

*Is Development really part of Media Studies?*

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## Introduction

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When the German Society for Ethnology<sup>1</sup> invited me in 1999 to give the keynote lecture on Anthropology of Development, I was slightly perplexed as to what to write. The probable reason that they had invited me was that, in the early 1990s, I had edited a collection of essays by anthropologists who were critical of much development theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> Since then my interests had shifted to anthropological and Cultural Studies approaches to mass media. I was on the point of graciously declining, when it occurred to me that Cultural Studies might have something to say about development that would be fresh, surprising and, I hoped, original. What I had not anticipated was that the audience would be so aghast. Of some seven or eight hundred people present, only one clapped, while my old friend on the panel, Johannes Fabian, hooted with laughter. The rest was silence. I had, it transpired, committed an act of unapologetic apostasy. Nor was this unique. When asked, as I occasionally was, to give a talk about critiques of development, if I touched on the topic, avoidance mechanisms kicked in, as if I had made some unmentionable *faux pas*.

What did I say that was so abominable? My starting point was that European ideas of modernity and progress—and so evolution and development—were not unproblematic or uncontested states governed by natural law, but were cultural articulations.<sup>3</sup> The hegemonic narrative of the West's inexorable rise required justifying the fate of less fortunate parts of the world. One entailment was that the exploitation that underlay this differential should be ignored or finessed as—or exculpated through—a commitment to worthy, indeed noble, charity to the poor and ignorant. Development aid was unquestionably a Good Thing, no matter what the actualities.

If development is articulated through an overwhelmingly Eurocentric narrative, then what are its main features? This is where Cultural Studies came in. In his *Television culture*, Fiske had neatly contrasted two semi-ubiquitous, gendered styles of narrative. Masculine narratives, exemplified by action series, presupposed people who are weak, unable to help themselves and depicted as feminine. Superior males leap to the rescue, sort things out and depart triumphantly. The complexity of daily social life is ignored in favour of the central story of effective agency and causation. Feminine narratives, by contrast, resemble soap operas. Daily life is not obliterated by interventions, however forceful. There is no simple problem and therefore no simple solution after which the heroes can ride off into the sunset. Contexts are complex; and all manner of narratives coexist. But where are these feminine narratives in development? Curiously, for the most part anthropological approaches to

<sup>1</sup> Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde, now Die Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kultur-anthropologie.

<sup>2</sup> *An anthropological critique of development: the growth of ignorance?* EIDOS, London: Routledge. The theme of the collection was that the corollary of the remorseless expansion of expert (aka Western) knowledge condemned its (Third World) subjects to ever deeper ignorance.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed nature itself has been imagined in three quite different and incommensurate ways in the history of European thinking (Collingwood 1945).

development argue precisely this in their opposition to the largely hegemonic instrumental and technocratic masculine narrative.

In the talk I spelled out how these contrasting cultural styles of imagining social reality played out. Naïvely I thought that I was floating an insight into how social, economic and political differences are articulated culturally which might be of interest to other academics and possibly even practitioners. What I suspect I did was to threaten the inviolability of discourse in Foucault's strong sense:

in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality... We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity (1981: 52, 67).

Discourses are marked by exclusion: what you cannot say or even what you cannot think. To judge by the general response, have I said the unthinkable? Readers should decide for themselves.

Mark Hobart 2<sup>nd</sup>. March 2020

The millennium is marked by a new realism, or an old one recrudescing. What we are, what we do – our life chances – are determined, we are repeatedly informed, by stern facts over which we have little control. Our proneness to disease, the age at which we die, the gentle decline of our brains are the remorseless outworking of our genetic code. Similarly our individual choices – in the developed world – are patterned by the dictates of life styles, which change with the demands of capitalism. In the developing world, the struggle for survival, let alone prosperity, remains lonely and brutal. Woe betide whoever dares flout the imperatives of economics. Periodically sacrificial victims are paraded for our edification. First Russia, then the unfortunate nations in South East Asia fell foul of IMF orthodoxy. It is – or so the images endlessly paraded before us intimate – a grim world in which only the successful, in other words usually the strong, the rich and the rational are likely to survive or thrive.

These harsh realities however often turn out not to be sufficiently imperative or realistic in themselves and have to be supplemented by simulation or mediation. If you are wealthy, you can re-enact the primal struggle for a price, whether by playing computer or executive war games, or by owning a four-wheel drive vehicle replete with steel bull bars (presumably for all that metropolitan bull). And large swathes of the (male?) world can participate by watching sport: Darwinian drama brought to your very own television screen. Europeans and Americans tend to forget how much our reality is mediated these days. Our food comes from supermarkets, the link with farms and abattoirs progressively etiolated, as food becomes ever more pre-packaged. Our links with our own bodies increasingly depends on doctors, nurses and health checks. Even our appreciation of our own minds and feelings is now often mediated by psychotherapy. And how do we get our information? For example, what proportion of important events, be these local, national or international, do we experience at first hand? Virtually none. The swathes of reality available to us seem to expand relentlessly, but it has long been accessed mainly through print and radio, and now overwhelmingly through television and the Internet.<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that reality is mediated, whatever it is that does the mediating becomes involved in complex ways. A striking example is the way in which economic and social development refracts back on the developed. Let us consider just representations in new broadcasts. As John Fiske has pointed out:

Third World countries are, for example, conventionally represented in western news as places of famines and natural disaster, of social revolution, and of political corruption. These events are not seen as disrupting *their* social norms, but as confirming ours, confirming our dominant sense that western democracies provide the basics of life for everyone, are stable, and fairly and honestly governed. When deviations from these norms occur in our own countries they are represented as precisely that, deviations from the norm: in Third World countries, however, such

<sup>4</sup> To extend the notion of mediation for a moment, it pervades not just our lives, but our movements and even our deaths. We rarely go far under our own muscle power, but our movements are mediated by the internal combustion and jet engines. And those 'dream holidays', as I know only too well working in Bali, are intricate exercises in mediation: to give the impression of authentic experience without the inconvenience and possible dangers of the actuality. And, if you have lived in a society where family and neighbours have to cope with the pain of dying and death, you realize the extent to which we often manage to bring in mediators – doctors, nurses, undertakers – to tidy up our loose ends.

occurrences are represented as *their* norms which differ markedly from ours. For the western news media, the Third World is a place of natural and political disasters and not much else (1987: 285).

The point is not just the fairly obvious one that news – especially television news – stereotypes its objects, here other people, as it claws back the dangerous, the unfamiliar and so the threatening either by domesticating them into understandability, or by projecting them into a (fortunately distant) alienness.

Perhaps as important, the Third World is necessary to the continuity of that obscure entity, the West, itself. Where, after all, does the West begin and end? Is it at the US border with Mexico and Greece with Turkey? And what of Japan, Singapore and Australia? If the West is about political structures or capital, are we talking about ideals or practice? If it is about lifestyle, then many countries are split down the middle by class, race and gender. Nor is the West a unitary or non-antagonistic entity, as the genesis of two World Wars and bitter disputes about trade tariffs should indicate. In short, the Third World is necessary to suture the West together into a passing semblance of coherence. This is too important an activity to be left to news broadcasts of famine. It requires continual reiteration through a congeries of practices known as development. Rather as God was necessary for Voltaire, development must be invented to prevent our own world falling apart.

The link between the mass media and development, however, is not peripheral, contingent or instrumental. How do the various constituencies which development addresses – whether government, the general public or those being developed – know that it is happening? And, if something did happen, how are you to know that it was development planning and implementation that was responsible for it rather than, say, the routine working of markets or the ordinary processes of capital movements and economic change? You do so because you have had the change endlessly represented to you *as* due to development through the mass media, nowadays especially television. As the most powerful means of articulation in modern societies, the mass media are not just necessary to development, in an important sense they constitute it.<sup>5</sup>

To what extent have those working in development addressed as an issue the ways in which development is articulated through the media? The short answer is precious little. A pervasive instrumentalism rules. Insofar as ‘the media’ can be conceived as being relevant, it is almost always reworking that old chestnut that traditional or mass media, from theatre to newspapers, radio to television, should be harnessed to the task of ‘putting the message across’. Less publicly, the media are regularly brought in to finesse one of the central problems, which made development necessary in the first place. Namely, how do you deal with the fact that the differences between the developed and undeveloped are being perpetuated or, if anything, growing more acute as a result of the imbalance of capital and inequities of commodity prices? The answer is to show footage on prime time news programmes of government ministers and

<sup>5</sup> I discuss what I mean by articulation below.

agency officials of the ‘donor’ countries visiting development sites, which is proof of how much they really care.<sup>6</sup>

Granted the vast literature on development, which is after all one of the most important frameworks for conceiving of global relations, why do developers and scholars have so much difficulty in recognizing the extent to which the mass media are central to, and constitutive of, development? This brings us back to the realisms with which Europeans and Americans protect their fragile lives. Recognizing that realism is itself a form of articulatory closure threatens to unleash all the suppressed – the disarticulated – problems I have outlined above. Realism in development has long been an articulatory stance, which has enabled development practitioners and scholars for the most part to avoid having to face the theoretical obsolescence of the whole paradigm (Hobart 1993a; Inden 1995).

Paradoxically, such realism goes hand-in-hand with a pretty unrepentant Idealism, because it assumes that processes such as economic forces work directly on people, unmediated by representations of how things are. An alternative version runs that such mediation is a distortion, which can in principle be obviated.<sup>7</sup> Such a view enshrines two remarkable assumptions. The first is that we can know truth, reason or causation unmediated (i.e. transcendentalism). The second is that only some minds – those of the realists – are qualified to appreciate this unmediated truth.<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, a familiar theological stance, by which an elect few are privileged to be, in Foucault’s trenchant phrase, superior ‘knowing subjects’. By this stage the suspicion also begins to dawn that this preoccupation with fixity and determination is about denying the opposite. In other words, the world has a bad habit of refusing to organize itself according to the rational systems, plans and imperatives of the development industry and its apologists (for a good account see Quarles van Ufford 1993). Phrased more theoretically, the possibility of structure presupposes contingency as its constitutive outside (Laclau 1990a).<sup>9</sup>

This refusal to recognize the complexity of the ways in which the media are implicated in development involves, of course, power. Arguably, Suharto, the last

<sup>6</sup> The same footage may be used in both donor and beneficiary countries, but is inflected differently. In the latter, high government officials must usually show themselves as in charge of the situation, not as helpless, let alone venal, recipients.

<sup>7</sup> This realism also assumes there to be an essence to things and events independent of the circumstances of their occurrence. It treats causation as demonstrable without recourse to some *a priori* assumptions. Or else we are pushed towards precisely that kind of transcendentalism these realists abhor, the idealism of which Schwartz argued to be inherent in genetic fundamentalism (1997: 2-5).

<sup>8</sup> A similar point may be made for that ‘hardest’ of all scientific reality: genetics. Much of the rigour of the human genome project depends upon DNA forming a genetic code. However

Context and code. A context is potentially unfinalized; a code must be finalized. A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative significance. A code is a deliberately established, killed context (Bakhtin 1986: 147)

Bakhtin’s apperception gives a delightful twist to the growing recognition of the extent to which the rigorous, fixed world of genetic determination depends upon the nuanced complexities of cell environment. The imagery of genetics is itself gendered.

<sup>9</sup> Laclau’s argument, drawing upon Staten (1986), is that, as no entity or system is self-constituting (except, notionally, Divinity), it is dependent upon what is outside itself for what it is. This dependence is almost invariably the object of lengthy denial, which is where the media often come in.

cold war dictator (Heryanto 1999), was finally brought low not by riots, treachery or treason, but by the publication of a photograph. As Melani Budianta put it:

Thanks to modern photography and audiovisual technology, the image of Michel Camdessus, the IMF managing director, standing erect, folding his arms, watching President Suharto as the latter bent to sign the Indonesian agreement with the IMF in January 1998, will remain a public memory.

The controversy over that scene as the image was printed next to headlines in newspapers, magazines, tabloids, and broadcast by television stations indicates that the damage had been done. Critics and defenders of Mr Suharto alike read Camdessus's pose as a show of power, and the president's, a humiliation. This image has helped to strengthen the association of the IMF with colonial power, external pressure, or global threat... he has somehow hurt the dignity of the nation (2000: 120-21).



Soeharto signing IMF statement witnessed by Michel Camdessus (Kompas, January 1998)

The 'Father of Development' was shown being humiliated by the bank in charge of development. What makes it ironic is that Suharto used precisely this same mass media to promulgate his vision of development.

### Mediation

If development is so thoroughly mediated, what light might media studies' theory shed on discourses of development? Epistemologically however the respective studies of media and of development appear largely unrelated. This comes about in no small part by the unfortunate tendency either to reify the object of study, or else idealize it (or both at the same time). If development were, say, solely to do with the technical task of constructing dams, spreading fertilizers on fields and the delivery of medicines to target groups on the one hand, or about structural adjustment, meeting basic needs

or empowerment on the other, then mediation might indeed seem marginal.<sup>10</sup> However that is simply to impose a particular historical set of Eurocentric ideas on practices. Even old-fashioned modernization theory took it that a key part of development was the need to communicate what modernization was about.

If instead we consider development, as I suggested, as a broad congeries of practices,<sup>11</sup> then the media and mediation become crucial. What then are these practices? They range from meetings to discuss and communicate ideas, to the drafting of long- and short-term policy documents, to preparing publicity and lobbying and yet more meetings to communicate the resulting plans.<sup>12</sup> If development is, as often presented, about wells-in-villages, why are so many senior staff in the metropolitan centre busy full time mediating? The whole business of actually carrying out all the proposals and of implementing policies 'in the field' often seems curiously displaced. And, if it were all really about delivery, why did it take until the late eighties before the whole question of evaluating the efficacy of what had happened became seriously considered?

If you stop and think about it, what else is the grand rationale of development other than mediating between pre-modern populations and the forces of modernity, however conceived? We are still living with the fallout of a lop-sided instrumentalist vision, in which the media are there to bring the fruits of superior rationality to the ignorant and deprived. In the development industry, the difficult task is still sidelined of engaging with what different groups of people need, wish, think or are arguing about.

This is where anthropologists are supposed to come in as the good guys. Now anthropological approaches to development have stressed the importance of understanding 'the native's point of view', of grounding action in shared local understandings about knowledge. What is that if not notionally about communication? And we mediate between the inexorable forces of modernity and the locals. The idea of development as a good thing however remains largely hegemonic. So anthropologists are often guilty of *trahison des clerics*. We explicate, we mediate, we try to ameliorate the more or less inevitable. Our involvement, quite improperly, always conjures up in my mind a proctological image. Anthropologists lubricate the suppository of development as it is rammed up the pre-modern fundament.

The entire argument however relies on an old and ethnocentric model of communication. It is the conduit metaphor, according to which policy, implementation, language or whatever are vehicles for a vision, for action, messages,

<sup>10</sup> This argument is, of course, fantastic. Maps, scale and technical drawings, directives, requisition lists and endless other mediating models and texts are involved in the most mundane of enterprises. Structure, power and necessity are fairly obviously discursive ideas.

<sup>11</sup> I deliberately hold back from compartmentalizing the different divisions of the development business, because my stress is on the complex of overlapping practices in which people and organizations in development are engaged. As to whom my targets are, I would adopt the Balinese pragmatic theory of truth: it is those whose thinking is changed by reading this, whatever the direction be.

<sup>12</sup> It is fascinating how little attention has been paid to meetings, although the sort of people who write about development spend much of their professional lives ostensibly trying to communicate primarily through meetings or in print.



meanings (Reddy 1979). It is a metaphor that suits a *Weltanschauung* of cost conscious rapid rural appraisal, of intervention techniques, of delivery and measurable efficiency. In fact though it is rigid, cumbersome, asymmetric, best designed for giving orders, not for discussion. No wonder it was popular with régimes like the New Order in Indonesia, which depended upon the mass media, notably television, to give a convincing narrative to social and economic change, especially when it ran counter to people's experience. New Order Indonesia instantiated a particular top-down model of communication, of which Suharto was its chosen, and willing, subject.<sup>13</sup>

Mediation is too broad a notion to be useful in the present context. What is relevant is that development and the *mass* media articulate events and actions in pervasive and powerful ways. It has become a cliché that, if there is one distinctive concept in cultural and media studies, it is 'articulation, which has the double sense of 'to utter' and 'to link'.<sup>14</sup> On this account, different agents articulate the world in different, and often antagonistic, ways under different circumstances. The imagery of the world as systematic, structured and governed by reason, causes or code, as unitary, non-contradictory, stable, is itself the outcome of a closed – and powerful – articulatory practice. Articulations, whatever their adherents believe, are not engraved in stone, but are changing, underdetermined and always subject to counter-articulation. If development is one of the most powerful, indeed hegemonic, articulations of the later twentieth century world, it is the media that do the articulating. It doesn't happen all by itself.

### Development as action

Development articulates the world in distinctive ways. For instance, the discourse around development usually exemplifies certain features, which are as familiar to media studies' specialists as they seem to be unrecognized by people working in development. Taking the example of a development project, there is almost always tight narrative closure. That is, only issues deemed relevant are included and these are hierarchically structured and inter-related. The determining criteria of this relationship are also usually defined about a particular inflection of practical reason: instrumental rationality must be converted into action to redress a situation that is or has become disordered, dysfunctional or plain dangerous. There is a stress upon action and its

<sup>13</sup> It is no coincidence that the New Order régime stressed at once development and top-down communication. It is just that the latter is not simply the instrument of the former. You can just as coherently argue development as the outcome of a particular complex of communicative practices.

<sup>14</sup> The idea was developed from the work of Gramsci (e.g. 1971) by Ernesto Laclau (1977; Laclau & Mouffe 1985). It was subsequently elaborated as a key notion in cultural studies by Stuart Hall, who argued articulation was

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made? So the so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'... Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures to certain political subjects. (Hall 1996: 141-2).

Articulation serves as a useful way of rethinking notions of structure and process in terms of practice without the hypostatization.

outcomes within a carefully delimited arena, within a framework of time that is presumed to be at once causal and linear. There is a clear division between those responsible for organizing the terms of action and the instruments and subjects of that action. But once again there is tight closure, such that for the purposes of the project, people may be adequately summed up, synecdochically, in terms of their roles. Other aspects of their lives are conventionally of marginal relevance.

Evidently different phases and kinds of development projects vary. And I am deliberately painting with a broad brush to highlight discursive regularities, in what I take it to be a wide variety of underdetermined and overlapping practices. My concern is with how such practices are articulated. Rather than impose some definitive – and in turn equally closed – structure upon these practices, I am inviting you to consider how what follows may bear upon your own varied experiences.

My argument may be put very simply. I wish to suggest that development practice submits to the sort of approach conventionally used in media studies to analyze action series as gendered television. As it is well known, I use Fiske's study of that eighties' classic, *The A-Team*, about four ex-Vietnam veterans. The series is probably best remembered for B.A. Barracus as the splendid Mr T, replete with Mohican haircut, gold chains and bangles. Because the contrast highlights certain features of development discourse, it is relevant to note that, in media studies, the antithetical form of gendered television is soap opera.

If you will forgive a brief detour into media studies, we may conveniently distinguish several characteristics of action series as against soap operas (Fiske 1987: 179-223, drawing on Brown 1987). I sum them up in the table below. With no more ado, let me turn to review some of the articulatory features of development projects. I take it that the parallels with action series will for the most part be sufficiently self-evident that I do not need to spell them out at length.

### 1. *Narrative Form*

Like action series, projects are mostly self-contained. As the King in Alice-in-Wonderland put it: you 'begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop'. What happens afterwards is moot or invisible.<sup>15</sup> While life presumably goes on, unless there is a follow up evaluation of the project's outcomes, it is ancillary. There is tight narrative closure. This is achieved in development through the formulation of the project on paper beforehand and in the presentation of the project to staff and sometimes recipients at stages of implementation. Above all, closure lies in the framing of the final report.<sup>16</sup> This is, after all, the great moment of articulatory closure. What is in the report is what circulates in the development agency, what is

<sup>15</sup> Such change as occurs between episodes or projects is driven by factors that are usually treated as external to the dynamics of particular plots or projects.

<sup>16</sup> On several occasions, consultants or senior field officials on development projects in Thailand and Indonesia explained to me how this closure came about over drinks – usually shortly before they left the field. The problem is that the final report cannot be too negative. It cannot admit that all sorts of things did not work out as planned, or that quite how things will pan out in the future is in significant part unknown. Nor is it on the whole proper to let on that, to the extent that things do work out, it may well be more to do with the field experience than the plan itself, a position that often does not go down terribly well at the metropolitan headquarters. Above all, there is the inescapable fact that complex events do not translate neatly into the language required of reports.

parades as its achievements and what it puts forward as its ‘track record’ (note the sporting image) to the constituencies from which it hopes to obtain further funding. What happens somewhere in rural Africa or Asia is conveniently remote, forgettable, fortunately even unrecoverable.<sup>17</sup>

**Table: Characteristics of Gendered Television**  
 (from Fiske *Television culture* and Brown  
*The politics of soaps: pleasure and feminine empowerment.*)

	<i>Action Series</i>	<i>Soap Operas</i>
1	Series form with strong narrative closure.	Serial form which resists narrative closure.
2	A primary plot to which characters, as roles, are subordinate.	Existence of multiple characters and plots.
3	Compression of time around planning, action and its consequences.	Parallel to ‘actual time’, the implication is that action continues between episodes.
4	Action is in the public domain; the private is publicized.	The main setting is the home; the public is privatized.
5	Relative absence of segmentation.	Abrupt segmentation between parts.
6	Emphasis on action and results as central, dialogue as subordinate.	Emphasis on dialogue and problem-solving as central, action as secondary.
7	There is a dominant (male) discourse to which others are subordinate.	Discourse is double-voiced. Recognition of the dominant discourse is offset by ironic or oppositional accounts.
8	The knowing subject is centred and relates to other centred, dominant (male) subjects.	The subject is decentred and relates in a complex and equivocal manner to other subjects (female or male).

Each project also has its own developmental, or climactic, structure.<sup>18</sup> That is, it is narratively pre-destined to arrive at a resolution in which, on paper at least, disorder has been eliminated or alleviated thanks to the intervention of active protagonists. While different voices are nominally recognized, they are hierarchized, with senior metropolitan staff at the apex through the serried ranks of project personnel in the field. (As in *The A-Team*, adult masculinity requires intelligence detached from physical action.) Those being developed may be intermittently audible, but their presence is ultimately contingent.<sup>19</sup> They are passively gerundive: they are there-to-be-helped.

<sup>17</sup> As Edwin Ardener (1987) made clear, ‘remoteness’ is a much more complex, important and overworked notion than is usually appreciated.

<sup>18</sup> The word ‘development’ itself derives from to disentangle, unfold e.g. of a story. The sense of evolutionary or practical progress is effectively twentieth century usage (OED). Note that in both action series and development projects, it is active outsiders who have to intervene because those whose problem it is are (sufficiently feminized as to be) incapable of dealing with it adequately themselves.

<sup>19</sup> The developable are replaceable in principle by any others-who-need-to-be-developed. They are encapsulated within, and are subordinate to, the demands of the project. In Talal Asad’s terms (1986), their existence as wretched is authorized by the project.

Action rules over speech here and is primarily instrumental.<sup>20</sup> It is how to implement the plan. The whole is goal-driven and phrased in the militaristic language of personnel achieving targets and accomplishing missions. (The ubiquity of the ‘mission statement’ suggests an unholy fusion of war and development as the paradigm for all planned change.) The scenario is how to achieve order and success in the face of chaos, disorganization or opposition, whether due to nature, ignorance or the natives. And the enterprise is underwritten by the developers’ dominant morality, which brooks no alternative. It is, in Cultural Studies’ Speak, as fine an example of the exercise of dominant patriarchal ideology as you will find.

Soaps, by contrast, are usually distinguished by the relative absence of narrative closure. There was life before, outside and after the project. In place of the linear narrative that subordinates everything to the plot and dismisses the lived worlds of the participants, in soaps there is a clear recognition of different and incommensurable points of view. And complex and competing interpretations are implicit or encouraged. What happens is not subordinated to overarching goals, but is subject to interrogation, and so to counter-articulation.

## 2. *Multiple characters*

In development projects characters are subordinated to, and subsumed within, roles notionally allocated according to competence. That is, they are notionally interchangeable tokens. Everyone knows that, in practice, much of the success of projects hinges on people’s characters, on the contradictions that go up to make people what they are, but this is marginally admissible in public discussion. All the participants are objectivized, but in different ways. The professional developers constitute knowing and performing subjects, differing by degree and kind, within the complex agent of ‘the project’. The developed were traditionally objects (stupid or incompetent, Hobart 1993b) or passive subjects (able to grasp the purpose of the project in part at least, but unable, too lazy or disorganized to do it for themselves, Alatas 1977; Hobart 1997). There is one main plot: the project. It is a measure of the project’s success that all other plots and characters should identify with, or be subsumed under, the project’s goals – or, rather, can be so represented. To the extent that a different dynamic takes over or intervenes, you can say that the project has lost its plot.

Power here is social power (what Hannibal Smith has and Mr T lacks in *The A-Team*). In development, it takes the form of expert knowledge, whether political, administrative or technical, which triumphs over nature and mere physical power, otherwise known as labour. A distinctive feature of news broadcasts everywhere, but for present purposes notably in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is the extent to which news clips must show political leaders not just as in charge, but as agents in the strong sense of commanding and being responsible for what happens. It is the kind and quality of their presence that matters. Should they deign to pick up a shovel or appear to participate, it should be purely gestural, lest they be conceived as instruments not agents. As Philip Kitley has nicely shown (1998), Indonesian news footage of the

<sup>20</sup> So, subjecting development to discursive analysis reverses the entire thrust of the programme. We should not be surprised therefore if such an analysis meets with resistance or denial as against the real or natural way of doing things. This is precisely what happened when I presented this as a paper to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde.

former President Suharto and senior ministers replays these distinctions endlessly. It is not coincidental that Fiske, writing about his speciality, which is the analysis of television news, concludes that we are justified in ‘thinking of the news as masculine soap opera’ (1987: 308).

The necessary condition for development is people’s inability to help themselves. Consider the parallel with Richard Dyer on the fate of women in horror films.

It is always a woman who is trapped, a woman without resources to help herself. Heroes in jeopardy do something about it; heroines don’t...

So far so good. Dyer continues unsettlingly:

we’re supposed to get off on her vulnerability, her hysteria, her terror. In the way such sequences are put together, we are encouraged to take up a traditional male role in relation to the woman, one that asserts our superiority and at the same time encourages us to feel the desire to rape and conquer (1985: 38)

I would suggest that our relationship to the underdeveloped-as-victim is more complex and ambivalent than we like to recognize.<sup>21</sup> Where the objects of concern are women, there is an ironic doubling of oppression and protection. Unpalatable as it is, is it not high time that we considered the full implications of development practices, instead of protecting ourselves with the self-serving ethical blinkers that are such a compulsive feature in the justification of development?

In soap operas, by contrast, the myth of progress is what only some men embrace. The world is seen as under endless threat, at the end as much as at the start. Material well being and progress are framed by the relationships between those involved. And these relationships carry the seeds of fulfilment or failure and jeopardy within them. Different characters have different ideas about what is going on. There is no master narrative. Imagine a report written about a soap. Would it not run the risk of being trivial or plain hilarious?

Because my aim is primarily to point to the discursive parallels between action series and development projects, I shall discuss the remaining points rather more briefly.

### 3. *Time*

In action series and development projects, time is defined by action. What does not fit is ignored. Time is first and foremost project time. Typically it is the unfolding of European rationality instantiated as practical reason in the planning of the project, translated into achieving the desired, tangible outcomes. The reports to the donors or head office reconfirm this specific, linear, closed world. The model is infinitely exportable, yet remains indifferent to other ways of relating events and in principle superior to local contingencies, which merely get in the way of the plan (Parkin 1975).

Time in soaps is supposed to be close to ‘real life’, which I take to mean they recognize the multiple and contradictory ways in which humans appreciate and

<sup>21</sup> *The A-Team* is a theme and variations on leadership, ‘being self-assured, unafraid, in control’ (Fiske 1987: 200, citing Hite 1981) and maturity which, unsurprisingly, turns out, in another synecdoche, to be a way of talking about masculinity. Not all males get to be leaders. So, cynically, to what extent do we need development, like colonialism before, to farm out the failures and resolve the antagonisms of ‘capitalist society’?

articulate the relationships between events. The stress, if anything, is on the problematic relation of desire to its fulfilment. Achievement is not equated simplistically with completion or fulfilment. Plans and relationships often go nowhere and peter out. Life consists at best of Roland Barthes' little *plaisirs*. There is no grand climactic *jouissance*.

#### 4. *Space*

Action series and development projects archetypically occur in public space. That is they are part of the domain of action conventionally assigned as that in which males are dominant. Even when projects are centred on households, the effect is to bring the household and lives that were until then partly private into the public domain, open to surveillance and discipline. An obvious example is when domestic food preparation and personal hygiene becomes the object of attention in a development project. In this sense, you could say that development masculinizes the domestic and feminine. Soaps, by contrast, celebrate the home. However the home is not necessarily the imaginary place to which the male retires for feminine comfort and warmth. In soaps, the world of the home more often subverts the world of public action, almost invariably by showing its heroes in quite a different light.

#### 5. *Segmentation*

Segmentation is the term for the abrupt switching of scenes and plots in television, a marked feature of soaps. It is to do with the problem of how you re-present a complex underdetermined reality within a tight representative format, be it a half-hour television programme or a development report. The effect is to recognize the co-existence of separate, sometimes overlapping, but always partly contingent lives, which radically refuses the demands for neatness, coherence or integration, beloved of bureaucrats. One of the aims of development projects is often to overcome the segmentation of social life, should it be relevant to the project. Segmentation should not be confused with compartmentalization, for which development projects are notorious. That is taking a complex set of circumstances and breaking them down into simpler, and so ostensibly manageable, components.<sup>22</sup> Australian dam builders in Central Timor in the late 1980s built dams where dams were best built. That no one lived anywhere nearby to use them was immaterial. The alternative has a less pleasant twist to it. This was to build the dams near to roads, in order to shift the population there, so that they could be subject to easy surveillance by the police and army.

#### 6. *Modes of addressing problems*

In action series and development, ideally speech is part of action. It is functional: to explain goals, gain support, identify obstacles and, above all, to give orders. A developer's wet dream would presumably consist of explaining his vision, then watching everyone else carry it out immaculately. Ordinary people and their lives are often in part obstacles to be overcome, just as the media distort the truth. Once again we are back at the hidden transcendentalism behind so much rhetoric of realism.

<sup>22</sup> This splitting of a complex process into its notionally constitutive elements is the classical mode of scientific realism. As Kenneth Burke noted, rhetorically it involves the application of metonymy. Antithetically, considering, as do soap operas, such a complex in terms of the different ways of imagining or relating to it is poetic realism, notably through techniques of association, such as metaphor (1969).

As against this, in soaps life is about problems and solving them. Dialogue is not subordinate to a pre-determined goal. By definition it is open, unfinalizable and determines its own momentary ends. The vogue for so-called participatory development is largely a sham, because the dialogue on which it is supposedly based is in effect a displaced or split monologue (Bakhtin 1984) – the developer's of course.

#### 7. *Double-Voices*<sup>23</sup>

Development depends in part upon appearing hegemonic. Not only its agents and instruments, but also those on whom it is practised, must embrace it as the right, or at least a desirable, way to articulate the world and its problems. Counter-articulations have to be silenced, because they threaten to expose the posited world-order as arbitrary. The methods vary from calling detractors ignorant to killing them (the preferred method of Suharto's favourite troops, KOPASSUS).

Feminist scholars have noted that men and women often understand and relate to television programmes differently (e.g. Brown 1987). Whereas males tend mostly to engage with male figures, females engage with both male and female characters. That is, women learn to handle 'double-voiced' discourse (Hodge & Tripp 1986). Now double-voiced discourse is a peculiarly suitable notion to anthropological approaches to development, because it is the use of an existing discourse over which the speaker is not in control, to other ends.<sup>24</sup> The language of development depends crucially on the antagonism between two kinds of passive double-voicing. Developers may well incorporate the discourse of those they are developing for their own purposes; while the developed have to subvert, rework, or attain ironic detachment from, the developers' discourse, if they are not to become objects of a process. In so doing they create a 'wild zone' (as Showalter put it, 1985), beyond control, where anything may, and does, happen. This is the realm of horror of bourgeois imagination, which it is development's job to soothe, disarm, displace or project – if possible to the remoter corners of the world. You may recall that earlier I raised the question of what it was that development did for the developers (who, after all invented the idea and appear

<sup>23</sup> The gendering of cultural roles in development, as in action series and soaps, is an interesting theme. In action series conventionally, powerful males (people in male roles) are imagined as agents. Here there is a highly significant conflation and confusion of action with agency (Hobart 1990; Inden 1990). Philosophically agents are those which determine the conditions of their own actions, whether upon themselves or upon others. So they are responsible for action, the commission of which is typically delegated to instruments. When it suits them such instruments may claim agency – or else deny it. 'I was only carrying out orders'. Stressing action as simply the 'hypothetical' relationship of means and ends, rather than capacity for self-determination or responsibility, therefore closes down critical discussion about the purposes, implications and consequences of agency. By contrast, insofar as in soaps females often feature as strong public figures and there are males who are sensitive, at least some steps have been made to recognize the complexity of the ways in which humans engage in action.

<sup>24</sup> In double-voiced discourse, the author makes use 'of someone else's discourse for his own purposes by inserting a new semantic intention into a discourse which already has, and which retains, an intention of its own' (Bakhtin 1984: 189). All this tends to get lost in the commentative literature on development, in which 'discourse(s) of development' have become as *de rigueur* as the expression is in danger of becoming vacuous. The application of the difficult and contested notion of *discours* to development is, to borrow an image once again from media studies, inoculation. The general idea seems to be that, if you incorporate a little bit of what is threatening (in this case just a trendy word), then you can carry on doing what you have always done without too much risk of dropping dead.

to pay for it). Development then starts to look like a fairly cheap price for being able to sleep untroubled at night.

How do these genres invite people to relate to them? Masculine genres conventionally are addressed to audiences who are presumed to be centred subjects, who are comfortable with, or are able to negotiate, their relationship to what they take the programmes to be about. By contrast soap operas, with a significantly female audience, have to offer a variety of quite different ways of relating to and understanding them. The key constituency of development is the metropolitan élites, who in the end provide the funding and political rationale. Similarly masculine genres address a particular, and partly exclusive, group. By closure around differences of class, gender, race and age, they exclude much of the population from unproblematic engagement or acceptance. In so doing they potentially set up the conditions of their own opposition. So does development. Cynically, such exclusion may be part of the point.

There is of course another, silent genre, which is implicated in this discussion. It is the transcendent, and notionally transsexual (but evidently male), role of the scholar of development or media studies.<sup>25</sup> He is the true knowing subject, endowed with superior knowledge, with an overarching gaze and able to comment on everyone else's practice as well as his own. Is it not perhaps time that we asked quite what this subject actually knows? Like the anchor in television news, it is a privileged role of articulating reality. And, as media studies' scholars have made clear, the more realistic the news, the more self-evident its conclusions, the tighter is its discursive closure.

## Conclusion

If the conventional language and practice of development parallels masculine television genres, where do soaps fit in, if at all? The answer, I suggest, is precisely the left-liberal critique of hard-nosed development, driven by so-called technological and economic imperatives. This critique, elaborated most obviously in the liberal human sciences reiterates long-standing arguments against certain crude forms of realism.<sup>26</sup> What I find delightful is that, considered in terms of the gendering of argument, in their criticisms of development studies and development practice, anthropologists have unerringly replicated the discursive strategies of soap operas. That is they have taken to stressing the complexity, openness, unfinalizability and underdetermination of action (significantly terms mostly used by the literary critic and philosopher, Mikhael Bakhtin over half a century ago). In cultural and media studies' terms then, anthropologists discursively position themselves as women. The proponents and critics of development planning therefore divide elegantly on lines of gendered television.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Ron Inden for pointing out that the logic of my argument does interesting things to the gender or sexuality of scholars. The asexuality of scholars is, of course, an old European theme.

<sup>26</sup> More radically, post-structuralists would argue that the idea and implementation of, and debates surrounding, development simply rehearse what now appear as tired and eurocentric discursive practices with their familiar consequences. Counter-analyses stress the degree to which structure is itself a way of articulating the uncongenial contingency of events (Laclau 1990a; Laclau & Mouffe 1985).



That some soaps and action series have moved on from the clear divisions of the late nineteen-seventies and -eighties, when the celebrated work on them was written, does not change the validity of the analysis of discursive features. On the contrary, if anything, to the extent that something similar is happening in development, it makes it even more relevant. That other people have reacted against the closure and rigidity of masculinized development discourse does not undermine my argument. For a start, they are still the loyal opposition to a hegemonic régime. Developers still carry on large scale, technologically-driven projects, regardless of the overwhelming evidence that, while donor and recipient governments may love them and they are good for the developers' businesses, they often do precious little, or even make life worse, for those who are unfortunate enough to be developed.<sup>27</sup> In short, the existing critiques of development have proven inadequate. My title was a question: *Is Development really part of Media Studies?* Provocatively, let me suggest the answer is: it should be.

### **Afterthoughts (Written in April 2000)**

My concern though is not to promote media studies as the panacea for all the problems of development, which is not a unitary or pathological condition to which there is a solution (Hobart 1993b). While I think that much of the thinking in cultural and media studies bears on, and can contribute valuably to, arguments about the nature and practice of development, cultural and media studies have some serious problems of their own. Significantly the problems also centre on class-based or cultural moments of closure.

The first difficulty is: who decided the interpretation of action series and soaps? And how do you determine what is the meaning in the first place? The conventional response in Cultural and Media Studies is to talk of the 'preferred' meaning. But who prefers it, under what circumstances, and on what occasions? And how do you know? At this point a convenient closure comes into operation. The starting point is the dominant or hegemonic meaning, which the industry is supposed to put across to audiences as well as getting their bums parked lucratively on seats. This is to be distinguished, on Stuart Hall's account (1980), from alternative readings.<sup>28</sup> There are idiosyncratic, negotiated readings, which acknowledge the 'dominant codes', but takes into account the specific social conditions of the reader or viewer. Then, there are oppositional readings, which create a decoding radically different from the dominant one. What is remarkable is that this whole argument should be accepted as radical. It shares a very old ontology of representation, of meanings, codes and determinate readings, with what it claims to criticize.<sup>29</sup>

That is nothing compared to the problem of how the Media Studies scholars arrive at what the real, as well as the dominant, negotiated and oppositional meanings are.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> It might be more pertinent therefore to inquire into the fantasy life of technology (cf. Appadurai 1986).

<sup>28</sup> The insistence on reading texts as the hegemonic metaphor is far more problematic than even the most self-critical Cultural Studies' specialists are inclined to admit.

<sup>29</sup> On the problems of representation see Goodman 1968; on codes see Bakhtin above; on meaning see Hobart 1982.

<sup>30</sup> There has to be a real meaning different from these others. Otherwise, there is no criterion by which to judge that they are ideological, dominant, negotiated, oppositional or whatever as against true. The

The left-liberal turn of much critical Media Studies relates these meanings by invoking the concept of ideology. Action series are supposed to perpetuate capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, while soaps may challenge the latter within limits. A problem with ideology is that, by definition, it is false. Once again, it presupposes a state of affairs which is actually the case. That means that there is some unitary fixed identity of a knowing subject, who is able to determine adequately that other peoples' consciousnesses is false, while their own is not. Furthermore, it is able to ascertain what the contents of that consciousness are, what is wrong with it and why.<sup>31</sup>

Quite why left-liberal scholars are immune to the temptations which false consciousness afflicts on the rest of the world is not usually discussed. We have here a familiar form of unreflective élitism, by which the meanings of television may adequately be determined as lying somewhere between the producers' intended meanings and the scholars' critical readings. Not only are what audiences make of it all left out or marginalized (cf. Ang 1991; Morley 1992), but it never even seems to occur to people that the whole argument is confined to what Euro-American scholars make of meaning. Even were that acceptable when analyzing 'western' (*sic*) television but, unless development is just a synonym for the techniques of making other people like 'us', how can we presume *a priori* to declare how other people understand television or the world about them?

A similar problem arises with gender. It is fine to decide that action series are typically masculine and soaps feminine. But whose ideas of masculinity and femininity are we talking about? And what counts at any time as masculine or feminine in different classes or groups, in different societies, under different circumstances? Why, for instance, should there be only two clearly defined genders? On the one hand, many societies differ. For instance Austronesian-speaking peoples conventionally recognize three genders (male, female, transsexual). On the other, scholars such as Judith Butler have argued cogently that gender itself is performative: we do not have fixed gender identification, but are the changing product of our performances as sexual beings (1990, 1993). In other words, there is a pervasive residual essentialism – and Eurocentrism – in media studies about meaning and gender.

Does this invalidate my earlier analysis? Insofar as the practices of producing television programmes or planning and implementing development projects are articulated in terms of more or less historically and culturally shared presuppositions, then I think the analysis still holds good. In other words people in the development and media industries are working within a fairly closed world of discursive practice. There are, after all, all sorts of regulatory and disciplinary practices to ensure that they do not step too far out of line. The catch is in the 'more or less' shared presuppositions.

default position is still covert realism: if something accurately reflects the world then it is unproblematic and does not need to be explained (away).

<sup>31</sup> Ernesto Laclau has a succinct and devastating attack on false consciousness, ideology and other imaginary entities.

The notion of false consciousness only makes sense if the identity of the social agent can be fixed. It is only on the basis of recognizing its true identity that we can assert that the consciousness of the subject is 'false'. And this implies, of course, that that identity must be *positive and non-contradictory* (Laclau 1990b: 91).

First, considered as congeries of practices, the development and media industries are not such neatly bounded entities. Second, we have little ground *a priori* to assume that developers and media producers or scholars share presuppositions in practice with those they are developing or the mass audiences they are writing about.<sup>32</sup> Either way most of the world is left out as usual. There is a familiar and convenient closure about a metropolitan élite comprising government, professionals and commentators. Development and media share something else in common: they are games only a few are allowed to play.

<sup>32</sup> While media scholars, especially those who write about audiences, recognize that, when they watch television, they are partly members of the masses. However, when they write, the complexity of their subject positions tends to get ignored. Dahlgren has a revealing piece on what happens when researchers try to read the news ‘naively’, as if they were ordinary people (1985).

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