching of Cultural Studies in South Africa. By the time the second issue of the journal, published in June 1980, among its contributors were some of the major South African intellectuals: Nadine Gordimer (1989), Andre P. Brink (1983) and J.M. Coetzee (1992). That the journal was able to so quickly crystallize itself into a *force field* of intellectual culture indicated its profound democratizing impulse. This is not surprising if the journal is seen in the context of the formation of a democratic intellectual culture in South Africa.

I sent Tomaselli a letter that reached him at a critical intellectual juncture, about a year or two after establishing the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit in 1985 at the University of Natal. The establishing of this Unit, the publication of *Critical Arts* over the past 25 years, and the many community projects he has set up, clearly give legitimacy to the idea of regarding Tomaselli as one of the *founders* of Cultural Studies in South Africa. While this is self-evident to international Cultural Studies scholars

[1] Gutsche consistently had this extraordinary reverential effect on readers of her book, no matter their political persuasion or ideological position (note added by Tomaselli).

from Richard Johnson (cf. e.g. 1987) to Paul Gilroy (1993), from Cary Nelson (1988) to Stuart Hall (1996), some South African scholars have pretended otherwise.

A democratic intellectual culture was formed by the New African Movement by establishing New African newspapers that articulated the necessity of constructing modernity. For all intents and purposes it began with the founding of the *Imvo Zabantsundu* ('African Opinion') newspaper in 1894 by John Tengo Jabavu, with the intent of establishing an intellectual forum that would not be under the control of missionaries. The group of Xhosa intellectuals that constituted its core included, among others, Elijah Makiwane, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, Walter Benson Rubusana, Isaac W. Wauchope, John Knox Bokwe and Gwayi Tyamzashe. When some of these intellectuals began espousing a conservative form of political modernity, a group of young Xhosa intellectuals broke away from them and launched their own newspaper in 1897, called *Izwi Labantu* ('The Voice of the Nation'). Among them were Allan Kirkland Soga, Nathaniel Cyril Umhalla and the great Xhosa poet S.E.K. Mqhayi. This historical conflict was not only generational, but also epistemological in that the younger intellectuals wanted to go beyond only politics to also concern themselves with culture. It was in the pages of this newspaper that Mqhayi began publishing his great poems.

With the spread of the economic and political forces of modernity from the Cape into the other corners of South Africa, other oppressed nations responded by constructing counter narratives expressing their particular historical imperatives as well as those of other oppressed people. In the same year of 1903, two important New African newspapers were launched in Durban. Mohandas Gandhi established *Indian Opinion* in order to make known the legitimate historical grievances of the Indians and to preserve Indian cultural traditions that he felt were under attack from the disintegrative forces of modernity. In the early years of its publication, the newspaper had four sections written in four different languages: Hindi, Gujerati, Urdu and English. John Langalibalele Dube published *Ilanga lase Natal* ('Natal Sun') with different sections appearing in two different languages: English and Zulu. In the 1940s two brothers, H.I.E. Dhlomo and R.R.R. Dhlomo, as editors and contributors, transformed the newspaper into a great forum for articulating New African modernity. The New African intellectuals who launched the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912 also founded their own newspaper *Abantu/Batho* ('The People') which not only sought to establish a unifying and progressive political culture of modernity but also began to articulate the incipient forms of African nationalism.

In the 1920s there appeared a newspaper called *Umteteli wa Bantu* ('The Mouthpiece of the Nation') in Johannesburg that can with all justification be designated as the national forum or national newspaper of the New African Movement. The leading New African intellectuals in the twentieth century regularly contributed to its columns consequently making it the great newspaper it was: R.V. Selope Thema, Solomon T. Plaatje, H.I.E. Dhlomo, Simon Majakathetha Phamotse, R.R.R. Dhlomo, Henry Selby Msimang, Marshall Maxeke, Allan Kirkland Soga, Richard Msimang, Mark S. Radebe and S. M. Bennett Ncwana. It was in the pages of this newspaper that the constructs and philosophies that defined the specificity of New African modernity were first articulated: the New African, New Africa, New South Africa, New African Intellectual, and African Nationalism. Although the newspaper aligned itself with a conservative political modernity, it nonetheless gave emergence to a spectacular intellectual culture. It struggled to understand the historical meaning of the emergence of the proletarian class. This intellectual mantle of New African culture was taken up by *The Bantu World* newspaper that was launched in the 1930s. The newspaper was edited by the venerable intellectual R.V. Selope Thema. He assembled around himself a group of young brilliant intellectuals: H.I.E. Dhlomo, Peter Abrahams, Peter Segale, R.R.R. Dhlomo, Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo, Walter M.B. Nhlapo, Henry Nxumalo and Todd Matshikiza. *The Bantu World* had to deal with new historical imperatives when the gravity of the New African Movement seemed to be moving from politics, religion and philosophy towards film, music and culture. Walter M.B. Nhlapo grappled with the historical meaning of the emergence of popular culture for the largely black middle class supporters of New African modernity. R.V. Selope Thema cultivated a reactionary political modernity in response to what he believed were the revolutionary forces of Marxism and Garveyism. The popular culture of American jazz and film and the American way of life was consolidated in the pages of *Drum* magazine that came into being in the 1950s. The popular culture facilitated the emergence of a brilliant school of photography. Many of the *Drum* writers emulated the popular style of American pulp fiction. It was the awakening of the political resistance in this decade intermixed with the popular culture that brought about the political crisis that exploded in the Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960. The political repression that followed upon this historic date suppressed political resistance and electrocuted the New African Movement, which thus came to an end at the high noon of the making of modernity in South Africa. In many ways *Critical Arts* was an expression of this noble and democratic intellectual legacy that had preceded it.

During this stage of the development of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit in Natal, Keyan Tomaselli in collaboration with Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Johan Muller published two major books: *The press in South Africa* (1987) and *Broadcasting in South Africa* (1989). The Unit's shift from Broadcasting and Journalism towards Cultural Studies and Film Studies was signaled by the publication of three other books: *Myth, race and power: South Africans imaged on film and culture* (1986), the seminal *The cinema of Apartheid: Race and class in South African film* (1988) and *Rethinking culture* (1989), an edited volume which had a significant political impact amongst grassroots activists. This shift was theorised by Tomaselli as necessitated by the *new* positioning of culture in the radically changing South African history of the 1980s. In the inaugural lecture he gave on 24 September 1986, *A contested terrain: Struggle through culture*, Tomaselli formulated a new understanding of the concept of culture he had arrived at as South Africa was lurching towards a revolutionary transformation of itself:

> Culture is the ensemble, or 'bundle', of meaningful practices through which self-defined groups within or across social classes express themselves in a unique way, or locate themselves within an identifiable web of significations. It is the process which informs the way meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed by the people themselves. Cultures are distinguished in terms of differing responses to the same social, economic and environmental conditions. Culture is not a static or even a necessarily coherent phenomenon: it is subject to change, fragmentation, reformulation. It is both adaptive, offering ways of coping and making sense, and strategic, capable of being mobilized for political, economic and social ends.

In presenting this definition of culture, Tomaselli indicates that he was moving in the direction of Frantz Fanon (1965; 1972), Paulo Freire (1972) and Amilcar Cabral (1979). The concept of culture theorised here by Tomaselli was very much influenced

by the one articulated by Cabral in his celebrated essay *National liberation and culture*, that was first presented as the inaugural lecture of the Eduardo Mondlane Lecture Series at the University of Syracuse in 1970.

This concept of culture was not only operative in Tomaselli's shift from Journalism through Cultural Studies to Film Studies, but also in his simultaneous inhabiting of the three fields in their distinctive particularities. In the first two chapters of this book, *Encountering modernity*, Tomaselli provides an eloquent recapitulation of his engagement with South African film culture over the past twenty-five years. It remains to indicate that he effected a profound transformation of it from the Euro-centrism of Thelma Gutsche and Hans Rompel, to his own constantly evolving Third World perspective. This is not to criticise Gutsche and Rompel, since in many ways it could not have been otherwise. Another of Tomaselli's achievements is his attempt to align South African Cinema in the same historical space as the African Cinema. Tomaselli's theoretical formulations on South African cinema situate themselves in the same historical moments as those of Teshome Gabriel (1989a/b), H. Frank Ukadike (1994), Manthia Diawara (1989; 1992), and others. Tomaselli's insistence on grounding his study of, and theoretical approaches to, South African Cinema in the context of African cinemas is evident within the pages of *Encountering modernity*, particularly from Chapters 3 to 6. This book is an informative assessment of how the visual technology of modernity, film, in both its form and industry is shaped by the productive forces operative during South Africa's turbulent history, and in turn how these products 'make sense' of the move into modernity for both the film practitioners and larger South African society.

Within the South African historical context itself, Tomaselli has through video documentation and theoretical formulations sought to bring the San and Khoi people of South Africa and southern Botswana to the centre of the making of South African modernity (cf. e.g. Tomaselli 1993). The San and Khoi people represent a common cultural heritage which predates all later immigrants to South Africa. The fundamental layer of our unified and multicomplex culture is within the rich culture of these people whom Tomaselli has set out to document, film and theorise as agents in modernity (cf. e.g. Tomaselli and McLennan-Dodd 2003). Without the success of bringing them into the centre of the modernistic project in the New South Africa, the modernistic experience in my country will remain in a state of perpetual incompleteness (Masilela 1987: 58-60). *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* is a singular product of these shifts and in-completions, which it seeks to make historically understandable in the process of transcending them.

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