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Entertaining Illusions: How Indonesian Élites Imagine Reality TV Affects the Masses
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Among the new genres of Indonesian television broadcasting, real-life crime and supernatural reality TV are of particular interest, because they were exceptionally popular for a time and aroused grave concern among intellectuals and the political élite. A close examination of both kinds of programming, however, suggests that their narrative structure is largely conservative and about reaffirming the social order against threat. In which case, why are élites so worried about such programmes? An analysis of broadsheet commentary reveals some remarkable preconceptions among the élite about the masses in Indonesia. Finally, a consideration of how Indonesians understand and engage with theatre—and so potentially television—indicates previously unconsidered radical possibilities.

Keywords: Indonesian Reality Television; Crime; Supernatural Broadcasting

If broadcast television is the private life of the nation (Ellis, 1992, p. 5), what does a study of contemporary Indonesian TV tell us about people's lives? And what do Indonesians make of television and how it impinges on their lives? However potentially important, the topic is enormous and inchoate, as we are dealing with some 250 million people spread across an archipelago and differentiated by language, religion, class, gender, age and interests. Since the 1970s television has played a key role in how the political élite has imagined and interpellated the population. With the emergence of commercial channels in the early 1990s, most broadcasting, whether terrestrial or satellite, has comprised 'entertainment' in a broad sense. More specifically, since 2002, certain surprising kinds of reality TV have become highly popular and have attracted extensive concern and commentary. So I wish here to

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consider how they imagine and address their audiences, why they have generated such controversy and who is perturbed by such programmes.

Approaching the themes of entertainment—and so reality TV as entertainment—raises problems:

> Everyone knows what entertainment is. It is obvious. Except that as soon as we begin to talk about it we get into a muddle ... Entertainment is difficult to define *because* everyone knows what it is, because it is a common-sense idea. (Dyer, 1992, p. 1)

So what constitutes good sense behind the common sense? And what counts as entertainment, for whom and according to whom? As televised entertainment presupposes audiences to be entertained, what do—and can—we know about what such a variety of viewers are up to, how, when and under what circumstances? What kind of research might appropriately address these questions? By this point it becomes clear that the whole issue is caught up in a host of presuppositions, which include *a priori* notions of how humans engage with media—here television. Such accounts largely ignore empirical issues, such as the historical and cultural contexts of viewing, discussion and use, not least because such contexts are extremely diverse and often unknowable. Moreover, these accounts assume analysts can get inside individual viewers' minds to know what they are actually thinking or feeling—a perduring European dream of surveillance and control (Foucault, 1977). The detailed study of what audiences make of what they watch, be it entertainment or otherwise, remains an intractable problem.

One of the reasons we have difficulty in thinking critically about what is entertaining, and for whom, lies in a collusion between media industries, media studies scholars, and sections of the political and economic élite. It involves a closure, which assumes the content, meaning and mode of reception of broadcasting are sufficiently determined somewhere between the process of production and the surveys, articulations and interpretations of media commentators and scholars as effectively to anticipate, and so obviate, the need for critical empirical inquiry, whether of production, distribution, reception or use. Such an account suits the political élite, as it gives them the impression they are both listened to and know how they are being received by their imagined audiences. No wonder then that, however clumsy and incoherent entertainment might be as a folk category, its use perseveres. It enables the neat, if fanciful, predetermination of how broadcasting is supposed to work and programming is to be received. The alternative would spell uncertainty and the recognition of a potential threat to political, social and industrial élites insofar as television has emerged as a key means of articulating, regulating and surveying populations in most contemporary societies (Poster, 1990, p. 49). But how does all this bear on something as seemingly innocent as reality TV in Indonesia?

Background

The former President Suharto's resignation in 1998 and the titular end of the New Order with the scaling down of state apparatuses of surveillance and censorship of the media preceded a period of remarkable enthusiasm and exploration across much of the mass media. Besides a rejuvenated film industry, print and broadcast media have flourished. Particularly striking is the emergence of local broadcasting, with regional, local and community television stations and innumerable radio stations flourishing.[1] With one state television broadcaster and 10 national terrestrial channels, over 50 local stations and a plethora of other satellite and cable channels for the wealthier, Indonesians have, it would seem, a rich viewing life. There are differences and inequalities though. The range of free-to-air television channels is not equally available throughout the country, with the rural poor in the remoter provinces having the least access, sometimes limited to the public broadcasting channel TVRI. State television is still recovering from being partly dismantled as a national network and is trying to redefine its public role from the days when it was widely considered a propaganda arm of the Suharto régime. While a slew of weekly magazines celebrate, preview, review and offer some background on the more popular programmes on the commercial stations, the opinion and correspondence columns of the main broadsheet newspapers periodically lament and lambast the excessive commercialism of television and its influence upon ordinary people. With the relaxation of censorship, there seems a new energy and drive among commercial broadcasters, with intermittent attempts to innovate, or at least to pilfer and adapt (or 'dub') foreign formats, if only to try to keep market share and attract advertisers.

With so much entertainment television, one is spoilt for choice. Several considerations focused my interest upon two genres of reality TV. They were at once popular and the topic of much discussion in the media themselves. They are popular, in the sense of being about ordinary people and aimed at a popular or mass market.[2] They have also engendered extensive public debate and concern about the dangers of television as entertainment, to the point that government empowered the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) to regulate such broadcasts.[3] This debate was also significant in that a whole range of public figures took it upon themselves to pronounce on what was good—but mostly bad—for the masses, so defining themselves not only as arbiters of taste, but as the authoritative articulators of the social and political order. In this sense such figures position themselves as self-proclaimed members of the élite. I take it that such an élite is not necessarily a fixed entity, but variously constitute themselves through different sets of social relationships, of which the mass media are one.

Interestingly the programmes that attracted all this public attention are *prima facie* not about entertainment at all. The first genre, emerging out of serious television news, is coverage of crime stories and social violence. The second would seem to have more to do with that most serious of topics—religion—notably in its idiosyncratic Indonesian inflection of interest in the supernatural (the paranormal, mysticism).

Evidently a neat division between serious and entertainment broadcasting does not necessarily work well here.

These crime (*kriminal*) and occult (*mistik*) programmes flourished between 2002 and mid-2005, by which time the scheduling time, especially of the latter, had declined.[4] The former deals with ordinary people—notably as perpetrators, victims and witnesses of violent crime. The latter offers glimpses into private, or semi-public but unseen, worlds in which ordinary people—again as victims, witnesses, believers or sometimes as protagonists—are caught by television cameras. Both genres are also interesting because the public discussion they provoked was largely in the print media. That is to say, they involve inter-media commentary and are informative about the complicated relationship of television to print. These two genres also are interesting because they are part of a broader global trend towards 'reality TV', however understood (Andrejevic, 2004; Brenton & Cohen, 2003; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Kilborn, 2003). Without the cost of stars, scriptwriters, expensive sets or camera equipment, and where the 'realistic' effect of the hand-held DV camera and cheap lighting are an asset rather than a defect and with mass audiences, the television companies are laughing all the way to the bank. So the stage was set for argument about the value and dangers of such programming, in which the audience was predestined to be the shuttlecock.

The Rise of Crime on Television

So far I have been unable to pinpoint exactly when *kriminal* emerged as a separate genre from general news broadcasts on mainstream channels.[5] For example, Indosiar, the market leader in audience share of crime coverage, aired its hour flagship crime programme, *Patroli*, at midday, followed by *Jejak Kasus* (*Investigating Cases*). In the same slot, SCTV countered with *BUSER* (an acronym from hunt, *Buru*, and arrest, *Sergap*). SCTV also hosted an in-depth late evening criminal investigation programme, *Derap Hukum* (*Footsteps of the Law*). On some channels, like SCTV, straight news broadcasts also included crime coverage. RCTI, in keeping with their up-market image, mostly restricted themselves to a twice weekly daytime show, *SERGAP*, while the other channels struggled to develop distinct offerings. Two stations departed from the trend in differing degree. TransTV had developed a late night high profile investigative programme, *Kupas Tuntas* (*In-Depth Analysis*), which tackled serious issues like corruption. And state television with its more Reithian brief avoided such programmes, which contributed to its declining, indeed miniscule, market share nationally.

By 2004 every commercial channel had on average one to two hours a day of violent crime coverage. For the more celebrated crimes, several channels would vie for coverage, each offering rival reconstructions, analyses and interviews with witnesses. Rumour had it that, the more sensational the crime, the more the station would have to pay the police to be first on the scene. While the standard format was reportage accompanied by interviews with witnesses, the victim (if alive), family and local

police, Indosiar also ran a one-hour programme reporting the police point of view on crime, based on lengthy studio interviews. The naming and exposure of victims and corpses make actual individuals identifiable—in life and in death. Through suffering, members of the masses, however briefly, attain identifiability, as persons or, rather, as victims and evil-doers.

With so many competing channels, differentiating product by style and branding became important. At one end television station Lativi had come up with a formula that neatly summarized its programme, *BRUTAL*, an acronym from *BeRita UTama kriminAL* (*Important Criminal News*), which had something of an ironic cult following among the university students I knew. At the other TransTV, although a newcomer, under Ishadi SK, the former head of TVRI, was aiming for poll position among the serious channels. Their riposte was an extraordinary late night programme *Menanti Ajal* (*Awaiting the Hour of Death*). This consisted of a series of detailed investigations by a smart young Jakartan woman journalist, Andromeda, into the background of well-known murders. This included detailed exploration of the scene of the crime where possible, lengthy interviews with the families of the perpetrators and with the prisoners who had been condemned to death. One programme included her musing on life as seen from inside the condemned man's cell and joining the inmates for meals. Unlike the other programmes, the journalist reported her feelings and reflected on the nature of such strange assignments before returning in each episode to Jakarta and a suitably luxurious setting where she would play a white grand piano to the closing credits—a variation on the (presumably unintended) theme of crime and class.

Crime as Real

How was crime imagined and portrayed on television in these shows? With their historical links to news, it is hardly surprising that most real-life crime programmes were presented in the documentary mode[6] used by news broadcasting. Shots of the scene of the crime or accident were obligatory, ideally with close-ups of the corpses as discovered (otherwise sometimes reconstructions inter-cut with forensic photographs) or in the morgue. For non-fatal incidents, clips of victims were, where possible, accompanied by live interviews. Multiple witness accounts lent further colour and immediacy. Scoops however comprised footage of the police going into action; or the suspect being interrogated; or arrestees dragging themselves across police stations floors having been shot (as is conventional) in the leg or thigh. Failing that, footage showed the accused in clothing carefully marked *tersangka* (suspect) confessing or reconstructing the crime. Hand-held cameras recorded the situation: shots of the victims injured or dead, in hospital or the morgue, but ideally at the scene and as 'realistic' or grotesque as possible.

The structure of these programmes obeyed the hierarchy of clawback (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 87), where the reporter structures events and the statements of the victims, witnesses, suspects and police into the conventions of the genre. In turn, the

studio anchor frames the whole process through questions directed to the reporter; and by explaining to the audience what it is they are watching and how to understand it. Reality TV helps determine what counts as reality. As with much Indonesian television, the presenters were almost always attractive upper middle class young women, mostly fashionably dressed, sometimes accoutred to suggest a certain solemnity to the proceedings. Although traffic accidents, public brawls and, occasionally, terrorist acts were featured, the meat of most programming was family or domestic violence—the very family life that media commentators are concerned to protect from exposure to violence on television. Granted how much emphasis the New Order and television advertisements put on fantasizing the family as the harmonious natural unit of social life, the exhibition of the family—or at least lower class families—as the site of strife stands in ironic contrast.

For programmes claiming to access the realities of violent crime, mostly we heard little from those intimately involved.[7] When they were allowed to speak, suspects almost always articulated their motives in terms of brute passion—usually greed or anger. Close relatives alternated between disbelief, surprise and resignation. Witnesses were shocked and horrified. In taut phrases, police summarized events and demonstrated themselves (*ex post facto* at least) to be in charge. Except for short clips, as when docile suspects painstakingly confessed,[8] the programmes relied on voiceover. Middle class reporters' voices framed and explained the violent crimes mostly perpetrated by a quite different sector of society—the working class and underclass. Where the victims were middle class, the coverage was generally more extensive and the tone one of perplexity. Middle class crime—nepotism, fraud, corruption—rarely featured in *kriminal*. Crime is implicitly identified with specific classes, whose carefully edited accounts fit highly structured stereotypes. When people were allowed to talk about their lives in another emerging genre of reality TV, that is, investigative reporting on the urban underclass,[9] they often came across as remarkably coherent, moving and reflective about their predicaments. So Indonesian crime programming emulated much reality TV in scrupulously avoiding reality, while claiming the opposite.

Instead of attempting to impose ideas of objectivity and representation on *kriminal*, it may be more helpful to think of them, anthropologically, as ritual, which I take to consist in pervasive modes of pre-articulation, designed to anticipate the awkward recognition of incoherencies and antagonisms in society. *Kriminal* arguably is about structuring and containing fear. Put this way, *kriminal* are rites of class, involving crucially the exposure to public gaze, and the spectacle of humiliation, of the lower classes. That these last comprise the bulk of the audience raises intriguing questions. So does what *kriminal* does within the context of family life, on which it provides so scathing a commentary. On this account television viewing is not just about entertainment but modes of interpellation which ritualize the implication of persons within society in different ways.

Supernatural Reality Shows

How Indonesians are positioned within reality TV becomes more complicated when we move to the genre which briefly eclipsed crime in popularity. Indonesia has a long history of film and television production about the supernatural, often linked to horror. After media liberalization, commercial stations started to broadcast low budget stories about the supernatural for evening viewing. By 2002, almost every channel had slots devoted to *mistik*. The market leader was RCTI's KISMIS *Kisah Misteri* (*Mystery Stories*), comprising re-enactments of occult encounters told by ordinary people interviewed by a striking, beautifully dressed and internationally educated presenter, Caroline Zachrie. Later RCTI, like other channels, added interactive phone in. However, the chronotopes—ideas of space, time, narrative, character, causation and agency (Bakhtin, 1981)—remained much the same. They just became more demotic, as 'ordinary people' could recount in the studio, or phone in with, personal experiences.

Although they are hardly the first to cash in on popular ideas about the supernatural, Indonesian television channels have turned the supernatural into a distinctive mode of reality show. TransTV lead the way with its mid-evening programme, *Dunia Lain* (*The Other World*). Programmes are of several kinds. There are 'true life' stories of mystical occurrences re-enacted by professional actors. The themes are usually gruesome events that seem to defy scientific explanation, but bear the authority of invited eye witnesses. Others are pseudo-documentary, such as TV7's *Expedisi Alam Ghaib* (*Expedition into the Invisible World*) when a team of 'experts' seek to establish the background of places with a history of mystical disturbance, commonly involving attempts to photograph ghosts and similar beings.

Much more spectacular and enduring has been Lativi's *Pemburu Hantu* (*Ghost Hunters*), in which a team of idiosyncratically adorned, headscarf wearing, Muslim *ustadz* (religious teachers) each week visited a haunted house, where the perturbed owners reported on uncanny disturbances, after which, amid much drama and somersaulting, the *ustadz* chased down the ghosts, before finally capturing them in empty soft drink bottles. Meanwhile another meticulously blindfolded *ustadz* painted each ghost on a large white canvas.[10] To add 'independent corroboration', celebrity guests were placed in an empty room and were later asked to compare what they saw with the paintings. The middle class owners invariably expressed great relief and appreciation for the exorcism. By 2005 Pemburu Hantu had moved to regular two-hour live broadcasts with an additional backdrop of rows of 'ordinary people', many of whom spirits would enter and whom the *ustadz* had to bring back to normality.

Dunia Lain explored quite different possibilities by combining the supernatural with hardship challenges. Members of the public volunteered to survive for a night in locations painstakingly described by local experts as exceptionally mystically dangerous. Clips of the ordeal, recorded on DV cameras on night-light function, were edited against the soundtrack of a loudly clicking clock. Afterwards the subject reported his or her experiences, which almost always coincided with the hallmark

signs of that spot. After senior religious figures complained, TransTV introduced a short closing disquisition by a religious figure (usually Muslim, sometimes Hindu or Christian) explaining that such phenomena were known to the religion in question, but were harmless provided proper religious etiquette were observed.

Other programmes are more tongue-in-cheek. TransTV ran a late night show, aptly named *Paranoid*, when people would target a suggestible or timid friend, who was then set up in a deserted spot, where mysterious sounds and sights were engineered, while the victim's terror was scrupulously recorded. The end comprised the victim and friends resolving feelings by laughing over what happened. Not all victims found it amusing. TPI's late evening show, *Ihhhh Seremmm* (*Oooh Hair-Raisinggg*), did a take-off of the others using candid cameras to record members of the public being tricked by spoof occult moments. Other episodes were direct commentary on their rivals, as when a senior ghost-buster incanted manifest mumbo-jumbo before his naïve acolytes. When one remarked on the ghastly smell ghosts made, the ghost-buster replied, 'No, I just farted!' Reality supernatural TV is not without critical commentary within the medium itself.

The popularity of these and other genres of reality TV may be interpreted as a reaction against the rigidity and formulaic nature of most broadcasting under the New Order. An example is the endless series of implausible soap operas about a tiny handful of metropolitan mega-rich, which once dominated prime time and the ratings. As Alfadin, a TV director and scriptwriter, remarked:

> nowadays on television the range is broader. So the theme of mystery can be drawn out in any direction. So it isn't monotonous. It's just natural if people nowadays are sick and tired of programmes which just portray wealth (The theme of mystery is a reflection of depression. (5 March 2003, *Kompas*)

Speaking as a foreigner who has been watching Indonesian television since the late 1980s, I found the supernatural programmes fun to watch for a time. The settings were different; there was an appearance of unpredictability.[11] They mostly involved the sorts of people you might meet in the street, presented as human by contrast to the conventional tableaux of self-important public figures and government officials, who still appear with monotonous regularity in news bulletins and current affairs chat shows. Anecdotally, most people with whom I discussed *mistik* stressed similar themes. Part of the appeal of reality TV seems to be that it was the antithesis of the patently engineered charade of television under the New Order. However, audiences have histories and tastes change: a point not lost on contemporary broadcasters. As already noted, by 2005 the viewing figures for *mistik* had reportedly started to fall and air time was down.

How are we to understanding the popularity, however transitory, of such programmes? The search for one unifying explanation may be misplaced, because with *mistik* we are dealing not with a single genre, but diverse programmes cobbled together from disparate sources, united only in expatiating on what lies outside conventional worlds. Indeed '*mistik*' can refer to anything from spooky, to paranormal, occult, supernatural or mystical as the irrational. However, what the

different forms of *mistik* across the mass media share is the antipathy they arouse among certain sections of Indonesian society.

Such programmes are also informative about how—or indeed whether (see Barkin in this collection)—Indonesian television producers thought about their audiences. With adherents of all the world's major religions in the archipelago, what can you assume about your audiences' preconceptions, predilections and vulnerabilities? To the extent that programmes depend upon the dramatic, at times riotous, display of spirit worlds frowned upon by most formalized religion, what are the implications of such coverage? Even if the producers are playing to widespread popular beliefs, there are complex implications both for official religious authority and for the canons of rationality upon which models of modernity and development at least notionally rely. That *mistik* manages to offend all the major religious and secular authorities suggests the reasons for its popularity are not necessarily simple.

Comparing *Kriminal* and *Mistik*

How do *mistik* and *kriminal* programmes differ? Both portray largely non-élite worlds. While *kriminal* highlights the underclass, *mistik* often deals with stories and encounters of more established social groups. Both address themes of the complexities of human (and non-human) motivation, conflict, transgression, victimhood, the establishment of agency and responsibility and usually the re-establishment of social order. Whereas the *raison d'être* of *kriminal* is violence and excessive emotion, these elements vie with others in *mistik*. This is interesting in itself, because studying local healers often reveals a murky world of pure instrumentality, extreme violence and intense human feeling and motivation. Far from exaggerating, programmes about *mistik* may actually sanitize what goes on.

What *mistik* programmes have in common is the recognition—indeed often celebration—of a non-manifest world that works according to presuppositions that differ from and defy those of the normal social and political world. So *mistik* offers a potential challenge to public power and inequities. It also provides a rich seam of commentary as to what constitutes 'normal' in the first place. *Mistik* threatens the social and political order, by maintaining that there is another order which is not only beyond the control, or even comprehension, of the élite, constituted as modern and rational. *Mistik* works by different rules and taps sources of power that purport to be superior and insubordinate to the mundane world. Mysticism has long been a popular theme in Indonesia among all social classes, perhaps most famously in Java. As it surfaces in *mistik*, mysticism is commoditized and demotic, and it flaunts its difference from both formal religion and rational modernity at once. Insofar as it challenges rational modernity, it negates the basis on which the political and economic élite claims publicly to found its legitimacy.

Is *mistik* then a liberatory or emancipatory genre, a means of disputing accepted understandings about power and position? The programmes I have watched do not so much challenge current ideas of power and propriety as reassert equally fixed, but

more 'traditional' ones and, as such, comprise a conservative response to uncertainty. The diegetic structure of *mistik* remains largely conventional. Recognized experts are called in to deal with disorder, rather as do the police in *kriminal*. The ghosts and other perpetrators are captured, exposed, sometimes interrogated. The hierarchy of society is not threatened. This may explain a striking feature of the seemingly unscripted remarks made by contestants in *Dunia Lain* and other shows. Considering the potential openness of the situations they encounter, the protagonists' *ex post facto* accounts of their experiences are remarkably standardized. Either the other world is structured along lines at least as rigid as this, or else the language or constitution of experience itself is strongly pre-articulated.

Finally, how are the participants and the audience positioned in *mistik*? The terms of participating in occult programmes are quite different from crime. (Generally you do not volunteer to be mugged, raped or murdered.) However, the constraints on what those involved can say are somewhat similar. Reporters, presenters, experts and studio anchors are on hand to articulate the participants' experience for the viewers. This is not entirely to foreclose imaginative invention, which may seep through and so confirm apparent authenticity and unscriptedness.

How viewers position themselves in relation to *mistik* is, I think, more open than *kriminal*, where the risk of the audience empathizing with the suspects is usually minimized. This openness touches on a feature of some reality TV, namely, the invitation to the audience to engage with the terms of reference themselves—a possibility rigorously eschewed in *kriminal*. The challenge is explicit in the title of ANTeve's *Percaya Nggak Percaya* (*Believe or Don't Believe*). A favourite topic of discussion among viewers I have watched and worked with is whether they believed in the supernatural in general and whether any particular episode was real or faked. Another popular theme was technological. What tricks did the TV companies use to help the non-manifest manifest itself? Viewers' scepticism became a way of attracting them to watch and question what they see. If that is indeed part of Indonesian reality TV, treating viewers as sufficiently mature as to make up their own minds implies a multifaceted relationship between broadcasters and public. That, certainly, is how a senior producer chose to present his channel's position:

> 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, 27 August 2003, *Kompas*)

However, audiences become increasingly skilled at viewing. And viewers subsequently turned off *mistik*.

How Élites Imagine the Masses

Appreciating that viewers change with and through television broadcasting, which is transitory and volatile, might seem the end of the matter. Is it not just harmless diversion? Some people who claimed to speak for part or all of Indonesian society, however, thought otherwise. The leading broadsheets regularly reported conferences and publications, and published opinions by leading citizens, which routinely condemned crime and supernatural programmes, and lumped them together with *pornografi* and *pornoaksi*.[12] Interestingly there seemed relatively little difference in orientation between the Muslim *Republika* and the Catholic-run *Kompas*.[13] Both could be direct. For example, a *Republika* headline read: 'Come on, let's sort out rubbish broadcasting' (26 August 2004). *Republika* would also invoke explicitly religious criteria, as when it warned that *mistik* programmes were *syirik*—i.e. to be avoided on religious grounds.[14] For *Kompas*, the broadsheet favoured by much of the mainstream political and intellectual élite, the 'influence' of television was a theme to which columnists and opinion-writers returned regularly.

The starting assumption of much broadsheet coverage was neatly summed up in the headline 'Behaviour is influenced by frequency of television-viewing' reporting on the award of a doctoral thesis in Gadjah Mada University which took it as axiomatic that television did in fact influence behaviour. What was at issue was the relative impact of education, consumer lifestyle, family environment and religious adherence in minimizing television's baleful influence.

> Redatin [the author] suggested that ordinary people should become intellectual and discriminating television viewers ... Moreover, before watching, family members should also be required to study or to finish other duties first. If possible, place the television set somewhere where it does not attract attention, advised Redatin. (Central Java section, 26 July 2003, *Kompas*)[15]

Several presuppositions need comment. Implicitly 'ordinary people' are lazy and shirk chores, are easily distracted and must be discouraged from indulgence. Entertainment is *ipso facto* bad. The argument enshrines a grim view of human nature—or rather of 'ordinary people'. What is their weakness? Is it that they are not intellectual? Is it they are liable to be influenced by what they see? Is it that they are not middle class? The term used to distinguish such people is *masyarakat*, society, which I translate as 'ordinary people' or 'the populace' according to the context. In every article I have read to date, *masyarakat* were people 'out there', on whom reason had a weak grip and who were prone to influence, emotion and recidivism. They were defined by lack. *Masyarakat* has taken over from a previous term, *rakyat*, the public at large, the masses, which is no longer so acceptable, with its connotations of *rakyat yang masih bodoh*, the masses who are still ignorant. Remarkably, *masyarakat* never seemed to include the writer, who stands apart as the knowing subject who, by mysterious means, understands those who are incapable of knowing themselves. It is in this self-defining sense that I use the term élite here, not to impute any coherence or essence to them.

A subsequent intervention by the deputy head of the national committee on human rights directly addressed the impact of *kriminal*.

> The common people of course need criminal news. However presentations full of violence are exceedingly negative for the development of society. First, opinion will be formed that violence is legitimate for suspects and criminals . . . Second, incessant news about criminality with a high level of violence will create an atmosphere of fear among ordinary people . . . The situation is deeply alarming because it can give rise to a paranoid populace. (16 April 2003, *Kompas*)

Here the base proclivities of *masyarakat* were taken as given and set unequivocally against the rational demands of the modern state. Moreover, the general populace were so primitive they had not even basic powers of discrimination. They lacked any sense of proportion, critical capacity or ability to recognize representation and genre. Television threatens to pathologize the masses. Even on cursory inspection, the argument fails to hold up. As these common people are the ones most likely to meet such violence in their daily lives—because *their* violence is being portrayed—who exactly is gripped by fear and paranoia? It is the only subjects about whom the writer can realistically know in intimate detail—the middle classes.

An interesting debate was sparked by *Kompas* publishing an opinion poll of unspecified Indonesians on 25 August 2003, under the not-entirely-neutral banner 'Swallowing whole dreams and violence from television presentations' (Menenggak Mimpi dan Kekerasan dari Sajian Televisi). The piece involved a struggle between the writer's opinions and the statistics cited which contradicted the argument.

> By presenting the programmes it makes, it is judged that television can herd the public into being in the position of receiving all the illusory sensations in the world of *sinétron* [television series], violence and eroticism that have become an inseparable part of life.

What was behind this was the sheer popularity of television. Citing an earlier ACNielsen study, the article stated that over 80% of people aged over 15 chose television as their source of information, and also noted that the majority (79%) of respondents 'admitted' they often watched broadcasts of criminal news. Considering the rapid change from sanitized, indeed lobotomized, broadcasting under Suharto, to a more open media environment, most people seemed to be coping pretty well.

> Music and talk shows which reek of eroticism and films are deliberately presented in order to seduce viewers for the sake of nothing other than profit. As a result, violence and eroticism are nowadays regarded as commonplace because people are used to watching them on television. This was expressed by half the respondents who could accept the violence and eroticism on television as not excessive . . . As a result, apart from viewers never being educated with programmes of quality, even the information that was presented tended to bewilder ordinary people. Such confusion about the information they got from television of this kind was experienced by half (52%) of respondents.

Ignoring the possibility that the responses suggested a fairly open-minded, tolerant and reflective sample, struggling perhaps to cope with rapid change, *Kompas*'s columnist had to perform mental gymnastics to reach the contrary conclusion.

The next day *Kompas* fired a second barrel under the banner 'Supernatural Programmes on Television Stunt Logic' (Tayangan Mistik di Televisi Tumpulkan Logika, 16 August 2003). Citing Suharlan, the Director of General Intermediate Education and 'an expert on television', Effendi Gazali, from the University of Indonesia, began:

> Television stations have forsaken their mission as part of development of the nation's mind with ever more incessant supernatural presentations on television screens. In chasing revenue targets, the whole world of television executives have so easily allowed themselves to become subject to advertisers in broadcasting things that stunt logic and are the exact opposite of reason . . . 'In the long run children will think that, without learning or even working hard, life can improve. This is because supernatural broadcasting tends to present solutions to problems by non-logical means' said Effendi . . . 'Our level of thinking will regress by several centuries. Faced with pupils who have been stuffed with mystical ideas, teachers will have difficulty explaining in a logical way how natural phenomena or chemical reactions happen' [Suharlan] explained.

It is not the masses, but the experts, who are confused. The philosophical notions of logic and reason stand in a complex relationship to natural science and all these to modernity, which is a historical process. Likewise, the experts reiterate familiar confusions between practical and pure reason, and between reason and absolute presuppositions (Collingwood, 1940).

More interesting is Effendi's observation that children will think that life can improve without learning or even working hard. Granted the virtually insuperable obstacles to the poor in Indonesia improving their lot, however hard they study or work, the supernatural arguably offers at least as rational and realistic a chance of success. However, there is indeed a category of Indonesian children for whom life is far more likely to be good, or even improve, without study or hard work. And that is the children of the rich. Effendi's comments are counterfactual and obfuscatory.

A reply to the *Kompas* articles was not long in coming. A fortnight later Ishadi issued a sharp retort.[16] As former head of state television, then CEO of TransTV, he was hardly a disinterested party. However, he was evidently better informed than the experts not only about the television industry and changing world trends, but media theory. Ishadi questioned assumptions that audiences are passive and easily influenced by arguing they could equally be imagined as discriminating. What was more, trends in television are volatile. So, jeremiads against television are usually exaggerated or misplaced.

Among the points Ishadi made was the experts' confusion over what conclusions may be drawn from quantitative as against qualitative analyses. While the former may be useful for determining certain kinds of conscious engagement and so setting advertising rates, by the 1970s qualitative research was already recognized as far superior for understanding audience engagement with television. The conjunction between advertising and low programme quality was facile and failed to understand the responses to audiences by television as a culture industry. As the most important sector for advertisers was the highly educated A & B socio-economic status group,

stations had to attract them with high quality broadcasting. Finally he challenged the simplistic mechanical connections underlying accounts of influence and argued that, in Saudi Arabia with draconian censorship, incidence of rape was very high, whereas in liberal Indonesia it was low. He concluded by dismissing the direr claims about television's effects as concocted and simplistic. That discussion in *Kompas* subsequently returned largely to parading prejudice as incontrovertible scientific fact is itself a commentary on the rationality of Indonesia's intellectual élite as it constitutes itself in the print media.

Imagining Audiences

The repeated articulation of modernity with an idealized 19th century vision of natural science and reason is hardly unique to Indonesia, but is common sense, not good sense. What interests me here is the bearing all this has on how people, whatever their other differences, distinguish themselves as members of a certain class or group as qualified to enunciate on behalf of the nation or society as a whole and, in so doing, distinguish themselves from those they write about.

On the accounts above, this élite stands apart from the masses, who are characterized by lack. They are objectivized by collective terms like *masyarakat* or *rakyat*, as anything from a category to be manipulated, objects to be fashioned or primitive beings to be trained into socially constructive behaviour. The imagery is mechanistic. It is about behaviour, not the actions of subjects who reflect on, and try to change, the conditions of their lives through various practices, including television-watching. There is little, if any, recognition of ordinary people as working, suffering, thinking, feeling and engaging with the world through the mass media as part of often complex lives with histories. Nor did the experts attempt to reflect on incoherencies in their received ideas of television, the mass media or even entertainment itself.

Why do most commentators insist on denying their participation in the general public?[17] *Kriminal* and *mistik* become means for distancing this élite from what they enunciate on. The masses are *Autre* (others as objects) not *Autrui* (others as subjects) through whose recognition you attain your own sense of subjecthood. So what drives this determination *a priori* to objectivize most Indonesians and to ignore the obvious complexities of how people engage with television in their lives? *Kriminal* and *mistik* form two frightening faces of the masses. The danger is that, in watching criminality, the masses will see themselves and their predicaments reflected and grow to fit the mask. Moreover, dwelling on criminality permits the camera lens to turn—as the bolder investigative journalists occasionally try—to the far graver crimes committed by the rich and powerful. In flirting with the supernatural, the masses are articulating the world according to a quite distinct apparatus of causation, of justice and injustice, of power, which acts as a sardonic commentary on the doings of their masters. Significantly this other world stands in what Baudrillard (1990) described as a 'seductive' relationship to the bourgeois world.[18] Class antagonism and hetero-geneous forms of power and knowledge are themes that have been endlessly reworked

in distinctive ways in Indonesia. If the disjunctures of power, class and mutual understanding in contemporary Indonesian society run so deep though, how easy would it be to change them to create the more democratic society which reformists seek?

Are we, however, merely describing the more general global working of capitalism, refracted in class divisions or globalized television formats? After all, reality shows, be they real-life crime, ordeals or candid camera, did not originate in Indonesia. While political-economic and mass communications approaches to Indonesian television provide an initial frame of reference, they leave much unexplained. Notably they omit any reference to how Indonesians understand, judge and engage with their own media. The relationship of religion, power and class in Indonesia with its myriad of patrimonial régimes has long puzzled scholars, infuriated outsiders and intrigued Indonesians themselves—which last is what much television is about, while remaining 'incomprehensible for anyone outside its scope' (Ellis, 1992, p. 5). Television is not just an industry but comprises overlapping cultural conversations, in the details of which viewers recognize or learn about themselves and others—be these suspects shot and dragging themselves through police stations, *Menanti Ajal* with its white piano, a ghost dancing with a house-owner in *Pemburu Hantu*, a Muslim woman's ordeal at a haunted Hindu bathing-place in *Dunia Lain*, or the subsequent vogue for showcasing the poor in programmes such as, for example, *Nikah Gratis* (*Complimentary Wedding*) and *Uang Kaget* (*Surprise Money*). To reduce the complexities of Indonesian class, power and their representation to processes of global capital says relatively little and fails to address how Indonesians articulate their differing relationships to the mass media and the world around them.

Producers and élites may attempt to predetermine or ignore audiences, but it would be a serious failure of critical scholarship were media studies' scholars to collude. Not least in the post-Suharto years, as the role of the mass media—and television in particular—has attained a new importance for reform-minded Indonesians. But how are we to set about thinking about audiences, which have proven so refractory to analysis (Ang, 1991; Hartley, 1992; Morley, 1992)? This is not the place to develop a comprehensive account. However, the programmes discussed above do indicate difficulties with some standard assumptions and suggest interesting alternatives.

Most obviously, should we think of supernatural programmes as popular culture, and so as constituting grounds for 'resistance' to political and economic élites? Remarkably, considering the emancipatory political agenda of most cultural studies' scholars, they have failed to consider the implications. Resistance is a term borrowed from classical mechanics. It is passive and its possibilities are determined by the force that acts upon it. It exemplifies Laclau's (1996) paradox of radical emancipation, for emancipation inevitably bears the traces of what it opposes. Resistance is the slippery path by which intellectuals, however radical-seeming, yet again seek to determine the conditions of their subjects' actions. However, Mini-DV and other inexpensive and accessible technology may well prove emancipatory in unexpected ways as people

record and disseminate events, lives and social practices in ways which defy the tight conventions of broadcasting.

If resistance proves too hegemonic a way of addressing audiences' implication in television, are there alternatives? Three suggest themselves. An evident starting point is Baudrillard's (1988) elegant presuppositional critique of how attempts to survey, know and address the masses are doomed to failure, because they misunderstand the nature of their subjects. Baudrillard's account remains however trapped in the metaphysics he himself subverts. It is a brilliant critical analysis which demonstrates the limits of Western thinking, but can offer no alternative. Here the work of Bakhtin is potentially relevant. His analysis of social life as dialogic offers ways of imagining the necessary relevance of audiences to producers without marginalizing or turning them into false positivities (for example, Morson & Emerson, 1990). And Bakhtin's (1984) account of carnival, of a European genealogy of humour and ways of subverting authority, are suggestive. While the parallels are obvious with the comedic and commentative role of servants in Indonesian theatre and now television, there are risks facilely in reading across two such different cultural histories. The risk of discovering yourself and what you want to see in the imagined mirror of the Other is ever-present.

At least partly to circumvent these problems, we may need to adopt more critical anthropological approaches, which were designed to address such traps. Now, as theatre in Indonesia provides a crucial world of pre-understandings which both actors and audiences bring to television, perhaps we should look to work on theatre to appreciate the mutual knowledge which is the necessary condition of viewing. In an important article, Alton Becker (1979) argued that applying European criteria of analysis to Javanese theatre was a fundamental category mistake, because Javanese use a quite different metaphysics of theatre and representation. In place of the unitary epistemology assumed in Western analyses of theatre, Javanese played with distinct epistemologies—feudal, cosmological, sensual, pragmatic and ideological—which cross-cut one another in complex and partly contingent ways. As the pragmatic epistemology of survival runs counter to, and is critical of, the hierarchical epistemology of the ruling élite, little wonder Indonesian élites worry about the subversive possibilities unleashed by television. On this account, the attempts at articulation—and so hegemony—of television as a culture industry are always unfinalizable.

Framed this way, it becomes obvious that mass communications' approaches to non-Western media are of necessity largely restricted to finding the Same in the Other. To recognize the diversity that exists, we have to think in new ways. This is why entertainment is a more fruitful starting point than news and factual broadcasting. These latter are committed to highly questionable—indeed wildly implausible—assumptions about representing reality. The critical study of entertainment points us to the need to recognize heteroglossia, to a world of heterogeneous utterances and irreconcilable subject positions. Otherwise it is not just Indonesian élites but media studies' scholars who are entertaining illusions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Sen and Hill (2000, pp. 80–107) note the singular liveliness of radio in the late New Order, a vitality which has now spread to the point that conservative groups, notable among them Islamists, are pushing for the reintroduction of censorship, in the guise of anti-pornography laws under discussion in Parliament as I write.

[2] Reputedly, at the time, these were the top rated programmes on terrestrial channels. However, reliable viewing figures are hard to come by from ACNielsen Indonesia or other sources.

[3] Regulation reins in TV content (2006, March 2), *The Jakarta Post*.

[4] Where relevant I shall use the Indonesian terms because they have distinctive senses in Indonesia.

[5] By the summer of 2002, programmes devoted exclusively to crime and violence were already a significant feature of scheduling for the main commercial channels.

[6] Grierson's (1932, p. 8) definition as 'the creative interpretation of actuality' neatly suggests the ambiguity and constructed nature of the genre.

[7] I am referring to who is allowed to speak and say what within highly structured genres, not to what audiences make of the programmes, which is an entirely different matter.

[8] I once remarked on how cooperative the suspects seemed in almost always confessing, until an Indonesian friend kindly pointed out what happened if they did not.

[9] Two series, *Jakarta Underground*, with its spin-off, *The Underground*, both on Lativi, were particularly innovative. While their mainstay was what seemed a rather voyeuristic exploration of prostitution, homosexuality and other previously undiscussable topics, sometimes they offered good coverage of underworld scenes, where people were allowed to talk at length with minimal editing.

[10] Oddly the ghosts often looked like particularly hirsute Dutchmen—an instance of transcendental post-colonialism?

[11] The appearance of realism, as with other genres like hard news, is necessary to disguise the degree to which broadcasters impose cultural conventions upon labile actuality.

[12] *Pornoaksi* is public indecency. I use the Indonesian terms, because their connotations are distinct from the English.

[13] This article is not intended as a survey of Indonesian print media commentary on *kriminal* and *mistik*. So I have not engaged in a detailed analysis of the inflections of coverage over the years across relevant print media. My concern rather is with how politicians, intellectuals and media producers use selected broadsheets to enunciate on such subjects. The two most relevant publications for these purposes are *Kompas*, which is the leading platform for public pronouncements, and *Republika*, which aims to offer a distinctly Islamic voice. Neither newspaper takes a single line; and the differences of accent within and between newspapers is complex and changing. I concentrate on *Kompas* here because there was a long-running intermittent debate about the pernicious effects of television, especially from 2002 onwards.

[14] Articles citing the code of media ethics on 3 February and 1 July 2004.

[15] Unless otherwise stated, all parentheses are mine.

[16] Commercial television and the opinion survey (2003, September 8), *Kompas*.

[17] By contrast Baudrillard once remarked that every time he watched television he was a member of the masses. After all, by definition, it is a mass medium.

[18] That is, it mocks the existing order of power and constitutes the antithesis of production, accumulation and privilege.

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