

The Relevance of Cultural and Media Studies to Theatre and Television in Bali

Abstract

A critical approach to Balinese society presents a starkly different picture from the representations that Balinese usually tell themselves, which are largely myths to disguise a painful reality. Bali no longer belongs to Balinese but to international capital, a process of alienation by which Balinese energetically commoditize their culture while claiming the opposite. Even the frames of reference for discussing what is happening are inadequate because they predate the rise of contemporary consumer capitalism and the mass media. That is why critical media and cultural studies, disciplines designed precisely to address such phenomena, are potentially so relevant for Indonesian intellectuals.

Key words: mass media, media and cultural studies, Bali, representations, theatre, television

There are two rather different ways of addressing questions surrounding what is happening in theatre, television and the televising of theatre in Bali.¹ The first is how the various participants understand what is going on, be they dancers, actors or media professionals. This has obvious strengths, most notably an intimate knowledge of what is going on, the complex dynamics and tensions of lived experience. The second is the critical understanding from outside, which, like a satellite photograph, highlights what is not easily accessible to the participants themselves. The strength of this approach is its potential to bring to bear the theory relevant to understanding contemporary forms of media and cultural production and consumption.

My aim is to raise issues for public discussion about the urgent problems facing Bali brought about through rapid social, economic and political change. My role is that of devil's advocate: I shall raise issues, at times contentious, about what is happening that most people prefer to ignore, hope will simply go away, or do not know how to face. I hope that such an intervention is a useful – if not always welcome – contribution to debates about possible future directions for Bali.

Let me start with an anecdote. Three days ago, on the flight to Ngurah Rai airport from Singapore, an unshaven Australian, dressed in ragged clothes and smelling badly, sat next to me. He put his feet up against the seat in front and waved his elbows about so much that I had to lean right out of my seat to avoid being poked. I was about to complain, when it occurred to me that what was happening to me was, in miniature, much what has happened to Balinese under the impact of tourism. Over the next hour and a half, this man behaved in an increasingly gross manner, quite oblivious to those around him. For the duration of the flight, I was given some small sense of what Balinese are obliged to put up with most of the time.

¹ This article was originally presented as a talk to the 6th. Anniversary of Geria Olah Kreativitas Seni (GEOKS).

Put simply, Balinese no longer own Bali.² Balinese have effectively been reduced to serfs, if not slaves on their own island. Bali is now the playground for international capital, which has ruthlessly carved up the potential sources of profit, leaving droves of national and local companies to fight over the scraps. Meanwhile, Balinese compete furiously for wages, which are derisory relative to profits. If you think I exaggerate, consider how many corporations are involved between the airline flight and the hotel destination. The drive along the bypass from the airport is a succinct summary of the island's fate as thousands of businesses and hoardings jostle with one another to block out what was once a landscape.

The puzzle is why this situation, which ordinary Balinese understand only too well, is so little debated in intelligent terms. Leaving aside the curtailment of expression under the New Order government, and the familiar and convenient overlap of interests between business and local and national government, what is striking is the absence of critical discussion, which is the task of the various social sciences. What is it that has coerced, by more or less subtle means, scholars and other intellectuals into accepting or even celebrating what is happening, instead of questioning it and examining the longer-term implications? By way of example, consider my former discipline, anthropology. Between 1910 and 2010 Bali underwent a radical transformation. What was a peasant society under patrimonial³ rulers became a capitalist society, split into a tiny élite, a fragile emerging middle class and a large working class comprising both farmers and labourers. Within this last group, we should probably include not only the conventional tourist sector, but many of the artists and performers, who sell their labour, albeit more elegantly.⁴

Although this transformation is obvious to many Balinese, how come it is so little talked about? One significant reason hints at the potential relevance of media and cultural studies. Balinese are incessantly invited through the mass media to imagine themselves as a single group, somehow special and set apart, united by a unique shared culture.⁵ This is a very common ploy by capitalist organizations, in which the mass media hold a particularly important function. In this instance it neatly distracts attention not only from the extent to which that culture has become a marketable commodity, but also to the extent to which Bali has been sold to and, as to what matters, is effectively controlled by outsiders. Balinese are left endlessly performing the simulacrum of their own culture, now neatly packaged for consumption as 'art', 'dance', 'religion' etc. The diversity of opinion and interests central to the argument and struggle that is culture has been replaced with a manufactured uniformity, which spells death.

² Arguably, not much has changed over the last two hundred or more years, except to whom Balinese are slaves. At least in the pre-colonial period, they were subject to Balinese or Javanese overlords.

³ Although Indonesians speak of the pre-colonial period as '*feodal*', it differed greatly from the type case of European feudalism. The striking feature of the distribution of power in Java and Bali is how closely it was – and indeed still is – linked to the person of those in power. This differs sharply from the land-based, legal division of obligations that characterized feudalism.

⁴ If you think this far-fetched, examine carefully the arrangements under which dance performances take place in the predominant sector, namely tourist shows. The status of dancers and musicians can be judged by the fact that they are transported not in buses but in the trucks used for cattle and other commodities the rest of the time. Rarely has the commoditization of skilled labour been flaunted so graphically.

⁵ In cultural studies, this process is known as interpellation. It is how the mass media work to domesticate readers, viewers, Internet users and so on. By addressing viewers etc. as carefully constructed 'identities', not only do people learn to recognize themselves, after which they can be very effectively moulded as subjects, but they actively participate in such subjection.

If, for a moment, we suspend uncritical acceptance of the myth of the vitality of Balinese culture, we can see the relentless commoditization that is actually going on. Balinese have been busy selling everything tangible and intangible to whoever will buy it. Land has been sold for hotels, restaurants businesses and, most recently, villas and condominiums. The sale of culture, long the staple of consumerism, has now extended to religion. In the Duty Free at Ngurah Rai airport, you can buy ‘genuine’ *tirtha*. And, for several thousand US dollars, you can even take a course guaranteeing the purchaser *taksu*. Occasional attempts to draw boundaries, as with the use of *Panyembrama* as a welcome dance to replace of *Pèndèt*, which was a temple dance, serve merely as ‘inoculation’.⁶ They give the public impression of taking a stance, when the actuality is allowed to proceed largely undisturbed. On the subject of *Pèndèt*, the recent contretemps between Indonesia and Malaysia conveniently obscures the fact that Bali is now largely owned by foreign capital. Balinese have been distracted by a minor issue – amusingly about the commoditization of culture – and ignore the urgent crisis facing everyone, which goes unchallenged.

What I am highlighting is the need to rethink the nature of power, especially where consumer capitalism is taking hold. Conventionally power is treated as linked with domination, what Althusser called ‘repressive state apparatuses’, the army and police, together with national and local politics. Such forms of power are crude and cumbersome. Revolutionary movements have long recognized this, which is why they usually prioritize control of the means of broadcasting rather than more obvious targets. As a means of control, it is far more effective if you can get people to cooperate or enthusiastically collude in their own subjection. Such hegemony works through ‘ideological state apparatuses’, such as education and, crucially, the mass media, where populations are trained to recognize themselves in engineered stereotypes. An obvious example is *Ajeg Bali*, where Balinese not only subscribe to the conditions of participation in an expressly capitalist medium, but even pay to take part! This is an autocrat’s dream of power with minimum exertion, which people inflict on themselves.⁷

The problem is, quite simply, that the older social sciences, which date from the nineteenth century, were designed for a quite different world than that of twenty-first century global consumer capitalism and struggle to make sense of it. It was to try to understand such changes that cultural and media studies were created.⁸ Inevitably, of

⁶ The term is from Roland Barthes and is central to understanding how the media function. For example, media coverage of anti-corruption commissions or imprisoning a few corruptors gives the impression that government is determined to root out corruption, when the opposite is in fact true.

⁷ The point may be made simply by asking: what is the commodity actually sold by commercial television? It might appear to be advertisements. But that is not how it is understood within the industry, where the price of advertisements varies according to audience ratings. In short, the audience is the commodity that television channels sell to advertisers, while pretending not to. Ironically it is Pajeg Bali (the tax on Balinese) that BaliTV extracts from audiences for the privilege of watching.

⁸ By way of a note of caution, cultural studies, which is a discipline emerging from a post-Gramscian theoretical critique of earlier approaches, is quite different from the study of culture, with which it is often confused. The latter, emerging mostly from departments of literature and the arts, is strong on cultural nuance but theoretically very weak and often incoherent. For cultural studies, culture is not an ideal, a pattern or an object, but inherently contested and a crucial site of struggle for power. In the Introduction to *After culture* (published originally in Indonesia, now freely available online at www.criticalia.org) I address the differences between interpretive and critical approaches to the notion of culture. The latter highlights the extent to which conventional notions of culture deal, by definition, with what is in the past and dead, an ideal to be resurrected nostalgically. And who decides what constitutes or should be treated as culture? What alternative accounts do claims about culture silence? Such questions show that commonsense notions of culture are shot through with power.

course, there are rival ways of representing and addressing what is going on. For present purposes, there are broadly two opposed camps. The first sees the media as a valuable part of the project of modernization in educating people out of traditional, pre-modern, ways of thinking, so that they can learn to function effectively in this new world – culture being this package of attitudes and skills. The second dismisses this account as subservient to corporate and political interests by producing an idealized vision, a myth, which disguises not only the exploitation that takes place, but also how this vision misrepresents as open and mobile an arrangement which works overwhelmingly to the benefit of a small élite. The latter account questions the transparency of representation by asking who represented what *as* what to whom on what occasion for what purpose.⁹ Culture thereby ceases to be an unproblematic positivity, but becomes a means to articulate what is happening and, crucially, to disarticulate or silence alternative accounts. That is why, for cultural studies, culture is a site of struggle.

At issue is the question of objectivity. Do the mass media represent the world accurately (or strive towards it) as they claim? Much depends on the response to this question, because upon its answer hangs the whole question not only of the objectivity and impartiality of news and documentary, but potentially of other genres as well. If, for example, soap operas or historical dramas do not depict what actually happens in family life or happened in the past, quite what *are* they doing? Among others, two arguments are immediately relevant. The first is the deceptiveness of the notion of representation itself. It is impossible to represent any event or action, material or immaterial, in its fullness at any particular moment in all possible frames of reference.¹⁰ Representing requires rigorous selection and articulation of particular elements, together with the suppression of others, while claiming to remain ‘faithful’ to the original. In short, representation involves selective transformation. Therefore it is impossible to represent something objectively.¹¹ Claims to do otherwise are plain disingenuous. Second, as Roland Barthes argued, such accounts are fairly obviously a form of myth, that bear a tenuous relationship to actuality. And we need to establish in whose interests these myths are and whose world view they embody. Uncontroversially, these are mostly the myths of the dominant class, which in modern and modernizing societies is the bourgeoisie. This is not obvious because, unlike, say, feudal or patrimonial societies, where the ruling class proudly announced itself, the bourgeoisie ‘exnominates’ itself – that is refuses to be named, instead going to great effort – and that is a prime function of the endless output of the mass media – to make its particular accounts appear as natural and normal. Look critically at any broadcast on any channel on Indonesian television and how the process works rapidly becomes obvious.

⁹ These quite different kinds of analyses stem from mid-Western American mass communications and British cultural studies respectively. The covert agenda of the former becomes evident when the close links of its founders to US government and intelligence are revealed, as is its dependence of funding from the media corporations that it is supposed ‘objectively’ to research. The latter emerges from broadly left of centre Gramscian and post-Marxist thinking, which was effectively banned under the New Order and remains marginalized so, not accidentally, depriving Indonesians of a rich vein of critical interrogation of their own society and polity.

¹⁰ The argument has been developed by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*.

¹¹ Consider news broadcasts, say, of a war. The two sides invariably represent the same video footage quite differently. The mass media also claim to be working in the interests of readers or viewers. Were this so, most media corporations would quickly be bankrupt. The art lies in interpellation: getting the viewer or reader to ‘identify’ with a particular representation of themselves, which is created by the corporations themselves. So differences of ethnicity, religion, generation etc. are inexhaustible resources ready to be sold to gullible viewers.

Let us now turn briefly to Balinese theatre, which is highly developed and driven by some brilliant and imaginative minds. What is more, theatre has long been a mode of social and political commentary. So, what does contemporary theatre have to say about the crisis facing Bali? Where are the genres that address the problems facing the poor? Where is the sympathetic recognition of the dilemmas facing young people? Where is the critique of the savage pursuit of wealth and money, which creates so many casualties? These are at best issues slipped in quietly during exchanges between servants in theatre. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Balinese theatre to Javanese and foreigners alike is the determination, bordering on the obsessive, with re-enacting the pre-colonial past and using this as the sole model to impose on audiences of whatever age and class. Two points are worthy of note. First, the account of Bali's past in broad terms is extraordinarily inaccurate. There is sufficient scholarship of the highest quality that has shown, as was the case elsewhere, that rulers vied with one another over how greedy, violent, cruel and uncaring they were to the populations they governed and exploited. Bali is not unique here. As elsewhere, there were traditional intellectuals, whose job it was to turn ruthless butchers into model monarchs. If *babad* (mostly written in fact in the twentieth century but retrojected) were the medium of their times, the mass media are now. So we need to interrogate how they represent the past with care and dispassionate, not partisan, scholarship. Put simply most theatrical and televisual accounts of Bali's past are largely myth.¹² Second, the past comes to have completely different significance when society has changed fundamentally and irrevocably, because the social function of appealing to the past is necessarily different. Régimes everywhere find it convenient to appeal to a noble past that they can engineer to justify and legitimate present inequalities and exploitation. As Balinese actors are skilled at showing, that does not mean that people cannot learn lessons from the past or from literature, which can be used to comment critically on contemporary actions and events. That is a vital part of culture as an argument. It is quite different from peddling myth as incontrovertible fact.

This brings us to an interesting problem. Why should Balinese be so nostalgic about a largely imaginary past? One reason is that Bali has been catapulted in less than a hundred years from a peasant society to a platform for global consumer capitalism with a massive redistribution of wealth and power. Society is being split into a managerial and professional middle class, which serves offshore capital, and a large proletariat, which sells more or less skilled labour at market price.¹³ When the future looks so uncertain, indeed grim, clinging to a past however fantastic is comforting. Rethinking the past in order to engage with the present is crucial for social continuity. However to ignore or overwrite the present creates grave dangers. Ostriches, which bury their heads in the sand when a predator approaches, tend to come to brutal ends.

There are other reasons for the problem just noted, which require a brief excursion into cultural studies' theory. Questioning the simple acceptance of social representations at face value, as natural and just the way things are, perhaps we should ask: what such representations do, what do they articulate? Articulation has two senses. It refers to how ideas or representations articulate with relations of power and production. It also refers to

¹² Let me be quite clear. I am not singling out Balinese for criticism. Popularly disseminated histories very widely serve class and political interests. For example, most mass media representations of British history bear little, if any, relationship to what happened. As Paul Gilroy noted, the British obsession with the Second World War is not unconnected with the fact that in a long history of duplicity, colonial brutality and greed (just think of the Opium Wars), for once Britain had a moral case for its actions.

¹³ The reason that businesses are shifting from China and Vietnam to Indonesia is not out of concern for the widespread poverty, but because they can extract labour at even lower prices, which government presents as a triumph.

how these representations are themselves forged out of diverse elements into a seemingly coherent, natural and normal vision of the world. The mass media are the central means of disseminating such a vision. When an articulation becomes generally accepted to the point that people agree with and reproduce it, even against their own interests, we can call it hegemonic. The use of credit cards in many societies is an example, because people happily spend and so lock themselves into debt with large corporations – banks. In Bali, an obvious instance is the priority given to money, together with its strenuous denial through assertions about ‘culture’.

Two points are worth noting here. First, the more powerful an articulation, the more it disarticulates other ways of understanding. In place of dialogue – in short, culture in a critical sense – you get a monologue, the repetition of a fixed articulation in different guises, which stifles debate and argument.¹⁴ This is, of course, very convenient for both political regimes and business, which is why media are mostly owned or controlled by corporations or people with political ambitions. Second, there can be no such thing as an objective or perfect representation. The question that this raises immediately is: why has Bali been subject to such intensive and sustained romanticization, however counterfactual?¹⁵ The answer is that this is inevitable, because almost all the mass media work for corporate capitalism and, as John Fiske put it ‘are the “unauthored” voice of the bourgeoisie.’¹⁶ The new business rajas dissimulate their activities behind the smokescreen of myth.

What are the implications for televising theatre in Bali? By now, it should be fairly clear. Whereas live performance before audiences makes possible social and political commentary and criticism, televising almost invariably castrates. That is why Nigel Barley, himself an anthropologist and one-time television presenter remarked: ‘Television is a content-free medium’. If Balinese have any doubt as to how far they are implicated in media capitalism, just consider the difficulty of getting first class theatre performances broadcast. Instead of paying such luminaries, local television channels widely require performers to pay to appear. This is capitalism gone mad. Mocks and destroys what it feeds on.¹⁷

If this analysis has any relevance, what can concerned people do about it? What is clear is that it is not easy, otherwise corporate capitalism would have been successfully challenged all over the world. The obvious problem is where are the intellectuals who are prepared to advance the critique of what is happening instead of colluding with it? Actors, who used to be among these intellectuals, cannot be expected to be critical

¹⁴ For Indonesia more generally, this trend has been noted and caricatured by Butèt Kartaredjasa and Putu Wijaya in their development of an explicitly critical genre of Monolog.

¹⁵ For example, Raffles remarked that Balinese, unlike Javanese, had little interest in the arts, preferring warfare and weapons. Indeed the history of Bali is marked by violence (the pre-colonial era, puputan, G30S, repression under Suharto, the widespread use of *préman*). Vickers has argued that the rebranding of Bali as paradise was closely linked to the Dutch need both to find a champion against Islam which they saw as threatening and to create a re-articulation to distract attention from the bad publicity that their conquest of Bali had created in the European media.

¹⁶ State broadcasting might seem the exception and, at its best, public service broadcasting can be quite interesting and informative. However, Barthes’ point still holds. In modern and modernizing societies, the mass media provide a singularly bourgeois articulation of the world. This argument also indicates how it is possible to evade this closure. Peasant and local radio stations run by cooperatives in the interest of listeners, often with very small-scale investment, allow for other interests and representations.

¹⁷ The original quote is from Shakespeare’s *Othello* (Act 3, scene 3)

O beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-ey’d monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.

scholars of the social sciences as well. That is not their job. It is the latter – the historians, anthropologists, sociologists, development studies’ experts, even scholars of literature – who have signally failed. Critical approaches are widely available in these disciplines and materials are abundant on the web. So it takes some determination to miss them. That said, Bali, with its theatre and television, presents some singular problems, which probably require cultural and media studies to further understanding. That said, the kind of capitalism to which Bali is subject is not simply going to roll over and submit. John Hartley argued that the purpose of media studies was what he called ‘intervention analysis’. It is not possible to counter the monologues in the mass media until people understand what is being done to them. In short, we have to challenge the closure around ‘culture’ and the endlessly aired but vacuous pseudo-arguments (monologues masquerading as dialogues).

So much is relatively uncontroversial, except perhaps in Bali. The next step is far more difficult. Is our understanding of capitalism adequate to its twenty-first century forms? As Gilles Deleuze has argued, capitalism is unlike previous political formations and, say, Marxist arguments do not catch it fully. It is at once terribly tangible, yet extremely slippery and evasive. For this reason he designated it a ‘body without organs’. What is fascinating is that the term originates from the French scholar of theatre, Antonin Artaud, whose ideas were revolutionized by seeing Balinese theatre at the Paris Exposition of 1931. In some way, yet to be fathomed, Bali may lie at the heart of attempts to understand capitalism itself.