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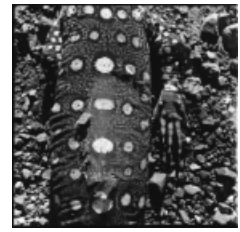

The end of the world news

Television and a problem of articulation in Bali

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ABSTRACT ● Presciently, a year before the riots in Indonesia which brought the downfall of Soeharto, people in Bali had been arguing that a new political and social order could only emerge after apocalyptic violence, although they might well be the victims. Anthropologists and cultural studies specialists still mostly fail to appreciate the sophistication and skill in reflective thinking of ordinary people who remain at best passive subjects rather than critical, if necessarily episodic, intellectuals in their own right. A study of conversations among a group of Balinese villagers revealed a subtle sense of how mass media in general, and television in particular, were crucial to maintaining the existing political order. A central theme of the villagers' analysis is how they had been silenced, to the point that no one would, or could, hear what they said. They were, in effect, disarticulated. Two years later I asked the same group of people whether subsequent events had confirmed or challenged their original views. On various grounds, their earlier argument seemed, if anything, more cogent. For example, the theme of the disarticulation of the majority of Indonesian people had begun to be taken up as an issue on national television. Despite widespread political violence in Indonesia, the villagers were clear that apocalypse had only just started. ●

KEYWORDS ● articulation ● Bali ● cultural studies ● local intellectuals ● mass media ● social commentary ● television

A singular expression was being mooted in Bali in the summer of 1997: *gumi suba wayah* – 'the world is old'. Slipped into conversations, it elicited responses from quiet recognition to enthusiastic endorsement. Balinese had not developed a genteel passion for geology, nor suddenly appreciated their past as a step to the fulfilment of modernity.[1] The expression itself is not new. It seems to have gained particular currency after the general elections in early 1997, because of people's sense of political stagnation. Although the phrase mostly made sense in context, it is fairly evidently *raos wayah*, 'mature speech', or 'indirect speech', as opposed to *raos nguda*, 'immature speech', where the reference is fully transparent. Such idioms are much used by maturer men and women when discussing complex or sensitive issues, the listener being required to be active, intelligent and knowledgeable. So, one evening I idly asked my companions what was the significance of people using this phrase. The ensuing discussion forms the substance of this piece. 'The world is old' turned out to be at once a diagnosis of the terminal, and irreversible, condition of society and a premonition of impending catastrophe. And television is deeply implicated.

Preamble

This article is, then, about how Balinese engage with television in their lives and so with the local, regional and global, however vague, incoherent, and indeed mutually defining, the referents of these terms are. It would be inappropriate, though, to categorize this study as simply one of 'audience response'. Such approaches reify media and divorce them from the situations in which they impinge and are used. Second, such categories turn audiences into imaginary objects (Ang, 1991; Hartley, 1992a), whose workings are in principle fully determinate and determinable. As what audiences make of what they watch is arguably underdetermined, much work with audiences involves the multiple displacement of inferring the producers' intentions, imposing meanings on programmes and imputing your reactions to others – steps which are even more questionable if you are working with people whose language, backgrounds and viewing habits may differ radically from your own. Third, such categorizing abstracts what viewers may be thinking or feeling (or otherwise) from the circumstances under which they do so.

In other words, I am interested in media such as television as practices. 'Practice' has become a buzzword. Its main use these days is to supplement the palpable inadequacies of theory. By contrast I prefer to treat social life, following the later Foucault, as practices. Apart from the often relatively untaxing activity of gawping at television programmes, there are more active practices. Among these, notably, are commenting on, and theorizing, other practices, including watching television itself. Like other Indonesians,

many Balinese I know both enjoy and are highly skilled at commenting and reflecting critically on what is happening about them in the world.

Before I turn to what was said, let me explain where I was, what I was doing, and who I was talking to that night. Since 1970, I have worked in a large settlement, known pseudonymously as Tengahpadang, in South Central Bali. Once a remote mountainous backwater, mass tourism and a boom in handicrafts have brought varying degrees of prosperity, the lure of wealth, new aspirations and uncertainty. In 1980, as far as I know, no one in the village knew how to carve wood. By the late 1980s Tengahpadang was hailed in the guidebooks as 'a traditional village of carvers'. By then, apart from 30 or more daily tourist buses hurtling past the 'artshops' which had sprung up, television had begun to have a major impact. More than 80 percent of theatre companies (many casual or seasonal) in Bali disappeared during the 1980s, as audiences demanded the best theatre troupes on the island as seen on TV. I have heard reflective Balinese argue that television has transformed life for the majority of people in Bali more than tourism and other, more ostensible, forms of modernization.

Almost every household in Tengahpadang now has at least one radio and a television set. Poorer families own black-and-white sets which receive only the state television channel (TVRI), but more people now own colour sets which can also receive five terrestrial commercial channels, as well as more then 12 satellite stations (although only three families have so far bought satellite dishes in the settlement itself). Such sets cost US$200 or more, and the dishes $500. Quite how the less well off pay for these is a question that exercises Balinese themselves. Much work, whether carving, sanding and painting statues, or making offerings and cooking, is compatible with watching, or at least listening to, television which is increasingly turned on from morning to late at night.

My interest in television was aroused during a year's field research in 1988–9, because people preferred to stay at home and watch television rather than drop in for a drink and a chat as they had in the past. When I could catch them, however, they would muse about television, a topic of immediate concern. My appreciation of the growing importance of mass media in Indonesia continued for some time in an equally contingent fashion. During the 1988–9 field trip, a major topic of conversation was when a reputedly superb theatre piece performed and videotaped at the annual Balinese Arts Festival would be serialized on television. Eventually, one day I dropped into the local station of Indonesian State Television (TVRI) to ask about this, only to discover that the tape had been recorded over, the station having neither the funds nor the facilities to store or preserve such broadcasts.

By a roundabout route, this led to a collaborative project, BHISMA (The Balinese Historical and Instructional Study Material Archive), between the Indonesian College of Performing Arts (STSI) in Bali and the School of

Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, which has been running continuously since 1990. Its purpose has been to record, transcribe and make available for their use television programmes which Balinese themselves consider valuable as a record of their changing artistic and cultural activities. Television has become an increasingly important medium, as Balinese come to define themselves self-consciously within Indonesia in terms of their 'art' and 'culture' (Hough, 1992; Picard, 1990, 1996).[2]

Such engagement runs counter to the ideal of the neutral scientific observer, who remains aloof from, and has no effect on, the people he or she studies. In running the Balinese Television Project, I am affecting both the object of study and the people who are directly and indirectly caught up in it, even if how this actually works is less than clear. The 'neutral observer' thesis, however, was always a rather self-serving fantasy, and singularly inappropriate to a post-colonial era. As John Hartley remarked of media studies, it is far from evident what an objective, academic account would look like, for scholars judge and intervene in the very nature of their activity, most certainly in media studies (1992b).

If we are untidily implicated in the lives of the people we work with and study, perhaps we should start from the recognition of the inescapability of this implication. For example, not only does the family with whom I stay receive a significant part of its income from working for the project, but, by being there for at least two months each year over the past decade, it has altered in complex ways my relationship to the people I work with and (partly the same thing) my object of study. Sporadic visiting academics remain in a world apart, because they always can – and indeed do – disengage at will. Quite how being more engaged in various people's lives affects how I am treated and how I participate in discussions such as that outlined below is hard for me to judge. Obviously there are both drawbacks and advantages of having known many of the people I work with for more than 20 years.

A key part of the research on television consists in working with a changing group of villagers, whose main criterion of (self-)selection is that they like talking about the issues I am interested in and often do so among themselves when I am not there. Among the central figures are 'Gung 'Kak (Anak Agung Pekak Oka), a well-known local actor, related to the local court and still flourishing at 91. His intellectual protagonist and spokesman is an ex-long-distance truck driver, ex-village headman, ex-hitman (occasionally my bodyguard) and part-time actor who, as his curriculum vitae suggests, is a man of many parts – the anthropologist's well-informed informant. These two were abetted by two close neighbours, a wealthy farmer (a devotee of shadow theatre) and a poor flower-seller (and wordsmith). Among the other regulars was the ex-headman's daughter-in-law, an actress-dancer who has just graduated with distinction from the College of Indonesian Performing Arts and the only one to have more than elementary school education. We

meet after dinner, when the day's work is over. Separately, I also work with three generations of women from one family: the young actress mentioned above, her mother (who runs a small general grocery shop and was a fine singer in her day) and her grandmother, who still goes to market to trade in agricultural produce every day. How and where I work with them is determined by, and interpolated into, the demanding routine of women in Bali.[3] On the evening in question, only the old actor, the ex-headman and the actress had turned up.

If theatrical links seem to be a leitmotif, it is because, in this neck of the woods, actors have tended to be the local intellectuals, priests being thought primarily fit for ceremonial matters. Anthropology hinges more than most practitioners would like to admit on engagement with local intellectuals and their practices. As a critical inquiry, however, ethnography involves its own distinctive interrogative and disciplinary practices. The result all too easily is that the ethnographer produces a world peopled by subjects who are largely the products of these practices and bear precious little relation to the practices of the interlocutors. In Bali these latter are often highly dialogic and involve forms of complex agency (Hobart, 2000). This is why I almost always work with groups of people. In the first instance, my interest is not in how Balinese answer my questions, but what kinds of questions they think to ask one another, what issues they consider important, how they talk and argue matters out, and when and why they agree or come to differ. When possible, only after having a chance to reflect on what transpired, do I start to interrogate them to try to clarify the presuppositions that they have made.

The end of the world news

On the evening of 3 July 1997, in the ex-headman's house after dinner, with a cassette recorder running, I asked what exactly was at issue when people said that the world was old. It led to an animated conversation, lasting for about an hour and a half. What follows are key passages from the discussions. The following night I returned to the theme and asked questions, to which I turn later in the article.[4]

Extract 1

Ex-head: If you ask my opinion, if things carry on for a long time like this. Our grandchildren will be in difficulties, if there isn't – what do you call it?
Actor: Turmoil.
Ex-head: Yes, that's it.
Actor: If there isn't turmoil, so that everything starts afresh.

Self: What do you mean by 'turmoil'?
Ex-head: 'Turmoil' means war.
Actor: War.
Self: Could you explain a bit more? I haven't fully understood.
Actor: It is everything turned upside-down, destruction.
Actress: Lots of people killed.
Self: But what's the use of a war?
Ex-head: Its use is that everything starts all over again. After a fresh beginning things are ordered again. . . . You can't get, as you do now, people 'buffaloing'.
Self: What's 'buffaloing'?
Ex-head: It's a proverb: those who are already too big just get bigger.
Actor: It's already too late.
Ex-head: Ordinary people can do nothing.
Actor: They can't lift a finger.
Ex-head: For example, they're like tiny insects, they count for nothing. Even if I spoke up and said this or that, no one would pay any attention.
Actor: They have no worth, those who are called 'the poor' (*Sang Tiwas*). They are useless. No one believes them.
Self: Would the rich agree with you that it would be a good idea to have a war?
Ex-head: Heavens, no. They'd be terrified.
Actress: They'd be frightened, if there were a war.
Actor: They'd try to make sure that it wouldn't happen.
Ex-head: Sure. The rich have never had it so good.

I then turned to an issue that various people had remarked on a year before: that there was an overwhelming preponderance of programmes and films celebrating the lifestyle of the wealthy. I asked why the lives of the poor were not shown much on television.[5]

Extract 2

Actor: As for the poor, they are of no use. The rich never think of actually talking with the poor. If possible, they keep as far away from them as they can, where the rich can talk among themselves about whatever. I don't think that the poor could succeed in speaking. Even if they did, as was said earlier, they are worth nothing, no one is listening.
Ex-head: They show the good life on television. They provide images of beautiful things, so that those without will strive for them. The only problem is that they can't succeed.
Actor: They haven't the wherewithal.

Ex-head: Yes, it's hard. Why? You can say people these days, it's like advertisements. Why should government promote television the whole time and only broadcast what comes across as good? But what's bad is not, or is rarely, shown. I think you can say it's theory *versus* practice. The theory is fine . . .

Actor: But the practice is a very far cry from that.

Ex-head: The practice is rotten. It is tantalizing the masses, goading them on, so that they will want to slave away.

Actor: So that they'll be joyful, for example so that they will do what they're told is right.

Ex-head: Yes. But afterwards there is the practice, which is different. For example, consider people going on transmigration. They never show transmigrants starving. It's always people who . . .

Actor: Who are happy.

Actress: 'Successful'!

Ex-head: Just the ones who have made it. A lot of people have been duped that way.

They then turned to some of the 'success stories', such as the growth of Indonesian car manufacturing capacity (run at that time by President Soeharto's son) and monumental projects.

Extract 3

Ex-head: Now they keep on putting up these big buildings, don't they 'Gung 'Kak? So that the masses feel good. Now if you ask me what do the masses get out of this, it's feeling – not what lies behind it. It's done like this so they feel happy, but the real good is for others. The feeling you get is sadness – you don't feel happy.

Actress: The feelings are close. Now I feel happy if I get to watch television. I enjoy watching the programmes. But the next day when you've got a kid who nags that he has got to have it just like on TV, then you're sad again.

What did they think about the range of programmes broadcast?

Extract 4

Ex-head: If television is important, as it was just said to be, it is so that people don't think too much.

Actor: About problems.

Ex-head: About being angry. So they give you entertainment, don't they? You won't be confused and undecided. Watch television and very soon you'll stop feeling pissed off. Isn't that so, 'Gung 'Kak?

Actor: That's how it's used.

Ex-head: It's used to divert people's minds. So that they don't long for – so that they don't think about – anything else. So that you won't remember, you'll just forget yourself the whole time.

I then turned to a favourite theme in Bali, the 'influence' of television.[6]

Extract 5

Self: Can you oppose what's on television?
Ex-head: As for opposing, there's no opportunity.
Actor: You can't.
Actress: It's difficult.
Actor: Because you can't, there is no opportunity to do so.
Ex-head: What would you use?
Actor: What would you use?
Actress: Against whom?
Ex-head: Who am I going to oppose? That is why we beg for uproar now. I don't know who would bring it about. It would just explode, just be war.
Actor: Apocalypse.
Ex-head: That's why there's no point in opposing.[7]
Actor: Oppose it, I couldn't succeed. Let me use an analogy . . .
Actress: It isn't that we can't succeed, we're reluctant.
Actor: Reluctant? What's behind that is that we wouldn't succeed. It isn't reluctance. We'd fail, for example suppose I translated my opposition into action, it would fail. Really, it's like preparing rice, isn't it? If you're going to cook, you winnow the padi to get the hulled rice. But how do you get clean rice, if the unhulled rice gathers into a pile?[8] Now, if it were just hulled rice, it would be easy. It would be fine for porridge, you could use it for cooking, couldn't you?
Self: You can't oppose what's happening? Can you explain?
Ex-head: What's on television contains nothing to think about. It has no exemplary use. What can you emulate in it? There is nothing worth imitating. How do you set about opposing it?
Actor: You can't.
Ex-head: There are no ideas you can use to help formulate criticism. If people do evil, there is nothing upon which to build a counter-argument.

A few universals

The analysis in this discussion is remarkably subtle, sustained and penetrating. It made me wonder whether academics do not appropriate more

theoretical sophistication from their subjects than they usually care to admit.

From what little I know of media studies, what the commentators had to say echoes the approach favoured by centre-left academics. On one reading you might think the villagers had mugged up on their media imperialism theory beforehand. We have a classic statement of the irreversible momentum and logic of capital with the reduction of most humans to units of labour, a class in, and not for, itself. This is complemented by the bourgeoisie's fear of threats to its pre-eminence and of the breakdown of reciprocal, or moral, relations between members of classes. Crucially, the proletariat are alienated and silenced through the ideological use of mass media as opiates. Television emerges as the medium par excellence of domination, not least by depriving the masses of the means to criticize their fate. Finally there is the recognition of the impossibility of structural change without revolution.

A less dogmatic interpretation might note that the older speakers are traditional intellectuals, whose former importance as opinion-makers and the brains behind the pre-modern order has been irreversibly eroded by new kinds of organic intellectuals. New forms of good sense fit ill with traditional forms of common sense. Such an interpretation might elaborate on the extent to which the commentators lament the loss of an earlier hegemonic order and question how far the new order (ironically the regime of President Soeharto, which was in power at the time, was known as 'The New Order') manages to make itself hegemonic at all, by stressing the degree to which it relies on domination and ideological manipulation.

The problem with all such academic accounts is that they apply so generally as to be rather uninformative and tend to tell us more about the preoccupations of their authors than of their subjects. The former analysis in particular rounds up all the usual suspects. Capital is organized and, like structure, is imbued with transcendental powers of agency and mind.[9] Its metaphysics relies on now-familiar dichotomies – traditional/modern, structure/ideology, determination/choice, matter/mind – as it does on the presumed superiority of the knower over the known. Contingency, indeterminacy and situatedness are articulated away. The central structures, forces or agents are autonomous and self-determining. Such essentializing ignores the degree to which such entities are continually constituted by what is outside them (Laclau, 1990, 1996, after Staten, 1986, after Derrida), a problem much time is devoted to denying, for instance through television.

Village hamlets born to sing unseen?

A favoured academic practice for dealing with indeterminacy and lack of closure is overinterpretation (Hobart, 1999). Were the commentators

anticipating class revolution? Or, given the Balinese penchant for reiterating what we might call Saivite-style thinking (for example, Teeuw et al., 1969), were they trying out familiar eschatological presuppositions on new kinds of events? They actually used not day-to-day Balinese expressions, but Sanskrit and *kawi*[10] words replete with connotations. For example, in the term *kaliyuga*, translated as 'apocalypse' in the last of the translated passages above, *kali* is the final age, *yuga*, in which morality and order fall apart before destruction, *sengara*. This refers especially to the periodic destruction of the universe at the end of a cycle of ages, *kalpa* (Zoetmulder, 1982: 1665).

Similarly, was the irreversibility of domination couched in the linear time of Euro-American (and Marxist) cosmology? Or was it part of a metaphysics of transformation (*matemahan*)? Prior to the extract above, the commentators had described the process of differentiation as *rodan pedati*, the turn of the cartwheel, by which what goes up must go down and vice versa. Later they reviewed the reversal of family fortunes in the village over the last generations and concluded that cycles took about 50 years, spurred by disruptions such as the Dutch conquest, the Japanese Occupation or the coup in 1965. Contrary to determinate explanations (be these infrastructural, processual or psychic), the commentators argued for *ganti*, 'contingency'.[11]

A central theme of the discussion is how ordinary people are silenced. At first sight this might seem to echo Spivak's view of the subaltern being unable to speak because of the constraints on her discursive positioning (1988). A problem is that this presupposes the possibility of an unconstrained, genuine position from which the superior knowing subject can speak; if not authentically, then at least not inauthentically (see Ram, 1993). What are we to make of the fact that the commentators, male and female, of different ages, class and caste backgrounds, did speak and had a great deal to say? What enunciative position are we to adopt such as to conclude that they cannot speak or are not heard?

The commentators themselves argued, on almost diametrically opposed grounds, that they could not speak. However, it was precisely the a priori dismissal of anything that they might say, without bothering to listen to it first, that exercised them – an exclusion in which Spivak is as implicated as the wealthy and politically powerful people to whom the commentators were referring. Their sense of being ignored and excluded, however, is a statement that has significant entailments. What the commentators had to say challenges elite claims to epistemic superiority, especially when these claims require the refusal to engage with those they purport to speak of (an example itself of denying the constitutive outside). In place of the rationalizations of the New Order regime (Heryanto, 1999), the villagers stressed contingency, disjuncture and antagonism in a way that is arguably at least as theoretically subtle as any on offer.

Not only are the ways that the elite imagine society and other people

incommensurable with, and antagonistic to, other kinds of practices, they are condemned largely to ignore these. The old actor's remark about the rich not thinking about actually talking to the poor was not just an observation of social mores. As he made clear later, it is a determination *not* to enquire, *not* to know. Even more fundamentally, it is the denial of the dialogic nature of social life. The old actor was engaging in a philosophical critique of the nature of society and knowledge. Similarly, the reference to images of beautiful things presupposes an acquaintance with Balinese ideas about how desire is fomented and how it is disciplined, if humans are to achieve a measure of agency and not be totally subject to others' and their own appetites,[12] exemplified for instance in the widespread sale of productive land to purchase consumer goods, such as television sets, in Bali.

It is against this background that the repeated statements about how worthless the poor are make sense. As the old actor remarked, even rubbish can be burnt as firewood. In earlier political formations, you might be politically insignificant subjects (*panjak*, *kaula*, *semut barak*), but that did not encompass your other skills, abilities or intelligence. The refusal to listen to and so recognize and engage others is far more serious than treating people as mere labour power (something Balinese have been familiar with for a long time). It is to treat people not as agents or even subjects, but as objects. Television epitomizes the mutual disenchantment. People do not believe what the elite tell them, nor do the elite believe it themselves. It is mere manipulation.

Let me give two brief examples of the subtlety of the discussion. The ex-village head remarked that all that the masses get from grand projects is 'a good feeling'. The word he uses for what others get is *suksema*, one of the hardest words to gloss, even in Balinese. It connotes subtle, immaterial, refined and so the feeling on accomplishing or being offered something good. It is deliberately ambiguous (*ngèmpèlin*). If listeners wish to infer material advantage, that is up to them. The reference is slightly veiled (*makulit*). Indeed it is an exercise in 'mature speech', *raos wayah*, which the undiscriminating listener or reader, like our imaginary leftish media studies expert, takes as it seems, instead of rethinking it critically. Remember the ex-village head's complaint about television programmes – that there was nothing to think about, or with.

Another point, which may have struck you, is the complexity of the 'subject position' from which the older commentators speak. There is a refusal to unify, centre or essentialize oneself as an enunciating 'subject', or universalize this into objective class interests. (The 'you' I have inserted into the translation to avoid clumsiness was absent, as were references to 'we' or 'I', except as illocutionary modifiers.) There is an ironic distance by which the subject starts to elide with the object of its own knowledge. Rather evidently this is not a disavowal. Before using the extracts here, I showed them to the commentators. They were actually rather pleased with what I had

chosen. I asked if they felt it was harsh or could be construed as deprecatory (*nyacadin*). The ex-village head replied that it was so, not a matter of personal opinion. As he truly felt this to be the case, they could not be deprecatory. Balinese categories of truth and slander are as distinctive as they are widely ignored by scholars.

Subjects or agents?

A crucial section comes at the end of the last passage. The ex-village head criticized much television programming for there being nothing to emulate. Then he added: 'How do you set about resisting?' Without much twisting and turning, this is not a world which is appreciable only through the categories and mental processes of a universalizable knowing subject, whether unified or split – the ghost in the television. Without something on which someone else has already started work, you cannot think or act. In emulating it, you change yourself. What you think, what you think with and what you think about are not predetermined, but are the result of endless engagement. If you are flung into a world in which people do evil, you need the means – the thinking of others before you – to enable you to think at all, let alone to be able to pass the results of your thinking on.

In short, the commentators spoke of themselves as agents, or as victims, not as subjects. That is, they stressed action, its responsibilities and consequences, where you may command, go along with or have action inflicted on you. They avoided talking about a consciousness, pure or otherwise, as the source or object of actions, which transcended actions and events. Yet at the same time, the commentators presented people such as themselves as subject to economic, political and social forces over which they have little command. There is more at stake here than the ambiguity in the word 'subject' (see Henriques et al., 1984: 3; Williams, 1983: 308–12).

To address this issue requires me to refer to a series of discussions about television which I held with a larger and partly different group of people three years earlier. The drift of the argument was that watching television was like standing near a water spout at a bathing place: you get whatever is about. (The term used was *kena*, to be the recipient of someone else's actions.) This may be for good or ill, but affects who you become. If you are not to be swept along passively, you have to be disciplined (*tegeg*) and learn from past example how to avoid what is bad and to exercise self-restraint. This is no spartan or puritan code though. I found Balinese open about their sexual arousal over attractive actors and actresses on television. Humans, after all, are composed of antagonistic drives and dispositions (*triguna, triwarga*), not harmonious wholes.

What was particularly interesting was how people would talk in terms of different kinds and degrees of engagement with television. These tended to

a rough order, each stage commonly being a necessary, but by no means sufficient, condition for the next. First, you knew something (for example, the news). You might also enjoy it (*seneng*). Most engagement with television stops there. Sometimes, though, you feel for the characters or find yourself gripped by your own feelings (*marasa*). Only then are you likely to understand or appreciate what is at issue. The word is *ngaresep* – at once active and passive, to penetrate or infiltrate into, and to be penetrated or infiltrated. To appreciate is not only to be changed, but to change. Finally, you may decide to act on (*nelebang*) whatever is the outcome for you. In use, these distinctions are obviously deployed much more flexibly and subtly than a bald list suggests. Media theorists tend to put much emphasis on television news as a hegemonic device (for example, Fiske, 1989: 289–308). Not only is the sort of knowledge involved relatively superficial on this account, but most Balinese are deeply sceptical about its accuracy even as far as it goes.

The relationship presupposed between persons and images (indeed the lived world as a whole) seems quite different from some media theorists' stress on 'identification' as the necessary mode of mediation. It is also arguably both more complicated and subtler than the idea that viewers implicate and extricate themselves at will (Fiske, 1989: 174–90) or than simple degrees of engagement and emulation (Smith, 1995).

It is at this point that television-viewing practices in rural Bali begin to have wider implications. One of the serious intellectual battlegrounds of the 20th century is over the nature of the human subject and its epistemological implications. It is hard to imagine what media studies would look like without some more – or less – coherent set of presuppositions about the subject. What would link production with purpose, programmes with meaning, images with content, or define viewing? An account of the subject has, in effect, to be universal (ahistorical and acultural) and a priori – and so the plaything of ethnocentric fantasy. This seems to me to be one of the most vexed issues facing critical media studies. Such approaches are caught, as Foucault pointed out, in the circularity common to the human sciences of being both its own subject and object (1970; compare Habermas, 1987).[13] An analysis of how people appreciated television in Bali offers a radical solution. It is not simply the familiar anthropological move of decentring the western subject by positing another: it is to dispense with the subject entirely.

As I have indicated, the commentators worked with quite different presuppositions. First, the knower is neither superior to, nor radically ontologically different from, the known. Humans are the products of past practices: both what has been done to them and what they do. Television, as a major source of representations, is therefore important.[14] As people are continually interacting with their environment, notably other humans often in groups, it makes little sense to postulate an atomized subject, whether as

pre-social homunculus, as unitary consciousness or as fractured ideal state.[15] It follows that humans are not the only, or even the most important, agents. In fact, the stress on agency in academic writings instantiates an elitist bias: most humans and groups spend more time being at least partly instruments or subjects of the decisions and actions of others – a point that the commentators elaborated on at length. An analysis of television-viewing is therefore as much an account of patiency as of agency.[16]

Are there not, however, differences between what Balinese had to say about television in the summer of 1997 and three years previously? The latter group seemed less pessimistic about the scope for agency or, perhaps better, active patiency: you could not by and large determine broadcasting schedules or content – although, in their own way, people like the young actress (who has featured in various broadcasts of theatre and textual reading) did – but you could affect how they impacted on you, your family and friends. The later account resonated with more abject patiency and objectivation. Against this, the commentators were aware to varying degrees that their arguments reached a wider audience through me and were interested to see what I had selected for this paper.

The next night I switched to direct interrogation about the differences between the two accounts. While this is part – or, better, one phase – of anthropological enquiry, it runs the familiar risk of presuming the commentators to be unitary subjects striving accurately to represent a stable world, independent of the circumstances of the questioning – precisely the abstraction the commentators challenged as theory divorced from practice. The differences turned out to be in significant part situational. That is, they both depend on what had been discussed earlier on in the respective conversations and were also affected by what was going on socially and politically at the different times.

Can you avoid the 'influence' of television? Yes, if you do not simply believe what you hear and see.[17] If you have begun to feel (*marasa*, which precedes intellection), then you can avoid ill effects; just as if you warn a child and it is sensitive to what you say, it will pay heed. Does that not contradict the hopelessness of resistance? No, you can resist in your thoughts and feelings, but if whatever you are resisting doesn't know about it, the effects are rather limited! Like a grasshopper in a matchbox it makes a lot of noise, but doesn't achieve much.

What about advertisements? You can resist those by not buying the product. It is much easier to resist commercial companies than government, because the latter imposes and enforces law. If you fall for the blandishments of advertisers, it is your own fault. But doesn't the effectiveness of television wear off with time? The commentators agreed that it was largely entertainment. What required lengthy discussion was the relationship of two contrary, and partly irreconcilable, ways in which Balinese talk about television. On the one hand, television could not be all that

important in the end because it was just an image (*lawat*, on the significance of which see Hobart, 2000). On the other hand, its effects depended on the quality of thought behind the presentation and so what you could make of it.

Isn't refusing to engage – just enjoying – a form of resistance? This drew laughter. Of course it is. Television is like a parent telling off a child. The child just keeps quiet. What can you do? Turning off the set or switching channels is a form of resistance. Most people turn off both local and national news (*Berita Daérah* and *Berita Nasional*). If you want to try to find out what is actually going on, it is better to rely on the world news broadcasts (*Dunia Dalam Berita*), because at least the foreign news reports are likely to dissimulate less. With much hilarity, they started recounting recent occasions when they had switched off during speeches by senior government figures.[18] By contrast, during the Gulf War and before the Indonesian general election, people had watched eagerly, trying to discern what was really going on.

Why, then, I asked, was the tone of their account so different? It is because nothing has changed for a long time. Like a new kind of food, at first it is great fun. But if you eat the same thing day in, day out, for years, you grow sick of it. After a long period of no change, without any explosion of activity (*makebiahan*, related to *kebiar*, the style of gamelan music) to follow, people conclude that what they are told is worthless (*tanpa guna*). I suggested therefore that an implicit symmetry emerges. The rich and powerful consider what ordinary people have to say of no interest, while ordinary people come to dismiss what their leaders say as of no value. They agreed this was so.

Finally, the old actor made a passing remark, which led to me intervening more directly still. He noted that, in the past, people had firmly believed their leaders (*Bapak kapracayain pisan dumun*). I almost missed it, but the word they had used before for 'believe' was *ngega*, not *pracaya*. *Ngega* implies both different truth conditions and an emotive relationship to the speaker's statement. *Ngega* suggests that the speaker has demonstrable evidence for what he or she asserts; whereas *pracaya* implies something closer to an act of blind faith. In other words, the commentators were saying that no one believed the poor, although what they said was demonstrably true; but previously they had had faith in their leaders.

I asked if television had reduced people's trust in their leaders, because they were now visible and the relationship of their words and deeds could be monitored. Could it be, I suggested, that leaders had been more like the gods, powerful yet remote? The old actor was particularly delighted with the analogy. Of course. 'If Divinity were manifest, you would believe in It much less. If you can't encounter It, you believe that much more fervently.' Perhaps de-deifying their leaders has been one of television's most long-lasting effects in Bali.

Aftermath

The Balinese commentators' discussion raises more general issues. What was it that they actually said and did not say? A careful reading shows that they were arguing that the mass media, especially television in their case, were central to the problems of contemporary Indonesia. My Balinese companions did not reify or instrumentalize the mass media, but were interested in them as practices. In Extract 2, the actor questioned whether 'the poor could succeed in speaking. Even if they did . . . no one is listening'. It is not that government, public officials or the rich cannot hear. They choose not to, and when they are obliged to hear, they do not listen: a quite different point. More seriously, the actor doubted that, in some sense, the poor could say anything at all. As poor people talk, complain, argue and even perform theatre, the actor is not speaking trivially.[19] They are subject to powerful articulations. They are unable to articulate back effectively. In other words, they are disarticulated. 'There are no ideas you can use to help formulate criticism. If people do evil, there is nothing upon which to build a counter-argument' (the ex-head in Extract 5). You could hardly put it more succinctly.[20] The media are not peripheral to, but are constitutive of, power.

Who is it who does not listen? In other parts of the conversation, the commentators made it quite clear that they were not referring exclusively, or even primarily, to entrepreneurs who are merely doing what they do (making money). Rather, they were talking primarily about politicians, the higher echelons of state employees, civil servants (*pegawai negeri*), print, radio and television journalists, and university and school teachers (organic intellectuals, if you will). These are the people who, by virtue of their education and position, are supposed not only to appreciate the problems, but to speak for, to represent, the interests of society in a broader sense.[21]

Subsequent events made the Balinese villagers' comments seem most perceptive, especially as most authorities on Indonesia at that time were speaking as if the New Order were stable and would last indefinitely. A year later, after riots in May 1998, President Soeharto resigned. The increasingly emboldened press and television started to reveal the extent of long-running military action in East Timor, Aceh and elsewhere, as well as intermittent civil unrest in many other parts of Indonesia. Was this the apocalypse of which the Balinese had spoken? In the General Election of June 1999, a large proportion of the electorate voted for Megawati, the daughter of Indonesia's first president, Soekarno. The sheer scale of the voters' rejection of the New Order regime seemed to take the political establishment by surprise, while reform-minded commentators on television kept remarking '*Rakyat sudah berbicara*', 'the people have spoken'. Did that mean that the poor were no longer disarticulated? And who had benefited from the changes? Three weeks later, while wrangling was still going on over the electoral college to

decide on a new president, I asked the commentators what, with hindsight, they thought of what they had said two years before.[22]

The old actor was quite clear. Although Pak Harto[23] was no longer in power, the same old gang (*sekaha*) were still there. Without violence (*kakerasaan*), nothing would change, because they were completely without shame and just driven by greed (*pongah kaduluran momo*). The disastrous state in which Indonesia found itself in the late 1990s was the result of Soeharto's greed materializing itself *mamurti*, a *kawi* and Sanskrit term. As the conversation went on, interestingly the imagery the commentators used to judge the motives behind, and consequences of, their political masters' actions was laced with textual references.[24]

Were the riots and massacres which had taken place not *kali sengara*? The commentators were agreed:

Extract 6

Ex-head: If you look at the situation now, I think not. If you examine what is supposed to be involved in *kali sengara*, this isn't it probably, not yet.
Actor: Not yet.
Ex-head: Being overwhelmed by *Kali Sengara*, but – what do you call it? . . .
Actor: I think it has just begun.
Actress: The indications are there.

The hundreds of deaths during the riots of May 1998 and tens of thousands killed in Aceh and East Timor, as reported on television from 1998 on, did not then constitute *kali sengara*. As my Balinese companions understood it, the term is reserved for the complete breakdown of society, law and order which, at the time of writing, many people fear is about to happen in Indonesia but which, in their misery, many of the poor are actually looking forward to. They went on to say that, without dispute, without struggle, no good can ever emerge. Unless they are to be crushed yet again, the poor have to be brave enough to oppose what is happening. If, like a cornered dog, you are desperate enough, you turn and fight no matter what the outcome.[25]

The discussion came round to a theme which, to judge from phone-in television programmes, was exercising people right across Indonesia.[26] Giving ordinary people a voice had been a central theme of nationwide advertising before the elections. The ex-head started by citing a popular slogan: Your voice will determine the destiny of the nation (*suara anda menentukan nasib negara*). How much money had they spent on the advertising campaign? And it had all been wasted, because their voices had not been listened to. No matter how many millions more people voted for Megawati Soekarnoputri than for any other leader or party, it turned out that all they were voting

for was some of the members of an electoral college, chosen according to labyrinthine rules.

Many of the themes that the commentators had raised originally turned out to echo, and sometimes anticipate, far wider concerns of ordinary Indonesians. Expectations of an impending apocalypse are quite widespread in Bali and I heard reports of similar predictions being made in Java. How widely these are held, I do not know. The old actor's pessimistic view that, even if the poor did succeed in speaking, it was questionable whether anyone was listening, proved sadly prescient. The disappointment that followed the election hinged on the appreciation that the majority of Indonesians had been neatly disarticulated yet again by the elite in power. The use of textual language to evaluate events is, however, significant. Perhaps the most popular form of social criticism, especially when the mass media are muzzled as under the New Order, has been theatre. And the theatrical use of classical examples, drawn from Indian and Indonesian literary texts, against which to evaluate contemporary action, is very common and well attested. We can, however, now appreciate its significance rather better. The texts are the potential source of counter-articulations, which carry authority insofar as such classics still command attention.

The New Order attempted to articulate its actions around a vision of modernity, but it is easy to underestimate how much respect is given to classic literary and theatrical sources, especially when the claims of modernity seem to ring increasingly hollow. Nor is it surprising that it is actors rather than, say, priests, who do the articulating. The old actor may be partly disarticulated by the new mass media but, ironically, a trusty standby for broadcasting is precisely these older theatre genres. A striking feature of the Indonesian media scene is that the television programmes which consistently gain the highest ratings – if we trust them – are high-production-value soap operas and quasi-historical epics, the latter rearticulating older ontologies and epistemologies in modern film form. Soaps, by contrast, deal with the lifestyles of the mega-rich and introduce us to the world of modernity, its joys and tribulations. The two most popular television genres therefore involve rival articulations. The old actor is at once silenced, but given the wherewithal to speak. Whether anyone is listening is another matter.

At one point in the conversation, I ran briefly through my argument about the poor being unable to speak. At this point, the ex-head and the actor cut in. When they talked about the poor, *sang tiwas*, they were not speaking about people who were simply lacking materially. This was mature speech (*raos wayah*, see my opening paragraph). *Sang Tiwas* are people who are poor in knowledge and experience. Rather obviously, if you have no money, you cannot get a good education or travel. But it is not the poverty that matters in itself, but the constraints it places on your ability to understand and to be heard. You are consigned to ignorance and silence. It is not, however, just Balinese who are in danger of being ignorant, but the

ethnographer. While *tiwas* is Balinese for poor, in *kawi* the word also has more complex overtones: 'failing, coming to nothing, being a disappointment; broken down, defeated, ruined, dead' (Zoetmulder, 1982: 2026). To be *tiwas* is not a happy state. If the commentators had not realized that I was unlikely to understand the indirect, but crucial, references, I would still be in the dark. It makes you appreciate how fragile and impoverished in fact may be the interpretations of scholars, who are supposed to be the authoritative articulators of the people we work with.

Notes

1 Like many other Indonesians, Balinese are struggling to articulate contemporary economic and social transformations, using the imagery and vocabulary of modernization and globalization in distinctive ways (Vickers, 1996).
2 The project has been run jointly with Professor Madé Bandem and Professor Wayan Dibia, successively the directors of STSI (the Indonesian College of Performing Arts), and in collaboration with the Centre of Documentation of Balinese Culture and the Faculty of Arts, Udayana University, Bali. We now have more than 1500 hours of mostly very high-quality broadcasts recorded on S-VHS tape in a small, special dehumidified studio, built in Tengahpadang. In recognition of its educational importance, Indonesian State Television has granted us permission to digitize and reproduce the collection's materials for research and teaching purposes. I am grateful to the British Academy Committee for Southeast Asian Studies and to SOAS for providing much of the funding for this project between 1990 and 1995 and to Felicia Hughes-Freeland, University College, Swansea, and Alan Bicker and John Bousfield, University of Kent at Canterbury, for their help and support at different stages of the project.
3 The actress and the ex-headman's son (her husband), a high school teacher, are the main people employed by the project to record and transcribe broadcasts. You could argue that the people who were there that evening were not typical; that, despite the young woman's presence, this was about elderly men ideologizing; that my presence and the fact that they knew me well and were responding to what they thought I expected of them made them articulate in a way they would not otherwise have done. There is obviously something in these observations from sociology of knowledge. Reducing people to functions of their subject positions, however, is a familiar form of essentializing and determinism, which treats them as producers of behaviour to be explained and not as thinkers in their own right. Over the past three years in different parts of Bali, I have heard almost all the points made by the discussants being put forward to me or to others by women and men of different ages and social backgrounds.
4 I have tidied up the text in two important respects. First, I have extrapolated

sections from the discussion (breaks are indicated by ellipses in the transcript). Second, such conversations are so dialogic that they are hard to read. I have omitted many interjections, reiterations by other people and so on in the English. The Balinese original can be found in an earlier version of this article, published as a chapter in Connor and Rubinstein (1999).

5 The poor appear, of course, on television in stereotyped roles, as caricatures rather than characters (reminiscent of Stuart Hall's remarks about the roles permitted to blacks in Britain and America, 1990).

6 I put the word in quotes for two reasons. First, it is an Indonesian word that is often used to split off Indonesian 'influence' as bad. Second, in English the word is a fudge. It conveniently bypasses the need to think critically about the relationship in question.

7 The expression *ngakoh* is a poignant one. It suggests the pointlessness of doing anything. At the Third International Balinese Studies workshop held in Sydney in 1995, Anak Agung Gedé Santikarma delivered a paper entitled '*Kok Ngomong*' ('What's the point in saying anything?'), which is now – as someone pointed out to me with delight – painted on the side of a local bus in Bali.

8 What can decent people do, if scum are on top? There is a further implied image, which harks back to the previous theme. The broken grains which move centrifugally outwards are little valued and are thrown to chickens for fodder. That is the fate of ordinary decent people these days.

9 The trouble is that capital keeps on changing its mind. For a long time it used to be driven by the pure reason of the market. In 1998 it suddenly turned out that it had been nothing of the sort, but corruption, collusion, nepotism and cronyism (to use the phrase popular among Indonesian reformers). Subsequently the International Monetary Fund tells us that the problem is that the rationality was not pure enough.

10 *Kawi* is a Balinese term that designates various distinct, but interrelated, literary idioms.

11 So much for Lévi-Strauss's thesis (1966) of pre-modern thought as over-deterministic. How are we to decide between interpretations?

12 If Foucault thought it necessary to devote two volumes of *History of Sexuality* to exploring radical discursive differences in earlier European eras, perhaps we should not unthinkingly impose our own commonsense ideas on others' good sense.

13 Here, any knowledge about the human subject presupposes the subject who does the knowing.

14 But less important than lived events, according to most Balinese I have talked to.

15 Henriques et al. in *Changing the Subject*, 1984, provide an excellent critique of the first two options and their variants. I do not know of a really good critique of the Lacanian rescension of the subject. Williamson (1992) is

useful on the narrative teleology of the Lacanian account. Fink, as a Lacanian analyst, undermines much of the apriorism of grand theorizing using extrapolations from selected texts of Lacan as the springboard to universalistic claims (1995). He points out that theory in psychoanalysis is an aid to, and revisable through, therapeutic *practice*.

16 The word patiency, borrowed from Collingwood (1942), has an unfamiliar ring to modern ears. It has the advantage, however, of being part of the vocabulary of action and avoids the massive ambiguities of the term subject in English (see Williams, 1983).

17 A point that runs counter to Eipper's somewhat Ricoeurian appeal for trust in authority to counter the hermeneutics of suspicion (1996). The commentators have, I think, adequately addressed his arguments.

18 Because commercial channels are required to broadcast simultaneously the news put out by state television, which is part of the Indonesian Ministry of Information, you cannot simply switch channels, but must either put up with it or turn the set off. That the families I know tended to leave the set on during Muslim or Christian religious broadcasts, but either switch the news off or turn the sound down, may be more informative than the news itself.

19 What 'Gung 'Kak said in Balinese was: '*Sang Tiwas 'ten ja wènten nyidang ngaraos napi-napi yèn tiang ngamanahin*'. It translates fairly literally as 'The poor cannot succeed in saying anything at all, if I think [about it]'. You can read the stress as on the object (there is nothing that matters that they can talk about), or on the subject (in effect they cannot speak). 'Gung 'Kak is a very skilled and careful speaker and, from his other remarks that evening, the double sense seems to have been deliberate.

20 And, as it happens, the term Balinese use is *ngadungang*, which catches rather nicely many of the English connotations of 'articulate' as at once to express and to link together. Evidently, however, it does not usually carry the philosophical overtones it has come to have in post-Gramscian media studies.

21 Villagers widely assumed that officials were in cahoots with entrepreneurs, so they could be lumped together for the purposes of the present discussion.

22 It was the same group of people apart from the poor, high-caste flower seller, who had died in the meantime. The conversation took place before the referendum on Independence in East Timor, the ensuing violence there and renewed rioting in Jakarta.

23 No sooner had Soeharto fallen from office than everyone I knew started referring to him as Pak Harto, which is fairly colloquial, somewhere say between 'Father Harto' and 'Old Man Harto'. Delightfully, Harto is 'wealth' in *kawi* (see below). So the ex-President was literally Mr Wealth.

24 At a key point, the old actor and young actress together started to develop a critique in *kawi*, often called Old Javanese, but perhaps better a literary register of Balinese. The key part was: *Amerih sukaning idep*. *Angawe*

laraning mitra. Seeking your own pleasure brings pain to your friends (other people). The saying is widely used in many of the serious theatre genres. They understand it to be from the *kakawin* Bharatayuddha, the old Javanese poetic version of the later part of the Indian epic, the Mahabharata.

25 As this article went to press, the electoral college voted Abdurrahman Wahid President and Megawati Soekarnoputri Vice-President. Not being in Indonesia, I cannot report in detail on the commentators' reactions. I have spoken with the ex-head and actress by telephone and they say they have to wait and see whether anything changes. They suspect little will.

26 Perhaps the most popular in the part of Bali I know was a programme, *Detak Detik*, hosted by one of the leading reformers, Wimar Witoelar, in which ordinary members of the public would phone in and put often quite blunt questions to senior establishment figures in the studio.

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