

# **Consuming passions? Over-interpreting television-viewing in Bali**

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Communication is too slow; it is an effect of slowness, working through contact and speech. Looking is much faster; it is the medium of the media, the most rapid one. Everything must come into play instantaneously. In the to-and-fro of communication, the instantaneity of looking, light and seduction is already lost... Simulation is the ecstasy of the real: just look at television, where real events follow each other in a perfectly ecstatic relation, that is, in dizzying, stereotyped, unreal and recurrent ways that allow their senseless uninterrupted concatenation. In ecstasy: this is the object in advertising, as is the consumer in contemplation of the advertisement - the spinning of use-value and exchange-value into annihilation in the pure and empty form of the brand-name (Baudrillard 1990a: 8-10).

Among Britain's last exports, many years ago, were the Quatermass films about various alien forms of life which, finding life unsustainable at home, roved the universe in search of lusher pastures, inevitably Earth. After wreaking gruesome havoc in the end, of course, they fail. The anthropological turn to cultural and media studies reminds me of the benighted aliens. Like the court of Majapahit's shift from Java to Bali, is it conquest or flight?

Although not yet officially buried, that briefly glowing, and always somewhat unlikely planet, anthropology is effectively dead.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists have always been great predators. Now the enterprise has been publicly blessed by the veneered patriarch of American anthropologists, Clifford Geertz (1991), there seems to be a surreptitious, if not yet wholesale, emigration under flags of convenience. Cultural and media studies are among the latest. The drawback is that anthropologists were superbly adapted to their previous habitat, and habitus. It is no coincidence that the paradigm subject of anthropology is kinship, an imaginary social institution (Needham 1971) found mainly in remote places (Ardener 1987) outside history and practice (Fabian 1983) among people who were passive subjects of the anthropologists' writing (Hobart 1997). Although anthropologists like to think of themselves as superior forms of life, as an anthropologist I have my grave doubts over how well equipped we are to cope with new worlds or even, in retrospect, the old ones.

For incompletely understood reasons, anthropologists of impeccable credentials who try to address what they imagine to be the real world fall prey to a peculiar affliction, a loss of intellectual sphincter control, known as Appaduraitis after a celebrated sufferer (e.g. Appadurai 1990, 1995). The symptoms include acute tautology, chronic catachresis and postmodern glossolalia. One observer has described the condition as follows.

The important signs are the withdrawal from the real world, replacing it with '*a systematic act of the manipulation of signs*' 'which has no longer anything to do (beyond a certain point) with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle'. It is '*a systematic and total idealist practice*' which 'extends to all manifestations of history, communication and culture...founded on a *lack* that is irrepressible'.<sup>2</sup>

Befitting a tautological condition, the patient's behaviour mirrors exactly what they project onto the object of study. The problem is that the quotations above are from

<sup>1</sup> Intellectual death does not entail the end of a discipline. As the word suggests, on the contrary public acceptability requires mindless regimentation and empty manoeuvres, the purpose of which was long since redundant. Take economics which rests upon pre-Darwinian assumptions *inter alia* (Smith 1989: 128-131).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all italics and parentheses are in the original.

Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary consumption (1988: 22-25). The hunter, *pace* Bloch (1992), becomes the prey.

### Modernity in Bali

We are now, so we are endlessly told, in a postmodern condition and also part of a global system. Quite who the 'we' are, where Bali fits in, what being postmodern is (apart from rather desperate irony, pastiche and general aimlessness) and how postmodernity is compatible with globalization is far from clear. The confusion is compounded by there being a putative state of society / culture / economy / polity and an intellectual / aesthetic / epistemological movement which somehow corresponds to / underwrites / justifies / explains (delete as applicable) that state (Fardon 1992). Modernity and modernism are supposed to be making way for postmodernity and postmodernism. However the symptoms of postmodernity, from fragmentation of social arrangements to the dissolution of legitimizing narratives and the precession of simulacra are equally explicable as the involution or exaggeration of modernity into a condition of hypermodernity.<sup>3</sup>

Some people have, so we are also told, not yet arrived at a state of modernity. Perhaps a privileged, or singularly unfortunate, few - Bali being a prime candidate - will be catapulted straight from 'traditional' or 'medieval' society to postmodern. The fact that people still speak of modernization (does this have any relation to 'modernity' any more?) and emerging globalization at all suggests that 'grand narratives' are not quite as dead as they are supposed to be (Lyotard 1984). As 'modernization theory' was a stillborn monster (for a review, see Hobart 1993: 5-7), the tenacity with which academics, developers and politicians still try to insufflate the corpse becomes a far more interesting problem than further pathology on the murling. The transition from medieval to modern to postmodern requires on most accounts a crude categorization and essentialism which obscures the key question of who determines the evolutionary scale. The subtler versions (including globalization, Hobart 1995b) are teleological. As Inden has noted, far from the transition being about the shift from religion, superstition, mindless collectivity to rationality, openness and individualism, the key presupposition is of religious conversion (you have to believe in progress, rationality) to attain utopia in the here-and-now (Inden 1997, n.d.). Development is the language of immanent (and imminent) utopia and television increasingly its great medium. Ien Ang summed up the problem beautifully.

Globalization was part of a short-lived rhetoric which coincided with a precise historical moment, marked by the equally short lived fantasy of 'the new world order' dreamed up by the then US President Bush around the years of 1989-1991... By the mid-1990s, however, this moment seems to be well and truly over. We now live in a *post*-globalized world... (1994: 325).

*Requiescat in obscuritate.*

Rather than waste space on elegies about modernity, modernization or postmodernity in Bali, instead I shall review critically existing approaches to the study of contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Ron Inden, to whom I owe the idea, is currently working through the notion of hypermodernity. Significantly the supposed 'high priest of postmodernism' Jean Baudrillard dismisses both the attribution and the idea of postmodernism altogether (e.g. 1993). A critical reading of Baudrillard suggests that his anticipation of the centrality of consumerism and the precession of simulacra arise from a logic of equivalence and the degeneration of representation respectively which are firmly part of the modern and not postmodern at all.

societies such as Bali. Briefly I suggest that the long-established academic 'disciplines' - notably my own, anthropology - are largely useless and, as presently practised, moribund.<sup>4</sup> More recent approaches, like cultural or media studies, have emerged as ways of studying contemporary societies. These too, I argue, have certain drawbacks, not least that are for the most part Eurocentric. My particular interest is practices associated with television in Bali. I therefore review some of the presuppositions in recent media studies and how television is supposed to work in particular. What is striking is quite how culturally specific much that is taken for granted in media studies is. I conclude by considering the implications of treating Balinese as actively involved in televisual practices, not least by taking seriously their own comments about their own practices. A strength of some critical writing on media studies is that it recognizes that such studies are interventionist (Hartley 1992a: 5-8). What remains rarer is the recognition that viewers are not the gerundive passive subject matter for the working of the analyst's superior mind: many Balinese I know are reflective critics, including of their own practices.

### **The argument such as it is**

As the world changes so, you might think, ought the ways in which we set about understanding it. Sadly, anthropology, for all its claims to be the comprehensive study of humans in society, is shown up as singularly inflexible and ill-equipped to deal with the radical changes which are taking place among our objects of study.<sup>5</sup> One reason is that its investigative method depended upon a conjunction of a naturalist epistemology (facts are given and there to be collected) and the peculiar conditions epitomized by colonial government under which the inquiring ethnographer had the right to poke his or her nose into other peoples' lives and write about it without let, hindrance or consideration of the consequences for those described.<sup>6</sup>

So, when those anthropologists who have not completely invested their careers and minds in a long-gone and largely imaginary past turn to address the present world of their interlocutors live, they run into trouble, because anthropology runs out on them. This is, I think, the reason for the quiet shift towards cultural studies among some of the less brain-dead. Unfortunately, while each of the approaches has something to offer, none is without serious drawbacks. Although they rarely do much of interest with it, anthropologists are able, in principle at least, to recognize that the existence of radically different epistemologies and ontologies, and the necessity of working across two potentially incommensurable discourses (our own and that of the people we work with). Needless to say, a convenient conflation usually takes place, leaving us to overwrite, and so authorize, our 'subjects'. Long periods of ethnography by participant-observation (however inadequate a formulation for what depends largely upon listening and asking questions) is, as most of us realize, central to the critical recognition of others' ways of thinking and acting.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthropology's particular affliction is that its object of study, culture, is a reactionary and nostalgic notion (Fabian 1991a; Hobart 2000). At least it is not pre-evolutionary like economics.

<sup>5</sup> As one example, the once-remote mountain village where I worked in Bali is now laid with fibre-optic cable and far more 'modern' in that respect than my house in Hampstead.

<sup>6</sup> Fabian 1991 states the problem clearly. Were someone to snoop into my life the way in which in my first fieldwork I did into Balinese villagers' lives, I would feel inclined to serve an injunction on the anthropologist to prevent her or him coming near my house, still less write about me without my having the right to check the published account for accuracy, defamation etc.

There is nothing which ensures anthropology owns the franchise on good ethnography: much that claims the name is trivial, superficial or downright dishonest.<sup>7</sup> And there is no reason specialists in language and culture, politics or geography may not improve on the Ur-Malinowskian Moment (UMM), as indeed they do. In fact, that branch of cultural studies which Clifford Geertz identified as the destined future of anthropology has effectively dispensed with anything but gestural ethnography. (Like the perfect dry martini, you wave a hermetically sealed anecdote or two over the gin of literary fabrication.) But then there is little to be said for this brand of cultural studies, except that it keeps a few language teachers employed and postmodernism may be a preferable bandwagon to others skulking in the wings. There is however another version of cultural studies which stems from the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and which informs some of the more interesting media studies (at times rather indirectly, e.g. Fiske 1989; Hartley 1992, who come from a different stable). At least it has a clearly argued and critical theoretical position, at times involving serious ethnography, and has led to some interesting studies.<sup>8</sup> More important, in Britain they changed the intellectual agenda in the social sciences. For all their considerable merits, for a critical anthropological approach all these schools involve presuppositions which are sufficiently culturally and historically specific as simply to end up reinscribing the rest of the world as burlesques of ourselves. The bourgeois universe has become cosmic: literally, with 'the elevation of the domestic universe to a spatial power, to a spatial metaphor, with the satellization of the two-room-kitchen-and-bath put into orbit (Baudrillard 1983: 128).

The practices of reproducing what, for shorthand, I shall call a bourgeois cosmology are far less determinate than marketing executives or academics can bear to recognize. (It threatens to put both out of business.) You can bombard 'Third World' audiences with Dallas, Miami Vice, CNN news and recycled advertisements, but you cannot know what they think or even what they will buy or, if they do, why (Schudson 1993). Nothing winds academics up as easily as indeterminacy; and they deny it by spawning theories like demented oysters in a sandstorm (and in that I include philosophers who play the trend with a defanged notion of 'contingency' such as Rorty 1989; cf. the more serious account by Laclau 1990). In contemporary capitalism 'either prior to production (polls, market studies) or subsequent to it (advertising, marketing, conditioning), the general idea "is to shift the locus of decision in the purchase of goods from the consumer where it is beyond control to the firm where it is subject to control"' (Baudrillard 1988b: 38; citing Galbraith 1967: 215). Consumption, knowledge and indeterminacy are intricately implicated in one another.

How has indeterminacy been addressed in the field which concerns me most here, media studies? The answer is, of course, too diverse to permit of easy answers. Briefly I

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere I expand on this dismissive-sounding statement (1996). Briefly, the imagined position of the ethnographer in much writing is impossible: it requires omnipresence and omniscience, features we shall see which typify the élite in Indonesian news broadcasts). Comments made by particular persons in specific situations for certain reasons are generalized into enunciations. Anyway precious few ethnographers have ever understood the vernacular well enough to underwrite most of their ethnographic claims. The song most ethnographic minstrels sing is a thing of shreds and patches.

<sup>8</sup> Despite some adopting a rather Spartist Marxism (I owe this delightful expression to Andrew Turton. Dave Spart was, of course, the lampoon of militant Marxists in *Private Eye* for many years.), when the practitioners blended this with post-structuralism the results have been stimulating and influential. Something of the ambivalence of cultural studies towards post-structuralism comes out at times in the writings of the Centre's founder, Stuart Hall (e.g. 1986: 44-48).

wish though to clarify with the aid of certain critical writers on television, some trends as I understand them. In doing so, I create of course a straw man.<sup>9</sup> There are two obvious points of closure: programme production and audiences.

There is an asymmetry and complementarity between explanations by recourse to production as against viewing. The former lean towards determinacy and its immanent forms (structures, codes, meanings), the latter towards the more transcendental, idealist opposition (creativity, ineffability, textuality). These stances are in fact mutually entailed. And both depend upon the media being about something, containing meaning (the 'conduit metaphor', Reddy 1979) in different ways, be it message, ideology or influence. The result is much media studies has created for itself a sealed world - hermeneutically and hermetically.<sup>10</sup> (So, in a partly different way of course has anthropology.) Production-focused explanations stress how programmes work through fixed codes, contents of notionally determinate significance, camera positions and editing to create narratives, which together define set genres, viewed by well-centred, indeed *wohltemperierten*, subjects. The contrary view is kaleidoscopic: there are as many ways of interpreters' imagining the pullulating creativity of each viewer as there are ways of construing consciousness and the subject, both generally (or generically) and specifically. (What audiences make of any production is not indeterminate, it is just not full knowable.) The relationship of production to audience is 'hypodermic' (Morley 1992: 45-46, 78-79): production values, ideology, meanings are injected directly into the consciousness of the masses. The relationship of audience to production is 'romantic' (Morley 1992: 173-75): each viewer may engage in an infinite play, atavistic, liberatory, emancipatory at will. Whichever the scenario, meanings are ultimately revealed, supplemented, made real, but not really changed, by the analyst's interpretations.

The analyst's practices are of course what partly determine the closure. Whether the producers are supposed consciously to plan the meanings or effects of programmes (as feared in conspiracy theories) or not (as celebrated in cock-up accounts), in either instance the analyst is conveniently positioned so as to provide authoritative interpretations of the producer's intentions (conscious or unconscious respectively) by retrospective inference, in which codes and contents are given homogeneous (at times universal) signifying status. In both versions, the analyst also assumes absolute authority over passive, knowable, largely invented, and ultimately irrelevant, audiences' understandings, despite it being very hard to establish what audiences make of television.<sup>11</sup> (Much the same holds for people listening to 'myths' or engaging in 'ritual'.) The fun really starts though when media studies specialists turn to audience understandings of television because it involves

<sup>9</sup> As should be obvious, I am grazing my way rather haphazardly through media studies, chomping on patches of grass which look interesting. The justification for my temerity in presuming to sketch out what I see as trends in television studies is that there is no quicker way to find out where you are wrong than inciting the experts to outrage. Also the intellectual background of critical media studies writers like Ang, Fiske, Hartley and Morley is very similar to my own. Where we differ is that I am trapped inevitably and perplexedly between two discourses, my academic and a Balinese one, which may offer interesting dialogic possibilities.

<sup>10</sup> One sure sign (sic) of the inadequacy of such analyses is their use of metaphor catachretically - military (vulnerability to advertisements) loyalty (to brands), horticultural (cultivate attitudes), dramaturgical (rehearse emotions/attitudes) etc. - to determine an apparent object and interpret it into existence.

<sup>11</sup> For all the exorcist mantras about audiences not being passive, as Ang has made clear both media executives and complicit academics stress the production of programmes (1991) and the responses of entirely imaginary, and so determinable, audiences (Hartley 1992b).

negotiating - or falling prey to - the Scylla of interpretation and the Charybdis of ethnography.

Now, interpretation and ethnography are topics anthropologists have made inimitably their own, even if the more reflective are deeply confused at the moment. As I have written on both issues at tedious length, I shall be very brief. Who creates the meanings? Apart from critics and media PR departments, it is those academics who impute being and depth (rather than possibility and indeterminacy) to texts and television programmes. In interpreting, they not only create an infinite - and so infinitely vacuous - commodity to exploit, but ensure the eternal supremacy of the interpreter over the interpreted. Morley, reviewing the shift from imposing meanings on imaginary audiences to crude attempts at ethnography, aka interviews, rightly notes the peculiarly complex nature of ethnographic inquiry. He does so by invoking the interpretive methodology of Clifford Geertz (1973a) and the critiques of ethnographic writing (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; without mention, sadly, of the counter case, Fardon 1990). Watching media studies specialists declare Granny's old knickers the latest fashion and armchair savants (Atkinson 1990; Clifford 1983, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson 1983; Hammersley 1992) lucubrate over their smell may give anthropologists a sense of *déjà vu*. What is far more frightening is the extent to which media studies is caught up in a historically and culturally specific, and largely Anglo-American, metaphysics of 'the knowing subject' and the nature of communication (Baudrillard 1990a: 7-24). Concomitantly studies are overwhelmingly of anglophone, notably American, productions. Despite the claims to world hegemony, what such analyses have to do with, say, practices of producing and viewing in different Asian societies is not self-evident.<sup>12</sup>

A switch of emphasis from production to consumption destroys much of the order, certainty and self-satisfaction of these analyses. Analytically this is not obvious because of that vital imaginary commodity: meaning. Now meanings are what television is supposed to produce. As Baudrillard notes meaning belongs to the order of production, 1990b: 56-57) and audiences to consume. Talking about consuming meanings, or even television, is Monty Pythonesque. It stretches commonsense and English. Arguably consumption is as much about consummation as devouring about individuation as gratifying desires. A far subtler paradiastole (putting together of different things) is the idea of television as a text to be read, a language to be understood (Fiske and Hartley 1978: 20). The recourse to textuality, by which not only must programmes be understood intertextually, but the idea of an audience is itself a textual construct, is an intelligent reaction to the residual positivism of analyses of textual determinacy and audience response.

Are images however reducible to, or rephrasable as, language or text? While we textualize images in talking about them, Baudrillard has noted (for example in the opening quotation) that language, communication, text depend upon a pedantic exclusion in slowing, academicizing, genealogizing, consolidating, homogenizing, exterminating and extruding images, moments, glances, ruptures, what people live, into an abstract textuality upon which, curiously, only academics are qualified to opine. Not all practices involve rendering or translating into language: an extension of textuality which makes reading a total practice. Even its subtlest exponent, Hartley, ends up caught in a dichotomy between textuality and reality (1992: 17). Talk of practice becomes divorced from actions in

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<sup>12</sup> Before anthropologists start sneering at such crassly exported ethnocentrism though, many are guilty of doing much the same, the past master being Clifford Geertz himself (Hobart 1983, 1999, 2000).



situations. Neither the world, nor news footage, nor audiences come ready textualized: agents textualize and retextualize them.<sup>13</sup>

Analyses of production, consumption and television have fascinating difficulties coping with agency. It is consumption which defines persons as individuals. The exercise of choice and reason on which this vision rests turns out to be at once a duty (and so not free, see Baudrillard below) and driven by the self as incomplete (Ferguson 1990: 194-219). When they encounter agency, cultural and media studies collapse into bedlam. Consider what a world would look like in which television production itself were 'a cultural agent', masculinity 'an agent of capitalism', 'feminine narratives' as refusing clear judgements and categories as 'normalizing agents'.<sup>14</sup> Let go of production as central and the entire approach falls to bits. How individual viewers understand programmes is not just radically contingent, but unknowable in principle because there is little evidence of an indivisible subject doing the viewing (Ang 1991).

In view of these difficulties, I would like critically to reflect further on the implications of certain presuppositions in studies of consumption and the media. This is a first step to reconsidering Asian media as practices, informed by the presuppositions of the producers and audiences in question, not of their hegemonic commentators. My interest is Indonesian television, especially Balinese television and theatre audiences. My argument is not just that interpretations of the meaning of television programmes bear as little relation to any actual referent as do several famous interpretations of Balinese culture. Nor is it that such interpretive practice is vital to keeping academic disciplines alive. Quite simply, there is no way of ever knowing what a viewer thinks. The entire inquiry is misplaced. Television as a process is shot through with indeterminacy - as is culture.<sup>15</sup> Producers and viewers are sufficiently various, disparate, differently situated, and non-unitary and dispersed as persons, as to leave existing approaches vacuous. We have no remotely adequate way of addressing practice, including practices of consuming or watching television. All in all this is not an auspicious start to an analysis of the imbrication of the media in modernity in Bali.

### Overinterpreting

Anthropologists, cultural and media studies' specialists have vied to out-lemming one another in interpreting culture, films and programmes as texts.<sup>16</sup> These texts are passive: they await the active resourceful interpreter (usually male), whose intelligence and power of interrogation will prize them open and force them to reveal themselves. If interpreting is

<sup>13</sup> In other words, with Knorr-Cetina (1989) and Ang (1991: 162) I would argue in favour of situationalism (preferably without the prefix of 'methodological' which suggests some separability of theory and method).

<sup>14</sup> The citations are from Fiske 1989: 1, 210, 220, 221. As Fiske is certainly one of the more interesting and provocative writers, imagine what the others are like.

<sup>15</sup> I am not therefore claiming to discuss what Balinese experience, only what Balinese do and say about what they do. The former is unknowable; and the effects of action and events underdetermined. Nor am I saying that Balinese are unique in how they talk about television but, until someone writes in detail about European or American viewers talking among themselves as and when they do, we shall not really know.

<sup>16</sup> The object of study for anthropologists was arguably either culture as transcendental agent or, for the more Marxist cultural studies' practitioners, ideology, the agent being variously describable. 'If, in the British context, media studies was reinvigorated in the early 1970s by what Stuart Hall (1982) has characterized as the "rediscovery of ideology"' (Morley 1992: 7), then it was in bad trouble. Ideology staggers on from profitable episode to episode no matter how often stakes are driven through its heart (e.g. Laclau 1983).



the argumentative discipline of deciding between alternative possibilities (Ricoeur 1976: 75-79), it leads to a skewed practice. The interpreter not only determines the criteria of judgement beforehand, but must have constituted the object of study as interpretable in the first place. Interpretation commonly involves overinterpreting (Hobart 1999). Any attempt to work towards a critical approach to Asian media must address the very general academic practice of overinterpretation.

Let me take the first three examples to come to mind. The first is from a piece significantly entitled *Advertising and the manufacture of difference*. The analysis centres on a picture of a woman's hand reaching for a cigarette from a packet held out by a man's hand. They appear to be in a boat on a river and in the distance is a low bridge. The authors interpreted this - without any recognition that any other analysis was possible - as follows: the relationship of the couple 'is, or is becoming, sexual. Its sexual nature is signified by the phallic prow of the boat heading towards the dark cavern beneath the illuminated bridge and the phallic proffered cigarette about to be grasped between the woman's thumb and forefinger' (Bonney & Wilson 1990: 186). No one I showed the picture to found it convincing. But then I might know odd people.

The second is from an important article in the history of media studies: Mulvey's *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. Typically, we start with problems of agency. Her aim was to show 'the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (1992: 22). She argued a psychoanalytical, largely Lacanian, interpretation of cinema as pandering to male scopophilia and narcissistic urges. Images of women set off castration anxieties which are resolved either sadistically in punishing women or by fetishizing them. Mulvey concluded: 'ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference' (1992: 29). Some might think her certainty echoes the patriarchy she condemns. We should have been forewarned two pages earlier when she wrote: 'Traditionally, the woman displayed [in films] functioned...as erotic object...' (1992: 27, my parentheses). There is some timeless, placeless domain called 'Traditionally'. Her analysis applies willy-nilly to all makers and audiences of films, everywhere. It is not an auspicious start any more than her universalization of Lacan's mirror phase so that 'the image recognized [in the film] is conceived as the reflected body of the self' (1992: 25, my parentheses). For everyone, everywhere? It took Valerie Walkerdine to point out how voyeuristic participant-observation itself is (1990). *Quis custodiet Mulvey ipsa?*<sup>17</sup>

Lastly Fiske explains how to decode a television programme, using scenes from *Hart to Hart*. In one excerpt, set in their ship's cabin, Jennifer Hart refers to 'the window'. Her husband corrects her: 'the porthole'. Jennifer: 'Oh yes. The porthole. I know they are

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<sup>17</sup> Being a clod-hopping anthropologist myself, I sometimes imagine societies in which babies would not get to see themselves in mirrors, or where fleeting broken images in puddles or whatever replaced the calm and devastating originating gaze. Dugald Williamson crystallized my concerns nicely in writing of the Imaginary/Symbolic dialectic subsequent to the mirror phase by noting that the theory

has the form of a narrative and might have attracted more suspicion on this count than it has, given the teleological problems associated with that form. The story of a subject predestined to assume an identity through misrecognition in 'an ontological structure of the human world' glosses over a number of discontinuities (1992: 110).

A critical review of the strengths and weaknesses of the Lacanian project must await another occasion. I find passing odd any explanatory strategy which pre-consigns both producers and viewers to ignorance and conveniently locates understanding exclusively with self-appointed experts. Any explanation which posits a hidden, determining depth invites this move.

supposed to be charming, but they always remind me of a laundromat' (1989: 3). Our friendly media analyst is on hand to explain the joke. There is a 'feminine tendency to make sense of everything through a domestic discourse. "Porthole" is technical discourse - masculine; "Window-laundromat" is domestic-nurturing discourse - feminine' (1989: 12). Media studies seems to have trouble handling even the simplest irony: it messes up codes. One problem is the question of tone: much lies in the manner of reciting or reading and that is uncodifiable.

All three examples are about gender codes or rôles. As Oedipus turned out to be about whether conception was necessary to reproduction (Lévi-Strauss 1963), so everything in media studies these days seems to be about gender - or class if you are British. Likewise most analyses of Bali tell us far more about the writers' preoccupations than about Balinese ones.

### Pleasure

For all the radical chic of much media and cultural studies, it is usually modernist mutton parading as postmodern lamb. Much writing in cultural studies has reified - and ironically ended up celebrating by critique - capital, production, needs, pleasure, the text and the increasingly residual subject. One obvious example is the determination of writers on television to treat programmes exclusively as texts (in Barthes's sense of 'a work', 1977). The text, ever since Ricoeur (1971, as with other Saussurean accounts), leads away from reference towards connotation (of the product) and that endless chain of signification from whose bourne no determined semiologist returns and upon which consumption depends (Baudrillard 1981: 157-63).<sup>18</sup> This reduction of situated actions to abstracted texts is part of the pervasive Lit Crit Tendency. We are also more complicitous in what we criticize than we like to recognize.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, authors of this persuasion, in writing about the Other, Subalterns and so forth, anonymize and alienate their subjects as much as, but more subtly than, did the predecessors against whom they inveigh so much.

Victor Turner once remarked that witches were less inversions of 'normal' humans than caricatures. Likewise, for all its sophistication, much *soi-disant* postmodernist writing is a caricature of what it sets itself apart from, and is deeply conservative in its presuppositions. Consider how in a critique of consumption, Judith Williamson defines her title (one I question in mine):

'Consuming passions' can mean many things: an all-embracing passion, a passion for consumerism; what I am concerned with is the way passions are themselves consumed, contained and channelled into the very social structures they might otherwise threaten (1986: 11).

Williamson takes passions, needs and desires as given, if adaptable. There is a striking spatial and processual metaphor of the relationship of individual and social structure which hypostatizes two entities. She concludes

<sup>18</sup> Baudrillard neatly notes that 'denotation maintains itself entirely on the basis of the myth of "objectivity"' (1981: 157). Reference is quite different, because it is a situated practice and so escapes the logic of the sign and exchange value. Although I make extensive use of the work of Baudrillard here, he is happily a god with clay feet, and himself given to overinterpreting, see Gane 1991: 22-25.

<sup>19</sup> Writing about 'academic mass communication researchers', Ien Ang remarked that they 'have often all too easily complied to the institutional point of view...not necessarily in a political sense, but all the more in an epistemological sense' (1991: 155).

The conscious, chosen meaning in most people's lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce (Williamson 1986: 230).

At once the object to be consumed underwrites the conscious subject, articulates and defines producer and consumer, and permits that quantification and assertion of equivalence (more - or less - meaning) which denies incommensurability. The argument is tautologous. As Ferguson has neatly argued, Enlightenment thinkers came to treat the psyche as an internal market, with sentiments as its commodities, desire as its motive and pleasure what it pursues.<sup>20</sup> These attributes of human nature were distinctive in being objective and measurable in a strictly causal world (1990: 189-95). Consumption was not simply the endless development of desire or the search for pleasure: it was the articulation of the psyche to the world as imagined. So 'consumption was therefore a process of individuation: it was above all others the sphere of self-realization' (Ferguson: 1990: 246).

If consumption is about pleasure, you would expect the topic to have been well thought through. On the contrary, the best that postmodernists in general, and media studies writers in particular, can do is resurrect Barthes's distinction between the tame pleasures of *plaisir* and the corporeal, sensual, ecstatic and raptive *jouissance*.<sup>21</sup> Both were originally forms of enjoyment produced (sic) in the reading of a text (1975). Academics do not seem at ease writing about enjoyment. They prefer to hand its putrifying cadaver over to the scientizings of psychology, in the confident certainty nothing will ever be heard of it again.

But has pleasure been the same everywhere, always? We badly need critical research on the practices of enjoyment and their histories, not least in those parts of Asia which are supposedly destined to be the epicentre of the new consumerism. One of the repeated themes of Balinese Hindu religious broadcasts is that self-realization comes not from consumption, but from discipline of the self, and realizing its place within a wider world of agency, of which Divinity is the supreme instance and instantiation. It is only by attaining command over your passions (*raja*) and the lust for material goods (*artha*) and sexual pleasure (*kama*) that you become a mature adult and agent, rather than a subject of your own self.<sup>22</sup> In Bali the most effective (but not the easiest) form in everyday life is to consume your passions, literally to let them rot in your stomach (*mere kang di basang*). What consuming passions suggests may be very different depending on whether you are Balinese or American.

Our own ideas of pleasure are changing though. Ferguson suggestively distinguishes the forms of pleasure which bourgeois society, that sadly dehistoricized essence, considered as alien. These included notably fun, which is what savages, the mad and children enjoy. It is too asocial and must be inhibited and renounced (1990: 7-69). An alternative was the happiness (medieval monks and knights) achieved from successfully

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<sup>20</sup> Pleasure is not to be confused with gratification. Williamson, incidentally, embraces the same anthropocentric idealism as does Appadurai (1986). Left-liberals have peculiar difficulties accepting the existence, still less the intransigence, of objects. Perhaps this is what I find so refreshing about Baudrillard's analysis of exchange from the point of view of the object.

Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason (1990a: 7)

<sup>21</sup> Or the different register suggested by *Zerstreuung* (Dyer 1992: 2-3). The obvious exception is Foucault (1986a, 1986b).

<sup>22</sup> In Vaisnavite thinking, quiescent goodness (*sattva*) could direct passionate energy (*rajas*) to good ends, just as could *tamas*, badness, lethargy, to evil ones (Inden 1985: 144-50).

undertaking a quest. A hierarchical society, equally, is anathema to bourgeois ideals. Consumption in the end leads towards thrills and excitement, away from the world of pleasure, the bourgeois world, which 'is composed of a system of relations (commodities) differentiating and linking the "self" and the "world"... Excitement is a kind of nostalgia over fun, as pleasure is ultimately the forgetting of happiness. The hope of excitement is a voracious consumer of novelties' (1990: 218). We seem on the verge of approving a new form of human enjoyment. Is it coincidence that, in the piece cited, Mulvey wrote of 'the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind' (1992: 24)?

### Consumption

What though of Balinese ideas about pleasure? Scholars have shown little interest in the topic, the more remarkably so because Balinese (at least those I know these days) often speak of their conditions of life in terms of *suka* (ease, pleasure, happiness, joy) or *duka* (pain, sorrow, unhappiness, misfortune, also anger; see Hobart 1999).<sup>23</sup> In the busyness of over-interpreting Balinese, we have lost sight of how they talk about their own changing lives. Are we to attribute to them identical desires, needs and passions to late twentieth-century bourgeois Americans? If not, on what grounds are we to write about, say, advertising on television? Are we to take it that English is so strong a language (Asad 1986) that the words 'pleasure' and 'pain' adequately encompass *suka* and *duka*? If so, we are already in difficulties, because *suka* and *duka* are not necessarily complementaries. They are part of a sequence which runs *suka*, *duka*, *lara*, *pati*, through suffering, grief, distress (*lara*) to death (*pati*). Fortunately, consumption only has one sense in our Brave New World where unhappiness is not yet owning something; the other has been condemned to invisibility and non-existence in hospitals and funeral parlours. What the Balinese account lacks in utopian euphoria it makes up for in scope and poignancy.

Whatever Balinese may have done and thought in the past, Bali has become a major destination for tourists, archetypical consumers of life styles; by 1988 many Balinese spent substantial time watching television; and a significant number had become sufficiently affluent that they, or their children, bought consumer products. Any analytical framework for a Bali entering the third millennium must address the relevance of the various theories of mass consumption.

It was clear a long time ago that consumption was not the simple economic process it seemed (see Bocock 1993). How, for instance, do you identify unambiguously a moment, or act, of consumption? It took Baudrillard - who must have seemed wacky when he first wrote over twenty years ago, but whom events have eerily vindicated - to spell it out. Consumption is a matter of the (rather onanistic) identity (you buy the ideal of conformity, 1988b: 37 ).

Individuals no longer compete for the possession of goods, they actualize themselves in consumption, each on his own... *There are no limits to consumption*. If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction (1988a: 12, 24).

It is not. It is 'a systematic and *total idealist practice*' For consumption instantiates a particular logic (of equivalence, 1981: 135) common both to exchange value and

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, when I tried to differentiate Balinese words for happiness and unhappiness by degree and kind (see below), the people I worked with refused the distinction.

signification. So what we exchange and consume are signs (or rather signs of utility, 1981: 134). It is endless because 'only consummation (*consommation*) escapes recycling in the expanded reproduction of the value system... Where it appears to consume (destroy) products, consumption only consummates their utility (1981: 134-35). Equivalence permits endless deferment. For

the flight from one signifier to another is no more than the surface reality of a *desire*, which is insatiable because it is founded on a lack... if we acknowledge that a need is not a need for a particular object as much as it is a 'need' for difference (*the desire for social meaning*), only then will we understand that satisfaction can never be *fulfilled*, and consequently that there can never be a *definition* of needs (1988b: 45).

For all the Gallic logical arabesques, what makes Baudrillard's argument frightening is how historically apposite it is. It would be wrong to infer though, as some authors have done (e.g. Appadurai 1990; Bock 1993), but Baudrillard does not, that consumption is therefore globally tending towards sameness.

Imagining the rest of the world as destined to enjoy bourgeois pleasures, notably of interminable consumption - after much, or even eternal deferment - is not quite all it seems. For a start

paradoxical though it may appear, consumption is defined as *exclusive of pleasure*... Pleasure would define consumption *for itself*, as autonomous and final. But consumption is never thus... The best evidence that pleasure is not the basis of consumption is that nowadays pleasure is constrained and institutionalized, not as a right or enjoyment, but as the citizen's *duty*... The consumer, the modern citizen, cannot evade the constraint of happiness and pleasure which in the new ethics is equivalent to the traditional constraint of labor and production (Baudrillard 1988b: 46, 48).

It is not possible to ground one of the most striking economic phenomena of our times, consumption, in a theory of needs, desires, or even pleasure (or its absence). In fact, pleasure subverts the entire edifice. So all is left is to reify it as (the latest) late capitalism and cosmologize it as globalization.<sup>24</sup> For anthropologists, cultural studies has become an excuse for the retreat from the rigours and inevitable inadequacies of fieldwork. As did the Duke of Plaza-Toro, the rout is heralded as a victory (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Boon 1990; cf. Fardon 1990; Hobart 1990a). The resulting simulacrum

apes forms or combines them in a disparate manner, it *repeats the fashion* without having lived it (Baudrillard 1970: 169, my translation).

What an apt description of both the literary and the postmodern turn in ethnography. Actually it is part of Baudrillard's definition of kitsch.<sup>25</sup>

### Some general problems

What is particularly enjoyable in critically considering the adequacy of media studies' analyses to non-Anglophone parts of the world is the way it highlights our presuppositions. Behind most analyses lurks some version of the question: how does television (or whatever) achieve its effect on viewers? The answers divide depressingly

<sup>24</sup> The finest example I know, is Appadurai taking Anne Salmond's article, *Theoretical landscapes* (1982) quite literally and cheerfully writing about the 'global cultural flow' in which the world can be redescribed in terms of 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes', 'finanscapes' and 'ideoscapes'.

<sup>25</sup> The original reads: '*il singe les formes ou les combine de façon disparate, il répète la mode sans l'avoir vécue.*' Baudrillard identifies kitsch (as against snobbism) with the supremacy of the bourgeoisie.

along that old dichotomy of body *versus* mind, as cause *versus* meaning. It is only by introducing hyper-semantic abstractions like representation and textuality that prevents things flying apart. And all this is before we have even started considering other peoples' practices.

Causation is an early casualty. It might have seemed possible at least to show some connection between advertising a product and sales.

The basic fact to remember about advertising is that little is known about what effect it has: even to talk of advertising having an effect is misleading (Tunstall 1964: 16)

Even where there is a correlation between money invested in advertising and sales increases, there are many good, or better, reasons than any response to the advertisements (Schudson 1984). It is a classic Quinean case of theory being underdetermined by its facts.

Even were you able to determine a programme's intention sufficiently to establish a definite message, you cannot fix what viewers make of it.<sup>26</sup> Unintended consequences are the death-knell of theoretical determination. Consumption confounds production. Although this has put sender-receiver analyses of communication out of business, no one has put forward a workable alternative, so the original staggers on ever more encrusted with *caveats*.

The great unknown is the human subjects and their conditions, motives and reasons for watching, which differ in degree and kind. If the media are indeed a medium, perhaps it is for an opiate. What does it matter what people think, provided they do not speak or no one pays attention? For all the producers' and analysts' concern over what viewers are making of programmes, I cannot help thinking, cynically maybe, that those who imagine themselves in power are more concerned with producing docile bodies.

How viewers relate to programmes requires suitable closure. The central concept, 'identification', is singularly apt, because identity (personal, cultural, ontological) is one of the most confused and unsatisfactory notions there is. For Mulvey, 'visual pleasure in narrative film [and by implication television programmes] is built around two contradictory processes: the first involves objectification of the image and the second identification with it' (Stacey 1992: 244, my parentheses). The first is a highly specialized objectifying practice, scopophilia, which places it incidentally together with the human sciences (Foucault 1982); the second 'demands identification of the ego' in an act which is both narcissistic and self-constitutive (Mulvey 1992: 26; note that the grammatical subject, and the agent, here is 'pleasurable structures'). Both are narratively structured, so deferring explanation onto an account of narrative.<sup>27</sup> Thereafter the essence of identification had to be refined and distinguished (e.g. from 'dreaming' and 'phantasy', Ellis 1982: 43; and more interestingly, from 'contemplation', Neale 1992: 281).<sup>28</sup> Identification, narratively, is part of 'the first articulation of the "I", of subjectivity' (Mulvey 1992: 25). Her mode of argument is foundational, originary, determinist,

<sup>26</sup> And the better crafted programmes are supposed to be deliberately 'open' (in the sense of carefully permitting divergent narrative readings). Again this is rationalized as being a function of increasing production budgets, so that the programme-makers can reach heterogeneous audiences. Once again, we are in the world of catachresis, 'reaching', 'targetting', as producers and analysts alike try to tame television.

<sup>27</sup> On the problems of narrative as an explanation, see above. On more general problems of recent accounts of narrative, see Hobart 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Neale also makes the default move of processualizing essences by declaring them 'mobile, fluid...multiple...at points even contradictory' (1992: 278), without challenging the basic ontology.

universalist and exclusive. I prefer a more pragmatic and situationally sensitive approach which considers how 'human beings are made subjects' and elaborates upon the 'modes of objectification which transforms human beings into subjects' (Foucault 1982: 208). Agents produce subjects (a deeply ambiguous term) by objectivizing them.

Identification is not a once-and-for-ever narrative act. That viewers identify with characters is given the lie, as Mulvey herself points out, by the crucial importance of *mis-recognition* between a viewer and an imaged person (1992: 25). Ang has shown identification to be a naïve notion when you get to comments by viewers on particular series (1985: 86-116). There is also a hidden democratic presupposition: that the kinds of people portrayed in theatre, film or television are sufficiently similar in degree, kind or circumstance as to enable identification. This is questionable for Bali. Fiske suggests '*implication-extrication* as a double relationship of reader with the text' (1989: 174). In so doing however, he introduces a further over-determination: the reduction of everything that happens when watching television or a film to reading a text. Implication-extrication is a conscious pair of critical acts of engagement and disengagement with a character which converts the issue into one of the 'knowing subject', with all the quagmires of 'the philosophy of the subject: will, representation, choice, liberty, deliberation, knowledge and desire' so entailed (Baudrillard 1988c: 213-14). There is a fine critique of existing accounts of the viewer (Ang 1991); but there is little glimmer of a workable approach.

In fact, far from desperately seeking the audience, the aim is usually to lose it at all costs. Most research works not with any actual audience but with necessarily fictional constructs.

Audiences may be imagined empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the need of the imagining institution... There is no actual audience that lies beyond its production as a category, which is merely to say that audiences are only ever encountered *per se* as *representations*. Furthermore, they are so rarely *self-represented* that they are almost always absent (Hartley [1987] 1992: 105).

When an actual viewer is in sight, s/he must first be essentialized (as a 'normal citizen' or 'social subject', Hartley 1992b: 107), then sanitized, probed and reconstructed through formal interviews and other techniques by which subjects are scientized and divided. How this is supposed to give insight into what the generalized viewer thinks or feels in their pulsating interiority is mind-boggling.<sup>29</sup> Leaving aside the problems of the nature of feeling, thought and the unitary, interiorized subject, the difficulty of any general delineation of the notional viewer is that it is historically and culturally unsituated. Apart from that, viewers and audiences have an awkward way of taking agency into their own hands at times, not always romantically in an act of self-empowerment, but by enjoying the image and refusing the corollary, or by their radical refusal to become an object of survey or study.

The intransigence (and so infinite institutional malleability) of the viewer is such as to make the sort of questions we ask implausible. What happens for instance if we treat television-viewing as a purposive act with an outcome: what do viewers hope to achieve by watching television? Some obvious candidates are ruled out by the closure of absolute

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<sup>29</sup> Obviously all you get is what the interviewer takes to be particular answers to the questions which s/he asked on that particular occasion. Having been interviewed by a sociologist myself the relationship of my answers to any other frame of reference is complicated. What is striking is how dependent my replies were upon the circumstances of the interview. I was briefly aware of structuring massively in a way which had neither occurred to me before, nor which I could remember two days later.



presuppositions. Academic analyses are so widely predicated on the negation or denial of enjoyment as a category that, as Dyer remarked, any attempt to inquire into what is entertainment invariably produces a *différance*, a displacement to talking about what else is going on (1992: 3-8).<sup>30</sup> You might as well ask what do owners hope to achieve by having pets? We have great difficulty talking about enjoyment, except catachretically in terms of the self as market or whatever. Enjoyment may have to do with erotics, and so with seduction (Baudrillard 1990b; Sontag 1961), and be quite antithetical to the order of production and its factory manager, interpretation. However, perhaps there is an erotics of ownership.

A review of the presuppositions of media studies shows unrecognized indeterminacies, and corresponding over-determinations, at every point. When it is not out of sheer laziness, much of the repetitiveness of arguments, the refusal to consider non-Anglophone practices, invoking the viewer-as-agent only to negate her/him are all ways of denying the indeterminacy. But indeterminacy gets transmuted into uncertainty, so into the tactical costs of inquiry and so back to the easier, and cheaper, path of imagining and representing others. Were others to represent themselves, we would probably never know it, because we only recognize viewers as subjects in our own terms and our own image.

So it is enough to reverse the idea of a mass alienated by the media to evaluate how much the whole universe of the media, and perhaps the whole technical universe, is the result of a secret strategy of this mass which is claimed to be alienated, of a *secret form of the refusal of will*, of an in-voluntary challenge to everything which was demanded by the subject of philosophy - that is to say, to all rationality of choice and to all exercise of will, of knowledge, and of liberty (Baudrillard 1988c: 215).<sup>31</sup>

### Television in Bali

After this highly theoretical preamble, in the rest of the paper I would like to become far more specific and talk about television-viewing in Bali, about which we know virtually nothing. So, instead of speculating, imagining and generally over-interpreting what remains almost entirely to be researched, I raise questions and point to possible themes of future inquiry. Since 1990 I have been running a project to record broadcasts of Balinese - and now Indonesian - cultural and religious programmes. From my preliminary inquiries into television-viewing practices, it looks as if I had better discard my few remaining certainties.

Indonesian state television began broadcasting in 1962, but it was not until the mid 1970s that sets appeared outside the capital of Bali. At that time, perhaps from their legacy of critical theatre-going, Balinese were sceptical about the images and narratives (and so of those claiming authority). I recall being asked in 1980 were the pictures of the American moon landing not made in a studio? By 1994, virtually every household in the

<sup>30</sup> An example is Fiske's dichotomy of centripetal pleasure from implication in a programme and centrifugal enjoyment of subverting the intended message or breaking the rules and so challenging the central control of the system (1989: 232-39). You will note how this entire analysis depends on a remarkably conservative ontology.

<sup>31</sup> I sympathize with Hartley's stress upon the desirability of disorganized communities attaining self-representation and so a measure of agency. There is the danger of a subtle hegemony here though. As I read Baudrillard, he is returning to the important venture of considering the implications of alternative rationalities and strategies of being, abandoned by Foucault after his *Histoire de la folie*, following Derrida's (deeply metaphysically reactionary, [1963] 1978) attack.

village where I work had at least one set, over a third with colour. Apart from state television, T.V.R.I., there were four commercial channels, of which three were broadcasting terrestrially in Bali.<sup>32</sup>

The quality of broadcasting from state television over the last years has been variable, but rarely exciting. (This is both my own opinion and that of Indonesian commentators.) Since about 1993 however, T.V.R.I. has begun to respond both to Indonesian critics of television and to the challenge from the commercial companies by becoming more adventurous. The number of broadcasting hours has become so great that a substantial, but regulated, proportion of air time is of imported material, mostly from the United States and given subtitles. (There is a wonderful doctoral thesis to be written on selection and translation in Indonesian subtitling.) There is therefore a growing demand for Indonesian films made for television. Some local stations, notably in Bali, produce several hours or more a week of news, features and arts programmes. It is these last which obliged me to be interested in television, because there was no one to talk to when they were being broadcast. Everyone was watching.

Apart from the growing range of domestic programmes, there is quite an international repertoire of programmes available. From action series like *The A-Team* and *The New Avengers* to soap operas such as *Dynasty* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* to epics like the Indian *Ramayana*. From an informal survey, among foreign programmes *MacGyver* and a Chinese serial, *White Snake Legend*, vied for popularity.<sup>33</sup> Indonesian films and quiz shows ran Balinese theatre a close second among domestic programmes.

### *The news*

Western (I use the term loosely to refer to North American and European) news broadcasts face a problem. It is how to appear immediate, present and real, while bound by the most rigid conventions of representation. Just as with television audiences, almost everything that actually takes place must be ignored and carefully chosen events neutered for public presentation. For an event to be newsworthy, it should be recent, concern élite persons, be negative and be surprising (Galtung & Ruge 1973). My initial viewing of local, national and international Indonesian news broadcasts suggests that only one of these criteria applies: it is - most emphatically - about élite persons. While disasters sometimes occur, the stress is as much on the government as all-powerful not only in coping with these but in making life ever better for the masses (*rakyat*). Government equally is all-knowing. Therefore there are few surprises.<sup>34</sup> You cannot often tell if an item in the news is recent or not: most are curiously timeless. Prime time is given to the formalities of the President and other senior figures - like Orientalists' accounts of Javanese kings - granting audience to endless visiting minor dignitaries, giving lectures, visiting sites and generally being everywhere. The effect is instant tableaux: the

<sup>32</sup> These were T.P.I. (Télévisi Pendidikan Indonesia), S.C.T.V. (Surya Citra Télévisi); R.C.T.I. (Rajawali Citra Télévisi). The use of satellite dishes was common in towns and spreading gradually to the more affluent villages.

<sup>33</sup> According to the monthly television magazine, *Vista*, this last was given top viewer ratings in Semarang and Surabaya, but not Jakarta or Medan. I have no idea how the ratings were decided though.

<sup>34</sup> There is a reversal of epistemological authority. Instead of the newsreader being presented as the hegemonic figure critically reviewing the doings - and, where investigable, the misdoings - of members of the élite, in Indonesia it seems s/he is the humble instrument, or conduit, by which the wisdom of the Great, beyond criticism and by definition Good, may reach the masses.

exnominated powers are omniscient, omnipotent and eternal - rather like the pronouncements of anthropologists.<sup>35</sup>

### *Action series and soap operas*

There is an ironic difference between Balinese preferences as to programmes and those of the few foreign scholars whom I know. The latter are greatly taken by such Indonesian serial as *Saur Sepuh*, an epic history of Javanese empire of Majapahit, done somewhat in the style of a Chinese martial arts film. Some Balinese are devoted viewers, but all find the quality of production far inferior to Chinese and western imports.

Now such series are conventionally part of gendered television. Feminine soap operas are notionally diegetically complex and open, so avoiding ideological closure. By contrast masculine action series are supposedly 'structured to produce greater narrative and ideological closure'. Being about power and control, they reassert the patriarchy that soaps undermine (Fiske 1989: 198ff.) Action series are climactic (narrative and, implicitly, sexual - awkward this, as more than one of the main warriors in *Saur Sepuh* is a woman). 'Sensitivity' is seen as threatening, reference to feelings avoided and dialogue is minimal by contrast to soaps where the opposite applies. Feminine programmes have a large repertoire of characters, numerous sub-plots and stress process and its open-ended uncertain outcome. (Once again these criteria hardly apply to either women or men in *Saur Sepuh*. So perhaps it is an Action Soap.)

Action films however give priority to product over process, have single plots and few characters (so not permitting decentred readings). Unlike soap operas which seek to replicate real time, action series condense process to focus on sequences of actions, typically away from the home in public space. Segmentation of scenes follows laws of cause and effect, as against feminine association. (We are already in deep metaphysical waters, because Balinese ideas of causation differ radically from contemporary American or European ones (Hobart 1995a). Whose ideas of causation apply here? And what happens if producers and viewers use different schemes?) Finally, masculine genres

speak to audiences who are positioned quite differently to the dominant ideology, and whose reading strategy is more likely to be one of negotiation by which they seek to accommodate their social differences with patriarchy, rather than one of resistance (Fiske 1989: 222).<sup>36</sup>

Even from what little I know so far of Balinese television-watching practices, the point is less that every proposition is open to serious question<sup>37</sup> than how rigid, dichotomous and closed the depictions of the two genres are. How far is this due to weaknesses in the

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<sup>35</sup> It will be interesting, now the K.I.T.L.V. has started collecting news broadcasts to watch changing trends. On exnomination, see Barthes 1972: 137-42.

<sup>36</sup> The entire vision of positioned subjects, universal patriarchy and negotiation appeals again to that theoretical dichotomy familiar in anthropology in the 1960s of an ossified structural world, where such movement as was not proscribable had been reduced to transactional 'negotiations'. That the assumptions, styles and possible outcomes of negotiation differ historically, culturally and situationally has got lost in the search for a suitably selfish essence. That the 'negotiations' of nineteenth-century Balinese aristocrats had precious little in common with Dutch nineteenth-century foreign service officials (Wiener 1995), still less 1990s Japanese bankers, is also conveniently sidelined.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, a significant number of men like watching romantic films and women Kung Fu films. I suspect Balinese are not alone in this.

analysis, how far to generic closure? I have often been struck by what seems to me, as an outsider, as the definiteness of Balinese theatrical conventions. My guess is we take our own conventions as given, even natural. The set of contrasts I have drawn point though to the extent to which such genres involve very general presuppositions - space, time, causation. How far such presuppositions differ across different Balinese and Indonesian genres from their various American and European equivalents remains to be researched. Once again though our categories of analysis pre-empt critical thinking. Genre is an essence we apply to production (Hobart 1991).

### *Quiz shows*

Most Balinese whom I know like quizzes. Even encyclopaedic knowledge quizzes draw audiences of the old who have not the faintest clue of what country Gozo is the capital, or where Malta is. As Indonesian quiz shows are mostly direct copies of British and American ones, do the same interpretations apply? Media studies' writers seem to agree they are about knowledge, power, success. Fiske has argued that 'quiz shows use knowledge in the way that Bourdieu argues culture operates [in his theory of cultural capital], that is, to separate out winners from losers and to ground the classification in individual or natural differences' (1989: 266-67, my parentheses). Knowledge varies hierarchically according to the kind of quiz from 'factual' (academic or everyday) to human knowledge (general or individual). Quizzes are where hierarchy meets carnival: embodied in the presenter who has two controlling roles at once of a master of ceremonies and schoolmaster-examiner. Luck is the unknown quantity in 'this hegemony of success' (Lewis 1988: 43). Fiske provides a suitably New World reading: 'luck plays a vital role in the hegemonic structure of societies that are both competitive and democratic' (1989: 270). Such societies are in fact hierarchical, but ideologically allow mobility. Luck explains success and failure.

But is Balinese - and apparently the participants' - enjoyment because they are signed up devotees of the Great American Dream, or its South East Asian avatar, the Orde Baru?<sup>38</sup> Many Balinese are great gamblers (come to think of it, what people is not?). The different workings of luck, chance, cleverness, karma pala (the necessary consequences of previous actions) are themes of literature and folk tales. When watching one clever, but arrogant, engineer fail in the final round, the viewers started arguing whether it were karma or not. Quizzes, they concluded, were contests of karma.<sup>39</sup> The processes of everyday life are highlighted and shorn of encumbering detail.

### *Advertisements*

In one way though Indonesian response to quizzes do seem to fit media studies writers' stress upon the joys of consumerism. Balinese, men and women, did comment on the prizes which advertisers offer. To those of us brought up on that hand-me-down Orientalism which stressed the rigid demureness, emotional effacement, vigilant self-control and ceremonialized aestheticism of Indonesians (e.g. Geertz 1973b), the apparent ability of actors in advertisements to achieve sustained public orgasm, or at least ecstasy, upon trying a new mass-produced noodle, a pair of jeans or soap powder comes as

<sup>38</sup> This was Suharto's New Order régime which lasted from 1966 to 1998.

<sup>39</sup> All my references to Balinese comments or responses to television programmes are based, unless otherwise stated, on remarks they made to one another not to me.

something of a shock. Much the same goes for the abandonment and ebullience of participants in Indonesian game-shows, even if they seem to be imitating something of the *jouissance* of American participants (whom they saw on imported broadcasts). But then, even Javanese and Balinese self-restraint is remarkably situational.

Everyone I asked said that they had bought at least one product because they had seen it advertised on television.<sup>40</sup> If, as was often the case, it turned out to be no good, they talked about it with self-deprecating humour, and were much more cautious and untrusting thereafter. Travelling vendors, Indonesian *Dulcamaras*, have after all been selling stuff to gullible villagers for ages.

The Balinese with whom I watched television did however enjoy advertisements enormously. What different people liked and disliked is fascinating and a separate article in itself. Most of the time Balinese seemed to enjoy the images without proposing to buy the product. Now, to do so would be a radical denial of the usual metaphysics of consumption. It also flies in the face of those Marxist theories which treat viewers watching advertisements as producing surplus value for capitalism (Jhally 1990: 199-204). For, what is to be avoided is pleasure, as this 'would define consumption for itself, as autonomous and final' (see above). Villagers greatly enjoyed talking about advertisements they had enjoyed. The following is an extract from one such conversation. (On who is who and the circumstances of the discussion, see below.)

Ex-Headman: As for me, about advertisements, I, we all, like watching advertisements.

Self: Mmm.

Ex-Headman: But what is it I like? If there are beautiful women, handsome men who act in advertisements, that's what I enjoy watching.

Old Actor: It's lovely too.

Ex-Headman: Huh! Lovely, and how? What's its name? That BSC one? The one where you can see the mouth. Wow. I really love that one. [Offhand now I cannot remember which advertisement he was referring to.]

Daughter-in-law: Whose mouth?

Ex-Headman: The one who says BSC, that one.

Old Actor: The one with the long face?

Ex-Headman: No! You can only see the mouth. [To me.] Have you ever seen that? The one for BSC?

Old Actor: I don't know that one.

Ex-Headman: Ooh, it's marvellous, I love it...

Poor Farmer: I enjoy looking at it.

Ex-Headman: That's what I mean, I like watching them perform. It's not what they say that I enjoy. 'Gung 'Kak, is it them saying it that you enjoy, 'Gung 'Kak?

Old Actor: What's said; what I have once experienced myself, that's it. Now for example...

Daughter-in-law: Softex, do you like that one?

Old Actor: No. As I just said, I only like what I have tried. Anything I haven't yet tried, I never pay any attention.

Ex-Headman: As for me, it is advertisements with people doing funny things. That's what I like.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> People of all ages tried out shampoos; the old patent medicines and balsams; the young food and clothes.

<sup>41</sup> Kt Sutatemaja: Yèn tiang indik réklame punika, tiang sami seneng nonton réklame punika kènten.

Self: Ngeeh.

Is this, as media studies' specialists claim, like mall walkers, an act of resistance to consumerism and capitalism (Bocock 1993: 107)? Is it that, *sakadi kebo mabalih ombak*, like a buffalo gazing at the waves, they were simply bemused by the parade of luxurious non-necessities? Or are there deep Lacanian arcanenesses at work of which only Lacanians know? The question, I think, is largely meaningless. Balinese, male, female, young, old, all quite cheerfully admitted, as did the ex-headman above, to enjoying - and indeed getting aroused by - attractive actors and actresses, above all in advertisements where appearance is emphasized and central to selling the product. A particular comical movement or gesture, an amusing situation or predicament seem to be enjoyed in and for themselves, and are appreciated for the skill with which they are brought off. It was the particular movement of the mouth, and the way it was photographed, which incited critical appreciation. Balinese, as avid watchers and critics of their own theatre, have found a vast new repertoire to admire, condemn, laugh at. Balinese also have their own ideas about kinds of appreciation of television. Of most broadcasts, you simply watch so that you know (*uning*) what is happening and commonly enjoy it as well (*seneng*, otherwise you turn the set off or walk off), Advertisements do not engage you unless, as the old actor noted, you have particular experience of a condition or, rarely, a product (on forms of engagement with television, see Hobart 2010).

Before we rush in to impose our own ideas on what is happening, we need to pause. What, for instance, of the man in his fifties who used to enjoy calling out, especially surrounded by children and young adults: 'Tilt the lens down. Go on! Show us her tits' every time a shampoo advertisement showed the head and shoulders of a young woman apparently naked out of frame. Have we at last identified a patriarchal scopophilia? Despite the familiarity of villagers' with one another's bodies from years of bathing just yards apart, I suppose it is possible. From what his delighted younger companions said afterwards, it was far more complex. Not least he was entertaining them - by playing on scopophilia?

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Kt Sutatemaja:	Sakéwanten sané senengin tiang napiné? Yèn puniki wènten anak sané jegèg-jegèg, sané bagus-bagus dados tukang réklame. Nah, nika tiang seneng nonton.
Anak Agung Pekak:	Luwung masih ento.
Kt Sutatemaja:	Yih! Luwung kènkèn? Apa adané? Ané kèto BSC? Ané kèto apa ané ngenah bungutné ento? Bèh! Ento demen pesan hatié.
Ni Sinduk:	Bungut ané encèn?
Kt Sutatemaja:	Ané ngorang BSC apa totoa.
Anak Agung Pekak:	Ané bungutné lantang kèto?
Kt Sutatemaja:	'Ten. Ngenahja bungut dogèn. Naenin manggihin nika Tuan? Anu BSC ja totoa. Anu apa totoa.
Anak Agung Pekak:	Sing suba tawang totoa.
Kt Sutatemaja:	Aduh. Luwung pesan totoa, demen pesan totoa.
Déwa Putu Balung:	Demen sampun mabalih.
Kt Sutatemaja:	Kènten artiné tiang puniki sané malaksana derika demenin tiang mabalih. 'Ten sané kabaos derika demenin tiang. Ento niki 'Gung 'Kak, anak sané kabaos puniki senengina 'Gung 'Kak?
Anak Agung Pekak:	Anu kabaos ané suba taèn iraga ngarasang kèto. Nah, upaminé...
Ni Sinduk:	Softèk, wènten nika seneng?
Anak Agung Pekak:	Sing. Sing buka raosé mara ané taèn suba rasang ento mara kasenengin kèto. Yèn ané sing taèn endèn rasang sing tiang taèn rungua.
Kt Sutatemaja:	Yèn niki sakadi tiang jeg réklame punika wènten sané banyol-banyol anak sané ngalaksanain punika. Nika tiang demen.)

### Some Balinese commentaries

There is little common ground between media specialists' interpretations and what I understand from Balinese commentaries. This is only in part, I think, because I am comparing ordinary Balinese viewers with professional analysts. It has as much to do with the presuppositions which older Balinese at least bring to watching. There is a generational difference here. The young, up to about the age of twenty-five, are thoroughly familiar not just with Indonesian, but with the registers and genres of television and its referents. Older Balinese complain the young have *keni pengaruh télévisi*, caught the influence of television; but older Balinese have complained in like vein for as long as I can remember. What may be more significant is that the Balinese language is used for the good effects of television (*sampun polih suksema*, 'they have appreciated the value') and Indonesian for what is bad (*keni pengaruh*). It is what Balinese talking among themselves had to say which interests me.

Unlike the clear, unambiguous lines of analyses like Fiske's, I am still wrestling to make sense of what I have learned during a month last summer working with groups of old men (and a young married woman), of young married people and the women in one family. I offer an outline of some points drawn from the old men with whom I spent most time. Even though I said very little, it was I who was the agent of what occurred by the terms of my presence: I also instigated the discussion and asked questions when necessary. There were four main participants: an old actor in his eighties, an ex-village headman, a rich and a poor farmer, both high caste. On most nights the headman's daughter-in-law actively joined in. Like most such discussions, it meandered to and fro over the course of a month. I shall talk about the first night.

After testing the quality of the Scotch whisky, they began talking about the set and performances of a Balinese serial they wanted me to see. They then turned to discussing what programmes they liked, disliked or walked away from. The headman asked the others if they watched the religious programmes. The wealthy farmer said he did, the poor farmer said he just kept falling asleep. The old actor said he liked the *pitutur* advice, admonition. The headman added that he liked watching it because it makes you frightened if you have done something wrong. It has *lawat*: it casts a shadow; it offers a reflection. It is like the difference between just eating a dish and knowing how to cook it and what the ingredients are. After a long argument with the others, he said he thought watching the programmes had changed his behaviour somewhat. He *maklenyet éling*. His heart caught in remembering (catching himself in time). *Klenyet* is one of several key words: it is the physical jolt of intense engagement. The actor admitted on a later evening that what he loved was the sight of beautiful women - on television, better yet not - although he was decrepit (*tongadi*, he was eighty-seven) it still gave him a jolt. To which the headman replied: 'if they have that effect on an old man, imagine what they do to the young'.

Is this patriarchal scopophilia? Each sex knows the other say they feel the same (see the extract on advertisements above). Women talked, ostensibly quite easily, in my presence about their complex feelings on seeing handsome actors.<sup>42</sup> Feeling, as they explained to

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<sup>42</sup> I have no doubt that they would have talked rather differently to a woman (indeed on other topics they were less inhibited talking to my partner) and presumably also in the absence of non-Balinese strangers. Against that however most of the women were from the family with whom I have lived for several years. And both women and men said they felt they ought to try to overcome their reluctance to talk about topics



me, was one thing, doing another. Already we have effects, judgements, remembering, fear, excitement, the relationship of feeling and action, and two of the great imponderables: *lawat* and *suksema*. It is not bad, coming from what the élite designate as the *rakyat yang masih bodoh*, the masses who are still stupid.

Reiterating someone's remark, I asked if television did indeed increase the amount people thought? Oh, yes. They all agreed. Before television, if you needed to know something you listened to *Sang Maraga Pradnyan*, a wise or knowledgeable person. That was the only source. If you spent much time with them, you learned something. If you lived in a village of thieves, you stole sometimes. Now there is television: you cannot but get its shadow (*bayangan*). (On a later night the ex-headman explained it as like water from a waterspout hitting a rock, *sakadi pancoran metatakan batu*. Everything nearby gets wet eventually.) So people follow an example.<sup>43</sup> Without my intervention, they started arguing through whether you followed an example slavishly or had choice. The latter they agreed.

Then they shifted to the conditions of choice itself. (On another evening, they began a fascinating comparison between your choice of sexual partner and your choice of television programmes (Hobart 2010: 218). As your partner depends on your *jatu karman*, passage through the underworld between incarnations, the discussion became very interesting. Who says media studies is dull?) It was not television which was bad: on the contrary, the variety of programmes offered a wealth of examples for people to follow. The problem lay with individual viewers. If you had the ability to hold firm, to reflect critically, then you could learn much. If however you vacillated, you were easily led astray. The old actor then expatiated on three kinds of action *cittakarana*, *pralabda* and *kriyamana*,<sup>44</sup> which he took to be the results of action today would affect one's children, one's children or grandchildren, and have immediate effect. What, I asked, was the bearing on television? You have to learn not to be swayed by lust at scenes of nudity or whatever. The rich farmer's grandson lacerated the knees of a new pair of jeans so he would be stylish. Of course television has an influence. But you cannot separate good and bad. If there were no bad, you could not say anything was good. If there were no women there would be no men.<sup>45</sup>

That was only part of the first night, of thirty such Balinese nights. At some point women or men, old or young, took up the analysis of consumption and television in ways I find at least as illuminating as most academic writing. Then again, that is not hard. They would not, of course, have talked on the subject for so long unless I had been there. They have better things to do with their time. My effect, I think, as a professional intellectual was to make semi-systematic what they, as episodic intellectuals, knew and would talk about.<sup>46</sup>

Let me sketch out a few further points which Balinese insisted on making to me and which are germane to the themes already introduced. Television, unlike theatre, is make believe (*karagrag*), because theatre re-presents what once happened. Plots, characters, appearances recall traces. Television is a succession of mere images: theatre is real. This is

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which did not seem to them appropriate, because I was doing research and it was important therefore that I had an accurate account of what was the case.

<sup>43</sup> This is incidentally part of an account of mimesis, to my mind, at least as subtle as Taussig's, 1993.

<sup>44</sup> The words are of Sanskrit origin and developed in Old Javanese texts. I use the Balinese spelling here though because of the context.

<sup>45</sup> This last is reversible, but usually Balinese give the present order, then repeat the saying in reverse.

<sup>46</sup> 'All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971: 9). Elsewhere (1990b) I have suggested that witnesses and some 'culture heroes' may engage in intellectual agency in crucial ways.

why you can often remember a play you saw for the rest of your life, but cannot remember a play which was on TV two days later. Moving audiences to deep emotions in theatre or television often says less about the plot than about the skill of the actors. What sad scenes do is to remind you of your own past suffering, which is why rich people cannot cry (Hobart 2010). You may empathize with a character, recognize a similar predicament or feeling; but you rarely identify with them. They are too different. The characters in theatre are mostly royal and caught up in situations which would not occur for ordinary folk. (Incidentally I have never heard Balinese say anything which I could take as identification with the servants, one of the oldest chestnuts in Indonesian theatrical literature. Are we to be reduced yet again to the cryptological ploy by which the analyst, like Mummy, knows best and can determine identifications where no one else can see them?) Women cry more, not because they are weaker, but because they are capable of much greater human feeling and empathy (a male view, only partly endorsed by women). On masculine genres, the reason that many men - and most women - appreciate MacGyver more than Kung Fu and Schwarzenegger films seems to be in part because he eschews violence and defeats his enemies by his wits, notably in playing their particular weaknesses off against one another.

What was more important than any preliminary judgement I might have reached was the slowly dawning awareness that on many occasions my questions, my whole frame of reference, was at cross-purposes with Balinese ways of talking and of appreciating television. For instance, I would keep asking what some category - men, women, young, old, villagers, poor, noble - thought or felt, only to be told again and again that the question had no point, or no actual person was pointed to by my question.<sup>47</sup> Or, switching to Indonesian, they corrected me: *seribu orang seribu pendapat*, a thousand people, a thousand opinions. Quite apart from that, what the clever (that is the motives of those in power in putting on broadcasts) and the stupid (those who watch them) make of television is quite different, just as is how Balinese comment on their own television-viewing practices (Hobart 2010).

### To be continued?

It is common to conclude a paper. As media studies in Bali is not even a mewling babe, but a twinkle - or cataract - in someone's eye, it seems a little peculiar to draw conclusions from a prolegomenon to research yet to be done. If you stop and think about it much academic writing engages in a narrative suturing worthy of their own representations of action films.

What interests me is the differences and similarities between the commentaries of media studies experts and Balinese viewers. Any comparison is lopsided, because it involves relating the analyses of professional intellectuals, who opine as a key constitutive part of their careers, with occasional intellectuals, who are musing for their own amusement, as part of critical thinking about their lives or to keep their resident anthropologist happy. However the same holds for the relation between the two discourses with which anthropologists work. The author's position in academic commentaries is usually apodictic, superior, appropriate to a theory-driven inquiry to which facts are subordinate. Quine has pointed out that facts are so subordinate and peripheral to

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<sup>47</sup> This becomes a rather subtly differentiated issue in Balinese semantics. The root is *tuwek*, literally 'to pierce, stab', see Hobart 1999.

theorizing practices as never to oblige their change (1953). My approach though focuses on the periphery: what Balinese villagers make of television (cf. Hartley 1988 on marginality in television itself). Looking at descriptions of genres of television, it must have struck some readers how definitive, determinate, authoritarian and monologic the depictions seemed. The Balinese I talked to on the other hand were humble (as befits mere villagers and episodic intellectuals) and critical, in the sense of dialectically relating ideas and practices, dialogic or - better - polylogic.

Media studies' discourse is marked by entelechy: the end is determined by, and indeed known at, the start. Like so much academic writing, it is rare to start a piece with little idea where you are headed or what your conclusion is.<sup>48</sup> So argument is sutured. Now I do not wish to suggest that Balinese, by contrast, are so original and free-thinking that they do not do the same. I have often heard people, especially senior males in public, rehearse well known positions. However I have equally been struck by the extent to which a surprising number of conversations were reflective, critical, open-ended, even labile (within more or less agreed parameters of analysis, see Hobart 1985). Arguments reached provisional resolutions, which could not easily be anticipated from their starting-points and involved on occasion remarkable risk-taking. But then the Balinese I was talking to did not have their careers implicated in what they said. Perhaps the most striking difference though is the extent to which, for academics, the task is fitting parts to the whole: the hallmark, I suggest, of an agent working in time contracted to, and focused on, her or his actions. Had I been dealing with Balinese priests on a topic on which they were expert, from my limited recent experience it would have been more similar. But in the manifest world, according to most Balinese, you can never know the whole. That is given only to Divinity. Villagers, like life in soap operas we are told, live in a complex, incomplete world which is underdetermined by their own actions and so exist in real time (whatever that is). We academics by contrast would seem at times to live in a timeless world so bound by propositions, structures and genres that we find it hard to think about styles of argument (one exception being Hacking 1982) and the practices of thinking. This is odd because how people set about thinking about and representing the world seems to me often rather more interesting than the content of particular representations.

As an example, let me end with what happened on another night. It was one of those moments - instructive or frightening in retrospect, irritating and confusing at the time - when my interlocutors and I parted ways. Were there not different kinds of happiness? I asked. No. Of course different people enjoyed different things; and the enjoyment of eating was different from, say, sleeping or sex. But, I retorted, there were different words. Surely *gargita* was stronger than *liang* in turn stronger than *seneng*. No. *Gargita* was just Old Javanese for *seneng* and *liang* low. So they were used in different situations. There was, one interlocutor continued, as much sadness as happiness. It may not strike humans that way though (they are more aware of sadness).

The parting of ways, far from being one of those aporia beloved of postmodernists, made possible a moment of revelation. I was trying to generalize some essence, in the manner beloved of anthropologists and media studies specialists alike. The Balinese in

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<sup>48</sup> In fact one of the best pieces of advice I was ever given as a young academic was by John Middleton, who remarked that people usually wrote the Introduction last, after you knew what it was that you had argued. Retrospectively - but narratively prospectively - you then announced in a suitably grand style what it was that you were going to argue. One of the reasons that I like writing is that I do not know where I shall land up and am often rather horrified at where I do.

question seemed to be talking about enjoyment as something inseparable from the particular situation and the person at that moment. There is much to reflect on, as usual, in what they said. From experience I have learned that there is a problem however with this Arcadian scenario. Not being as monologic as academics, not perhaps having the same investment in past mistakes, Balinese argument may be more uncertain in its direction. Had the preamble to the discussion been different, had I asked my question differently, had I understood more of what their replies presupposed, what followed might well have been different. It might not. Until I go back and try I shall not know: nor for certain then. Faced with such appalling uncertainty and indeterminacy, is it really surprising that so many anthropologists and others should seek refuge in brands of cultural and media studies which celebrate the view from afar?

What all this says for the study of modernity in Bali I am not quite sure. While the island is engulfed (literally) by millions of tourists - and not a few experts - seeking, if not an authentic experience, at least its simulacrum, the frames of reference through which we seek to appreciate what is happening seem, if anything, to grow ever more powerful and all-encompassing, but also more remote and curiously detached from any actual object of study. In being able to explain everything, we seem to have explained it into non-existence, triviality and irrelevance. Perhaps our passion for knowledge is like the bodiless god, Kala. In Balinese representations when Kala tries to consume the sun, it just passes out of the back of his head.

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