

# **A Very Peculiar Practice**

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Professor of Critical Media & Cultural Studies*

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According to the media, HEFCE, the universities' funding body, recently decreed that

government is to stop funding 'pointless' university research, forcing academics to prove that their academic inquiry has some relevance to the real world. Universities will have to show that their research influences the economy, public policy or society.<sup>1</sup>

My academic life, it would seem, has been wasted. I have moved from one 'pointless' discipline, anthropology to cultural and media studies – purportedly the pinnacles of pointlessness. Before I could become overly depressed, it dawned that, according to this insular definition, most of what we do at SOAS is pointless. Not that the School is entirely unused to its special expertise being dismissed. Famously, at the start of the Second World War, it highlighted the lack of linguists, for example in Japanese, only to be ignored by the Foreign and War Offices with dire consequences (Phillips n.d.: 31-40). In the light of events in Afghanistan and Iraq, *plus ça change...*

Why should the study of the media arouse such excitement? Classically citizenship assumed literacy. How can you be a competent subject in a contemporary polity, if you do not understand how media work?<sup>2</sup> The inherently problematic nature of communication has exercised minds since Socrates and Augustine. Nor are media transparent: consider how Locke and Marx wrestled with money as a medium.<sup>3</sup> Apart from unmediated divine revelation, all knowledge is mediated by texts, images, language and so on. The recognition that even logical signs were neither neutral nor transparent drove Charles Sanders Peirce to invent semeiotics. On what grounds are we to assume, then say, for development studies or politics that the media are neutral and transparent? Television news arguably resembles masculine soap opera and reiterates the worldview of a particular class. As John Fiske put it (1987: 289), 'Objectivity is the "unauthored" voice of the bourgeoisie'. We start to see why so many people assert that communication and mediation are unproblematic and have to denigrate media studies. As J.K. Galbraith remarked:

Faced with the choice between changing one's mind and proving there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof (1971: 50).

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/sep/23/panel-funding-university-research>; accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida & Stiegler 2002: 56-60.

<sup>3</sup> See Peters 1999, esp. pp. 33-62; 109-135.

Try going for a week without access to any media – print, broadcast, Internet or mobile phone—and the modern subject quickly becomes disoriented.

To address these issues, if I may in an inaugural lecture, I shall draw on my own career and how, after working as an anthropologist on Bali, I came to be defrocked and to embrace those flighty twin disciplines of cultural and media studies. By cultural studies, I mean the theoretical movement traced to Gramsci and Althusser, as exemplified in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Many disciplines claim to own, or contribute uniquely to, media studies. The versions that interest me derive from cultural studies, literary and anthropological approaches.

Until recently anthropologists have tended to downplay their people's involvement with modern mass media. It took a popular cartoonist, Gary Larson, to make the point. As a well-indoctrinated anthropologist, I managed for years to ignore how far Bali and Balinese self-understandings had long been constituted through the mass media. Quite how we appreciate the ways people engage with media is complex; as are the ways they are implicated in people's lives. In this sense of articulating the known and lived world, the mass media and film are anything but trivial. At times in unlikely guises, the media can be perceptive commentators on trends. Andrew Davies's 1986 cult BBC satire, from which my title is taken, elegantly anticipated the contortions required of British universities under Thatcherism. Here my title is a predicate in search of a subject.



"Anthropologic! Anthropologic!"

Before arguing that the pursuit of knowledge is for its own sake, how adequate a response is this in 2010? What is researchable and what count as acceptable outcomes are heavily constrained directly through funding and less directly through institutional pressures. Nor are the ends necessarily so pure. Area studies and other disciplines had been co-opted by governments,

long before they were invoked to counter the perceived threat of terrorism (for which read ‘Islam’).<sup>4</sup>

So, perhaps it is time to reflect on the big question: ‘What is knowledge for?’ Fortunately for you—and perhaps me—this occasion is supposed to be more general and entertaining. So I shall confine myself to a narrower issue: ‘For whom is this knowledge?’ Specifically, for Indonesia, how did the island of Bali, notorious for its warlike population, come to be re-imagined as both an erotic and an artistic paradise on earth? And what has come over Indonesian television since Suharto’s resignation in 1998?

How have anthropologists addressed the question: ‘For whom is knowledge about Bali?’ Coincidentally some of the discipline’s most illustrious figures worked there. In their study of Balinese character, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead argued that

Balinese culture is in many ways less like our own than any other which has yet been recorded. It is also a culture in which the ordinary adjustment of the individual approximates in form the sort of maladjustment which, our own cultural setting, we call schizoid (1942: xvi).

Balinese, unproblematically, were the object of study to further *our* knowledge for *ourselves*. As Bateson was British and Mead American, who is ‘our’ here—uncritically imagined ‘Westerners’?

Balinese mothers were to blame because they borrowed babies to tease their own children, which induced the emotional detachment that Mead regarded as distinctive of Balinese. They did not consider asking their subjects what they thought they were doing. When a Balinese psychiatrist finally inquired, they explained they were simply teaching their children how to control jealousy and anger (Jensen & Suryani 1992: 59-74). One reason Mead found Balinese withdrawn was that they were too courteous to tell her that she resembled the dreaded Queen of



Margaret Mead

<sup>4</sup> Western knowledge

has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans *but also to the Orientals themselves*. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enabled the orientalist and his countrymen to gain trade concessions, conquer, colonize, rule and punish in the East. Now it authorizes the area studies specialist and his colleagues in government to aid and advise, develop and modernize, arm and stabilize the countries of the so-called Third World. In many respects *the intellectual activities of the Orientalist have even produced...the very Orient which it constructed in its discourse*’ (Inden 1986: 408).

Witches, Rangda. So much for ethnographic reflexivity.

Does that flagship of cultural approaches, interpretive anthropology, fare better? Its doyen, Clifford Geertz, admitted that his best-known book, *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali*, was ‘a history of Bali for us’.<sup>5</sup> Geertz’s vision was of

a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for... Power served pomp, not pomp power (1980: 13).

This familiar image of South East Asian symbolic kingship was only achievable by ignoring the evidence. As the historian Adrian Vickers put it, these kings might equally be described as ‘warlords, slave traders, thugs, organized gangsters’ (2005: 13). Anyway, whose idea of theatre is this? Geertz blithely imported a twentieth-century Euro-American account replete with all its associations. He never considered whether Balinese might have their own ideas about theatre—which happen to be quite different. Anthropologists argue their sensitivity in addressing cultural difference through ethnography underwrites their authority to enunciate about others. As regards the most famous scholars on Bali, we have a problem. Not only is the pursuit of knowledge overwhelmingly for the benefit of the pursuers but, to achieve this, the subjects of study—and at times the evidence—have to be ignored.

When antique dealers examine, say, a period table, they do not look at its polished surface, but turn it upside down to see how it was made. When considering knowledge of others, perhaps we should look not just at disciplines’ claims, but at their practices. It takes some agility, if not sophistry, to invest ethnographers with such authority, when their grasp of language, history and the complexity of societies like Bali is necessarily



Mask of Rangda

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Skinner, personal communication.

fairly rudimentary. However, when Nigel Barley in *The Innocent Anthropologist* spelled out what doing ethnography usually looks like, coals of fire were heaped on his head. Often the ethnographer resembles less a hero than a small child struggling to speak and understand what's going on.

Let me clarify how practice is relevant with some examples. During my first field research, while collecting genealogies, I was puzzled by the fact that bride-givers and bride-takers often gave starkly different accounts of what happened—for example, by parental arrangement, by family agreement, by elopement or by capture. Stupidly, I set about trying to establish which version was true, until it struck me that culture was less a set of collective representations to which people adhered or not, than as the cultural studies' scholar Stuart Hall put it, a site of struggle. Anthropology is committed to some version of culture as a coherent whole (Clifford 1988). By contrast, the philosopher behind cultural studies, Ernesto Laclau's view seems more apposite that usage and contingency make society as a structure or system impossible.

More humbling was the unintended consequence of shaving and showering in the mornings in Bali. Nearby, the family I lived with worked, chatted with visitors and watched television. It was hard not to overhear them. What was frightening was that, day after day, virtually nothing they said was illuminated by the voluminous literature on Balinese culture or society. What anthropologists—and indeed others—wrote about Bali had precious little to do with how Balinese talked among themselves or about what. The irrelevance of my supposed knowledge was at least as galling as being informed that my academic discipline is pointless.

It is worth briefly recounting how I was forced to appreciate the importance of the mass media. During previous research trips, I had held open house and recorded the lively arguments that ensued each evening. By the late eighties however, no one was turning up. When I investigated, I discovered my former interlocutors glued to Balinese theatre on peak hour television. Television had become integral to how Balinese understood and engaged with the world about them.

Bali is slightly unusual. The island was famous even before Westerners knew it existed. Renaissance Europeans thought that Eden was not transcendent, but some remote place yet to be discovered. So, when the explorer Cornelius de Houtman returned from a voyage to the East Indies in 1597, the news spread throughout Europe that the search was over: they had



finally found Paradise.<sup>6</sup> The island became the object of European dreams of exotic otherness: sometimes idyllic, sometimes savage. Stamford Raffles enthused about the noble Balinese compared to the indolent Javanese. And the drunken German Sanskritist Friederich found ‘brahmanical’ literature. So Bali was promptly branded an outpost of Hindu civilization in a sea of Muhammedanism.



Dutch photograph of Balinese corpses after a *Puputan*



The Raja of Bulèlèng committing suicide in 1849 (*Le Petit Journal*)

On the other hand, Balinese were notorious as slave-raiders and warriors; and ferociously resisted all attempts at conquest. When the Dutch finally invaded in 1906-8, the European newspaper stories and photographs of the massacres and looting became a *cause célèbre*. Many Balinese rajas, their families and followers committed mass suicide rather than surrender. Needless to say, there are contrasting representations of what occurred.

In a brilliant exercise in public relations, the Dutch promptly rebranded the site of this carnage as a Garden of Eden. And, by 1914, the steamship companies had started issues tourist brochures. Bali became the place for the international glitterati. Among the musicians, artists and playboys who visited or stayed, perhaps a special mention should go to the musician and artist, Walter Spies, who had close links to the German artistic movement in Hellerau. Spies settled in Bali and set about creating a school of Balinese painting and a style

<sup>6</sup> Part of the excitement to the Dutch, who came from a waterlogged country, was that the Balinese had highly developed irrigation systems (which they mistook for drainage!). The following account draws on Vickers 1989.

of imagining the island. Not only were celebrities such as Charlie Chaplin, Noel Coward, Elly Beinhorn and Barbara Woolworth Hutton offered Spies's view of Bali,<sup>7</sup> but so were scholars like Bateson and Mead. Most histories of the period represent Europeans as sowing creative seed into the fecund, but largely passive, native imagination. Balinese



accounts, by contrast, dwell on how they realized that foreigners—the new *rajas*— wanted art. As they had no idea that what they did was called ‘art’, they went off to find a cultural broker, which ended with them enticing Spies to Bali. The 1920s and 30s became an extraordinary, effervescent period for the arts, with royal power sufficiently weakened as to enable ordinary Balinese to participate—sometimes unwittingly.

To puritan Americans and war-weary decadent Europeans, Bali offered

o b v i o u s  
attractions. Poor  
young Balinese  
mostly went  
about topless.  
Visitors rushed  
into print, and  
later celluloid,  
to spawn a  
minor global  
industry in  
which erotica  
featured large. I  
confine myself  
to one of the  
many European  
photographers,  
the aptly-named



<sup>7</sup> On this period in Balinese history, see Barley 2009, for a charming portrait.



Hofker's *Pura Campuan*Le Mayeur's *Ni Pollok* (who became his wife)

Fleischmann (2007).<sup>8</sup> While such images have now mostly disappeared, Dutch artists flocked to paint Balinese women, a market which still flourishes in Balinese hands. There were some photos and paintings of males, of which more anon.

Nowhere were these cultural encounters acted out more intriguingly than in dance. At the Paris Exposition in 1931, commentators enthused about the young female dancers. It was as if bas-reliefs of celestial nymphs at Angkor had come to life.<sup>9</sup> Famously, these performances revolutionized Artaud's ideas and set him about revolutionizing Western theatre.

Bonnet's *Two men resting*

Later Indonesian nationalists like Soedarsono (1968) argued the ancient pedigree of Balinese dance was formed between 2,500 to 1,000 years ago. The epitome was *Lègong*—the

<sup>8</sup> Fleischmann, like Gregor Krause, whose pictures helped fuel the exotic and erotic image of Bali, was an Eastern European medical doctor.

<sup>9</sup> For a critical alternative to conventional histories of Balinese theatre and dance, see Hobart 2007.

Dance of the Virgins,<sup>10</sup> as one film title put it—which is now the brand image of Bali, indeed sometimes Indonesia. Supposedly an eighteenth-century prince dreamed of heavenly nymphs dancing and ordered his imaginings to be choreographed. However we have little evidence of dance in Bali much before the 1920s. Tourists expected the natives to dance and the Balinese obliged—by extrapolating from theatre or ritual and by inventing new works to order (Picard 1996: 134-163). *Lègong* probably took its present form, danced by pre-pubescent boys then later girls, in the late 1920s. The stories reflect Balinese Saïvite enthusiasm for violence. The dance you saw figured, from the Mahabharata, Abhimanyu dying of a hundred arrows and, at the reception later, the video, also *Lègong* about the Mahabharata, dwells on the beheading of Drona and the disembowelling of Karna. This did little to inhibit Balinese dancing girls becoming part of a sanitized Euro-American imagination, exemplified in perhaps the most famous dance, complete with Thai headdress, slit skirt and high heels.



Dorothy Lamour's depiction of a Balinese dance in *The Road to Bali*. Click image for video

If Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* presented an exotic East to the haute bourgeoisie, *The Road to Bali* made it cozy to the masses, *aka* small town America.

*Lègong* has come to embody the ultimate fantasy of feminine mystery and allure. Vickers noted that

as Mead saw it, when Balinese men sought sexual partners they looked for the little dancing girls, but the dancing girl turned into the Rangda witch (1989: 122-3).

The interest in small girls – and boys – was not unconnected to Bali's status as a haven for paedophiles. In 1939 Bateson and Mead testified in vain at Spies's trial on charges of sex with under-age boys; while the Canadian

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<sup>10</sup> Henry de la Falaise's film: *Legong: Dance of the Virgins*, 1935.

musicologist Colin McPhee fled Bali before he could be arrested. It may not be coincidental that many expatriates' servants became leading figures in the Indonesian revolution against the Dutch. The relationship of Westerners and Balinese was profoundly asymmetrical.

After the Revolution, Soekarno's turbulent times and the massacre of supposed communists in 1965-66, the New Order government capitalized on Bali's international image by developing a major tourist industry there. Now some four million people a year visit an island 100 km by 150 km with 3½ million inhabitants. The people whom Raffles described as interested in war and its instruments rather than the arts (Raffles 1817: 234) have reinvented themselves largely in terms of someone else's consumerist fantasies. The Indonesian Institute of Arts produces an élite cadre of dancers, increasingly for the tourist market. And the provincial government holds an annual International Arts Festival. The most expensive features are Sendratari – mass ballets—which Soekarno is said to have encouraged after seeing *Son et Lumière* in Egypt. In a neat caricature of his successor Suharto's New Order régime, the actors are silent and only the narrator speaks.



Excerpt from Sendratari Dalem Balingkang at the Bali International Arts Festival 1995

*Pace* Geertz, to see these events are spectacles begs both questions of what the producers hope to achieve and how audiences appreciate them.

Margaret Mead once said that the only way to research somewhere like Bali was to be parachuted in with no prior knowledge. While this highlights an anthropological dilemma, such denial smacks of despair.<sup>11</sup> And, so far, the answer to the question 'for whom is knowledge?' seems overwhelmingly in favour of those with academic, political and economic muscle. And yet, as

<sup>11</sup> Rodney Needham, personal communication. Fredrick Barth (1993) and Unni Wikan (1990), appreciating the impossibility of acquiring adequate background for a short fieldtrip, adopted a somewhat less extreme approach with mixed results. What is gained in freshness tends to be lost in naïveté.

the burgeoning of local broadcast media suggests, matters may not be quite so simple.

Is the only relevant knowledge academic? What about people's understandings of their own society? John Ellis argued:

Cinema and broadcast TV work over the meaning that modern society gives itself, the web of definitions and suppositions that give sense to the world... broadcast TV is the private life of the nation-state, defining the intimate and inconsequential sense of everyday life, forgotten quickly and incomprehensible for anyone outside its scope (1992: 15, 5).

Given the limits of academic knowledge, perhaps we should not sneer at the study of such public discussion.

As a vast archipelago, television has been crucial to national development and to creating a sense of nation, which is why Indonesia launched one of the first civilian satellites in 1976. The government placed a television set (car-battery-powered where necessary) in every village, as it set out to involve its sprawling population in the idea they were Indonesians. By 2008, besides a burgeoning print media and radio, over half the population had mobile phone subscriptions<sup>12</sup> However, with two-thirds of households able to access it, and with its high political and public profile, television is the mass medium *par excellence*.

Under Suharto's military dictatorship, television was tightly censored and effectively a branch of the Department of Information. This ended abruptly with the riots of 1998 when commercial stations ignored orders and broadcast riots and the shooting of student protesters. While media freedom remains contested, with Muslim conservatives pushing through an anti-pornography bill, Indonesia must now have one of the least effectively regulated media in Asia. If television is indeed 'the private life of the nation', then Indonesia has a vibrant, raucous and at times surprising private life.

With over ten national terrestrial stations, a range of satellite channels and some 140 local stations, Indonesian television production is diverse. As television is an industrial product, much is formulaic. Genres have been copied or adapted from the USA and other countries where producers have trained. However, the sharp drop in the Rupiah's value during the economic crisis in the nineties made imports prohibitively expensive and, coupled with lighter regulation, encouraged experimentation. While *sinétron* – electronic cinema – a portmanteau term covering soap operas, action and mythological

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<sup>12</sup> Sources: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>; <http://www.budde.com.au/Research/Indonesia-Mobile-Communications-Market-Overview.html>. These figures should be approached with caution, especially mobile phone data. However the overall figures give a fair idea of access.



series carried on, other genres disappeared or were created.<sup>13</sup> News reporting, hidebound under Suharto, had to find new formats. Banned political talk shows mushroomed then gradually dwindled, as audiences grew bored of endless talk. Reality TV caught on to the producers' delight, because programmes required little investment or expertise. As the most successful topped national ratings, the chase was on for new formats and attractive presenters. An unintended consequence was that young well-educated, articulate and elegant women came to dominate in many genres. It is the argument – at times implicit, at times explicit – between these programmes at which I wish to look briefly.

A reliable stand-by is hidden camera shows, especially involving pranks. While these are a global format, what is significant is how these are culturally



Screenshots from *Bulé Gila* (Mad Albinos, aka white people) who take on camp roles for candid camera

inflected. Most Indonesians' knowledge of foreigners is as rich, superior, expatriate businessmen. The series, *Bulé Gila* (literally: Mad Albinos), shortened to *Bugil* (Naked) consists of Westerners playing ridiculous and transgressive roles<sup>14</sup>. Here an Australian and an Englishman are being trained by a trans-sexual before begging as street minstrels. White men as buffoons or worse stand in stark counterpoint to their conventional colonial and current news' images.

After 32 years of doctored news coverage, viewers had become sceptical and turned off. To up their ratings, the Surabaya-based Surya Citra Television decided to include sensational crime in their news reporting. Soon, every channel had two or more daily 'real life' crime programmes, fronted by

<sup>13</sup> Some genres, like soap operas or the mythologizing of history require books of their own. Certain presuppositions, however, seem to remain remarkably constant, which raise a question mark about how such collective representations play out. For example, counterfactually, the poor are almost invariably portrayed as ugly, stupid and comical. The obvious exception is *Si Doel*. Beginning as a film about a poor boy, Doel, who managed to get educated, the original actor reappeared as the adult Doel in a long-running television series between 1994-2003 (for details see Loven 2008).

<sup>14</sup> 2004.07.27 16.30.17.00 Bule Gila (Bugil) TransTV.



glamorous and class was most perpetrators. individual stamp named BRUTAL<sup>15</sup> TransTV with Menanti Ajal latter two explored violent crime, as from Lacak's



Police photo of the couple's murder

presenters, whose style remote from that of Each channel gave its from Lativi's aptly to the up-market Lacak (Trail) and (Awaiting Death). The the background to in these screenshots coverage of an



Television reconstruction of the man's murder



Television reconstruction of the woman's murder

apparently motiveless murder of an elderly couple in Yogyakarta, which mixed police photographs with reconstruction.<sup>16</sup>

Menanti Ajal went further and sent a young Jakartan journalist to remote parts of the archipelago to research capital crimes and interview condemned murderers and their families. This included her sitting in their cells, eating with them and so on before flying back to Jakarta. The credits rolled to shots of the killers and their families, and the journalist playing a white grand piano in some luxurious location—here involving a flowerbed.<sup>17</sup>

Watching, rather than just dismissing, such programmes raises questions, at times disturbing, about what is going on in mass culture. Examined closely, broadcasting highlights social contradictions. Élite or upper-middle class Indonesians, often internationally educated, devise programmes ostensibly for 'the masses', with whom they have little acquaintance. Crime

<sup>15</sup> An acronym for BERita UTama KriminAL, Important Crime News.

<sup>16</sup> 2003.07.29 30.00-60.00 Lacak TransTV.

<sup>17</sup> 2004.07.29 22.30-23.00 Menanti Ajal TransTV.



Clips from *Menanti Ajal* (Awaiting the Day of Judgement)  
interviews with prisoners on death row for murder

programmes are partly  
rites of class, w h i c h  
expose the lives of the poor to public gaze. However such coverage also  
reveals how others live and think, and so may not simply reinforce, but  
potentially unsettle, existing stereotypes.

While local television can focus on less heterogeneous audiences and involve locals in creating popular culture, national television is differently positioned. By its nature it produces mass culture and is also required to interpellate its viewers as Indonesians; yet Indonesia comprises several hundred different languages and societies, with adherents of all the major religions. To assume, say, that television addresses Javanese and Muslims as they are the most populous groupings is too simple. We need to examine the practices of production and decision-making of different media corporations. Replying to critics, Ishadi, CEO of TransTV, made two points. First, most commercial programming is pitched at middle class viewers, because they have the disposable income.<sup>18</sup> Second, critics imported their own class preconceptions in presupposing the masses to be infinitely gullible.<sup>19</sup>

The vehemence with which Indonesian and foreign intellectuals dismiss such broadcasting overlooks the extent to which they have ignored what ‘mass culture’ recognizes at least in part. That is a rich history of cultural representations of violence and the complexities of class. What is less remarked upon is how scholars attempt to preempt the ways that people understand and engage with mass media like television. Such accounts

<sup>18</sup> For example:

Making up their minds about television programmes, including supernatural, should be left up to viewers’ wisdom. As a mirror of reality of ordinary people, every television genre is impermanent because it is always developing and changing.

I think that the belief that television programmes cause deterioration in people’s way of thinking is taking things too far. After all the public are able to make up their own minds according to whatever values they profess (said the CEO of PT Televisi Transformasi Ishadi Sutopo Kartosaputro (*Judging mistik programmes should be left up to viewers*, *Kompas* 27.08.2003).

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of crime and supernatural reality shows, see Hobart 2006.

conveniently omit the whole question of what audiences make of what they watch and so reiterate a singularly myopic view.<sup>20</sup>

One genre, which attracted both the largest audience share at the time and the most opprobrium, is delightfully Indonesian: supernatural reality shows, or Mistik. These vary from explorations of the occult to playing practical jokes for cameras, to undergoing haunted or places in Dunia Lain World). It before other had fun—street—(ngamèn) to push down cars



Scenes from Paranoid, a candid camera programme, here about fear of ghosts

The genre lends itself to playing pranks on friends. In Paranoid, which lives up to its name, the victims are set up. While Europeans tend to find such programmes cruel, my Javanese friends describe them as an important cultural lesson in *ikhlas*, detachment – learning to accept the good and the bad indifferently.

Among the most long-lasting was Pemburu Hantu (Ghost Hunters). In live broadcasts, exotically dressed religious figures, grapple with jinn and other people's houses, eventually them in soft bottles. Meanwhile blindfolded would draw these



Artist painting ghosts blindfold—click image for clips of ghost hunters at work

hidden volunteers ordeals in 'dangerous' series like (The Other was not long programmes from ghosts singing helping to broken-at night.<sup>21</sup>

Ustadz, Muslim would ghosts, spirits in before capturing drinks'

another Ustadz apparitions

<sup>20</sup> What attracted me to media studies in large part was this critical recognition by scholars such as Ang (1991) and Morley (1992).

<sup>21</sup> 2004.07.26 22.30-23.00 Paranoid: Kejutan Hantu.



(usually resembling hairy Dutchmen) for the householders invariably to confirm the uncanny likeness.

These shows, including scenes of possession, caused outrage among the more religiously devout. Ghost Hunters, for example, contains many Islamic



Two men in a nightclub



A homosexual's corpse exuding pus and worms

invocations. The programmers' response was to end broadcasts with authorities from different religions, each arguing that the events portrayed did not contradict the respective religious teachings. Such carnivalesque treatment of religion, especially Islam, eventually provoked a new genre, Islamic piety programmes, ranging from depictions of the rewards of the faithful in heaven to the awful fate of sinners. From Azab Homosexual (The



Mourners repulsed by stench of corpse

Punishment for Homosexuality) this is what happens when homosexuals die.<sup>22</sup> Such programmes mostly met an unfavourable reception and gave way to charity shows where, to hidden cameras, mendicants tested people's generosity.

It is another genre, however, that has captured, and so far held, the attention of both the public and politicians. Launched in 2007, Republik Mimpi – the Dreaming Country or Fantasy Republic – parodied the most senior government figures, past presidents and how decisions are actually made behind closed doors. The depictions so lacked the customary indirectness and obsequiousness that the Minister of Communication threatened to take it off the air. And the then

<sup>22</sup> 10.08.06 22.00 TPI Azab Homosexual.

Vice-President, Jusuf Kalla, was so outraged that allegedly he arranged for the actor who played him to be arrested for fraud. Such intervention backfired spectacularly because ratings soared still further as the actors skillfully turned it to highlight political fixing to a enthusiastic national audience.

With elements of *The Daily Show*, *The Thick of It* and *Spitting Images* with look-alikes not latex, the programmes mix reconstructions, commentary and interrogation about current political events. While actors impersonate public figures, politicians neatly blurring between parody. From spin-offs, *Impian*, above are first with actual political their on-counterparts.



Negeri Impian—a show that parodied leading political figures. click image for extracts

‘ r e a l ’  
also take part,  
the lines  
actuality and  
one of the  
N e g e r i  
Dream Land,  
video clips,  
photos of  
leaders, then  
s c r e e n

So what? The less interesting question is: what effect, if any, do such programmes have on mass audiences? Most Indonesians are openly cynical about their political masters. What is significant is that the critically inclined are offered public recognition of their judgement; while the judgement of the the political committed is publicly questioned. In Java and Bali, actors are widely considered intellectuals. And, historically, theatre is a recognized mode of social and political criticism. A senior Indonesian diplomat told me privately that the President and ministers are now acutely sensitive about how their actions will appear when parodied before audiences used to such work of interpretation.

What does this tell us about whom knowledge is for? Is it how Indonesian élites imagine media works on the masses? That however assumes meanings can adequately be determined by a study of production and producers. Readers and viewers are presumed passive, relevant only as numbers or effectively absent. This standard élite vision of knowledge is contradicted at almost every point by ethnographic studies of audiences. Most theories, including Gramsci’s hegemony, presuppose at the least some kind of acceptance on the part of the ruled. The idea that viewers are feral – and so knowledge, meaning and opinion partly uncontrollable – is deeply threatening. Because we cannot know individually about large populations,



the industry and scholars have declared audiences only important insofar as they are domesticable and knowable. The logic is impeccably false. Audience research is the bath plug of communication studies and other quantitative approaches. Seize hold of it and the comfortable warm water drains away leaving you naked.

Have I not though confirmed the suspicion that media studies is still pointless—entertaining perhaps, but trivial? Curious assumptions lurk beneath this argument. We are to believe that scholars and men of action are concerned with how structures determine; the rest is talk, feminine and peripheral, exemplified in soap operas. Part of the issue is historical: how in the 19<sup>th</sup>. century mass culture became associated with women, while real, authentic culture remained the prerogative of men (Huysen 1986: 47). Equally our associations of entertainment with the ‘democratic, vulgar, easy’ owe much to Molière’s defence of theatre against the Church, smart *salons* and art critics (Dyer 1992: 12). As Richard Dyer pointed out:

Entertainment rejects the claims of morality, politics and aesthetics in a culture which still accords these high status. It is born of a society that both considers leisure and pleasure to be secondary and even inferior to the businesses of producing and reproducing, work and family, and yet invests much energy, desire and money into promoting them (1992: 2)

You might be uninterested in what engages people, what articulates their lived worlds and how media expand and frame public commentary about events and persons. But you have to be pretty single-minded to ignore one of the world’s largest industries. In short, media are a crucial part of any society—not least its public commentary—in this instance Indonesia.

A final question: how well can media and cultural studies deal with non-Western media? Mass communications, operating with Eurocentric categories, faces a major problem. Confined to a macro level, it cannot address situated practice. And, in effect, it can only imagine others’ media in its own terms. Cultural studies, as a relative newcomer, aims to address the gaps in older disciplines with a more theoretically sophisticated account of how culture is disseminated through the mass media. However its sense of culture remains closely tied to certain Anglo-American intellectual debates; and it has yet really to come to grips with the issues posed by difference.<sup>23</sup> This is where the disciplines and regional expertise of the School become crucial in offering alternatives to the existing hegemony.

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<sup>23</sup> Where it is, for example in the emerging Asian cultural studies, much effort goes into confronting the most abstract Euro-American theorizing, which begs questions about whom is the knowledge for?

So, is the answer ecumenical rapprochement between rival disciplines? A Cultural Studies sensitive to difference promises well. However, there are obstacles, which require recognition, if we are to overcome them. Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* noted the central role of scholars' intellectual practices. What should be sweetness and light in theory may turn out to be trench warfare. Or else, there is mutual denial – as between British cultural studies and French post-structuralism.<sup>24</sup> My liminal status between anthropology and cultural and media studies has made me an accidental ethnographer of their intellectual practices. The differences in how they run seminars and conferences or engage with colleagues are fascinating. Even within departments, mass communications, cultural studies and practice-oriented streams define their objects of study differently, invoke different intellectual genealogies and advocate different research practices (known grandly as 'methodology').

The stress upon what is essential or structural at the expense of the contingent and contextual means that the serious study of practice has barely begun. However, as Foucault noted, if you look behind the grand claims, the critical scholar

examining the history of reason...learns that it was born in an altogether 'reasonable' fashion—from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition—the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason (1977: 142).

It seems there is forging still to be done.

This ceaseless process of questioning and argument, like the ritual we are participating in today (culminating in the forthcoming ordeal by SOAS wine), reinforces the stereotype that universities are out of touch with 'the real world'. What needs interrogating though is how a cosy neo-liberal dream of consumer capitalism has been naturalized, not least through the mass media. Consider the political and financial élites' recent antics in defending a manifestly unsustainable and dangerous *modus operandi*. To point the finger at academia distracts attention from far more serious and peculiar practices.

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<sup>24</sup> This point has been made nicely by Chen Kuan-Hsing (1996). Johan Galtung discusses the contrast in his charming light-hearted ethnography of international intellectual practices in the social sciences (1981).

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