

# **Here's looking at you, kid!**

**Rethinking television reception in everyday life in Indonesia**

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'Media', 'consumption' and 'everyday life' are words that trip off the tongue easily. But what, if anything, do the terms actually tell us other than to replicate platitudes bandied about by the media and advertising industries themselves? And what do they contribute to a critical post-colonial study of rapidly changing parts of Asia? I shall question some taken-for-granted assumptions and suggest that such familiar and seemingly innocent terms involve a host of historical and culturally ethnocentric presuppositions. How unfortunate were the launch of a critical approach to Asian media to founder on the submerged iceberg of European hegemony.

But what is so wrong with these useful words? To start with, because they are part of vernacular usage, the object of study becomes easily confused with the terms of critical analysis, resulting in tautology. And what precisely is meant by the media here? Are we talking about industries, objects or relays, means of transmission, relations of production, means of dissemination or interpellation, channels of information or entertainment, the rise of mediated experience, practices or expectations and much else besides? Much of the seeming omnipresence of the mass media consists simply in slippage between different senses. Before we turn to case materials, let us consider first what baggage words like consumption and everyday life bring with them.

So, what exactly do we mean by consumption when applied to the media, or by the everyday? In what sense are activities as diverse as reading a newspaper or magazine, going to the cinema with friends, watching a favourite television programme in the evening or surfing the net adequately encapsulated by the notion of 'consumption'? On what grounds, apart from making life simple for scholars, should we assume that an economic metaphor is sufficient to sum up possible forms of engagement with the media? As we cannot possibly know the everyday lives of the billions of people in Asia, what are we actually doing when we make such sweeping generalizations? And what are the limitations of notions like the everyday which perforce are so remote from researchers' possible experience as to be undecidable? Below I examine what, at first sight, would seem an ideal example of media consumption in everyday life – advertisements using beautiful women on Indonesian commercial television channels to sell cosmetics and other products. On closer inspection however, matters are not so straightforward and far more interesting.

### **A problematic example**

A key aspect of the growth of the mass media in Indonesia has been the expansion and proliferation of television channels. In place of a single state broadcaster, in the 1990s a variety of commercial channels emerged, with 10 national terrestrial channels by 2006, over 50 local stations and an abundance of satellite channels. So central islands like Java and Bali were well served and households in many villages had at least one colour TV set. In the remoter parts of the archipelago coverage is more variable, although satellite dishes are relatively cheap. With a rapidly growing mass market, advertisers – many of them working for international agencies based in Jakarta – have saturated programming time with advertising breaks every ten minutes or so, which irritate audiences. What makes Indonesia interesting is that viewers are often not naïve. With a long history of spectatorship of traditional media like theatre, they have become skilled critical audiences and readers of modern media. This poses difficulties for programmers who find themselves continually having to invent new genres (or

more often borrow and adapt models from elsewhere), as audiences tire of programmes and see through the tricks of production.<sup>1</sup>

Following Suharto's resignation in 1998, censorship of the media was relaxed greatly. Coupled with the financial crisis and a weak currency, so making imported programmes expensive, Indonesian production houses seized the unprecedented opportunities. Taking advantage of the new liberal atmosphere, programme makers decided to make use of attractive, elegantly dressed young women as presenters, not just for the conventionally female market, but across a wide spectrum including the news and reality TV such as *verité* crime. With the weakening of the New Order's insistence on depicting women exclusively as mothers and wives, the scope for using glamorous and affluent-looking women to sell consumer goods was greatly enhanced. This looks familiar: the female form is used to sell commodities or becomes a commodity.

However, rather than start on the familiar ground of how media producers and, for the most part, scholars address the role of media in consumption, let us look at what supposedly ordinary consumers make of what happens. Between 1988 and 1999, I studied how people engaged with, and understood the consequences of, the mass media in a village in South Central Bali, Indonesia (e.g. Hobart 2000, 2002). By the nineteen nineties several commercial television channels had become widely available and a topic that villagers often discussed among themselves was advertisements. As I have written about this elsewhere (2001), a brief summary should suffice.

Although commercial television had produced a marked change in many people's daily schedules, the criteria they brought to evaluating programmes and advertisements derived from previous experience ranging from radio, political speeches and popular theatre to local markets. Far from being dupes, villagers' conversations showed they had an acute sense of how programme producers and advertisers attempted to interpellate them. Indeed the need to advertise a product was taken as evidence that it could not be much good: if it were, word of mouth would sell it without the need for big advertising budgets. Viewers showed themselves to be sharp textual analysts in enjoying spotting the ambiguities and evasions of advertising blurb. However they were only too aware of their place in society and the forces directed at them. Whatever they were, 'ordinary villagers' were not acquiescent recipients of consumer capitalism. Nor, if they were capable of being so critical and self-critical, is it clear quite what distinguishes everyday life, which implies the ordinary, routine and unreflective, from anything else. Gramsci's remark seems apt here: 'All men are intellectuals...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals' (1971: 9).

To complicate matters further, how universal are the subjects of consumerism? During a remarkable conversation in Bali, a young wife whose husband had recently bought a new gas-fired hob commented that, if he had not had the money, he would not have wanted to buy one (Hobart 2001). It was remarkable because it highlighted differences between how I, as a western anthropologist, reacted by arguing that one can still want something even if you cannot have it and my Balinese interlocutors, who immediately endorsed her argument. Western scholars tend to work with folk ideas about desire – common sense rather than good sense – which we risk imposing on our subjects of study, as I did. I took it that flaunting consumer goods as desirable *ipso*

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<sup>1</sup> A good example is the varieties of reality TV which swept the ratings after 2002, but had virtually died out by 2006 (Hobart 2006) leaving television producers struggling for new ideas. One genre, supernatural programmes made use of angles, special effects and digital enhancement. It was entertaining to sit with different audiences and see how they set about working out 'how they did it'.

*facto* creates or inflames desire. As Balinese are implicated in a long Hindu-Buddhist philosophical discourse about the nature of desire and the human subject, we should be cautious about unthinkingly imposing concepts such as consumption and the everyday which easily carry so much cultural baggage.

### **Rethinking media consumption in everyday life**

This brief account should remind us that the more natural, obvious and self-evident that categories of thought are, the greater the risk that they involve presuppositions that may have eluded critical review. And, if the urgent task facing media studies is to address its persistent Eurocentrism, is it really wise to impose upon the rest of the world universalized, acultural and ahistorical assumptions, which reiterate a peculiar European genealogy? So let us consider briefly two sets of issues. First, what problems might lie in our seemingly innocent use of terms like media, consumption and the everyday? And second, how are people supposed to be implicated in consumption through the media. The latter touches on that most problematic set of issues: what do audiences make of what they watch? And what we can know about it?<sup>2</sup> These questions are too broad to be answerable fully here. However, as the television advertisements I shall discuss hinge on the use of attractive women mediating the consumer product by virtue of being the object of the viewer's gaze, we need to consider quite what is involved in such a gaze.

To avoid tedium, I shall forego potted histories of the debates about consumption and the everyday,<sup>3</sup> and cut directly to the relevant critiques. Far from being primarily a set of materialist practices, consumption is in significant part semiotic: it is about consuming signs – of wealth, status, life style. As Baudrillard noted some forty years ago, what is remarkable is that

*there are no limits to consumption.* If it was that which it is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want to consume more and more... At the heart of the project from which emerges the systematic and indefinite process of consumption is a frustrated desire for totality. Object-signs are equivalent to each other in their ideality and can proliferate indefinitely: and *they must* do so in order continuously to fulfil the absence of reality. It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a *lack* that it is irrepressible (1988a [1968]: 24-5)<sup>4</sup>.

Were consumption about needs, these would swiftly be fulfilled. You can only eat so much, drive so many cars, watch so many televisions and take so many holidays. However, in a classical capitalist inflation, the desire to consume more and newer seems limitless.

Baudrillard's rejection of the naïve realism of so much writing about consumption (Bocock 1993) rests upon a developed theoretical critique. It starts from the recognition

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if you stop and ask 'what is involved in watching television or a film?', it becomes clear that the question is largely incoherent, because there are so many ways in which different people may watch under different circumstances. Granted the potentially extraordinary and ungraspable range of human engagement, you see the appeal of cognitivism in claiming an answer.

<sup>3</sup> Similar problems surround the use of 'media' (cf. Williams 1983: 203-7). Indeed one reason that debates in media studies have proven so protracted and inconclusive is that the different disciplines which claim an interest and special competence in the study of the media all have different ways of constituting their object of study within incommensurate frames of reference.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases in quotations are in the originals.

that at issue are not objects desired by universalized subjects but relationships that form a singular kind of system. For

we can conceive of consumption as a characteristic mode of industrial civilization on the condition that we separate it fundamentally from its current meaning as a process of satisfaction of needs... From the outset, we must clearly state that consumption is an active mode of relations (not only to objects, but to the collectivity and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole cultural system is founded... Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of signs*... what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself – signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time – it is *the idea of the relation* that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it (1988a: 21-22).

The difference from most approaches in Anglo-American human sciences<sup>5</sup> is exemplified in Baudrillard's use of two interesting notions: difference and lack. In a distinctively anthropological turn, what people consume are signs of difference. And, as difference is potentially infinite, so are the objects in which difference is vested. Likewise lack has complex implications. At once it underpins the apparent inexhaustibility of consumer desire and points out that consumerism presupposes a theory of the human subject.

A curious feature of the debate about consumerism is the relative absence of critical reflection over what is presupposed about the human subjects who do the needing, desiring and consuming. Are we being offered a theory of some universal, ahistorical, pre-social homunculus?<sup>6</sup> And to what human proclivities is consumption supposed to appeal? With a startling lack of imagination, this usually seems to be some form of 'pleasure', as if the gamut of human happiness across the world and the ages could be so simply summed up.<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard neatly complicates both the assumptions that it is 'free' individuals who consume and that the ends are pleasure.

Consumption is not...an indeterminate marginal sector where an individual, elsewhere constrained by social rules, would finally recover, in the 'private' sphere, a margin of freedom and personal play when left on his own. Consumption is a collective and active behavior, a constraint, a morality and an institution... nowadays pleasure is constrained and institutionalized. Not as a right or enjoyment, but as the citizen's *duty*... one is obliged to be happy, to be in love, to be adulating/adulated, seducing/seduced, participating, euphoric, and dynamic (1988b: 48-9)

That this is not more evident is because scholars have become complicit in the logic of the phenomenon they are supposed to analyze – what Baudrillard termed 'the order of production' (1979).

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<sup>5</sup> The difficulty many such scholars have is the more interesting because the theoretical framework in question and the concomitant role of semiotics were proposed by the American pragmatist philosopher, C.S. Peirce. The analytical appreciation, since Lévi-Strauss, that the elements under study are not objects, but relations, and the relations of relations which constitute systems, has again and again proven explanatorily far more powerful than empirical models.

<sup>6</sup> For an elegant critique of how problematic presuppositions about the homunculus are in psychology, see Henriques et al. 1984: 18, 97, 272ff. Granted how questionable, if not downright dangerous, culturally specific (aka European) accounts of human nature masquerading as universal truths are, Asians scholars should perhaps be particularly careful before adopting such models which involve such presuppositions. Otherwise they are likely to find themselves participating in their own intellectual recolonization.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson 1990 has explored some of the reasons why our thinking and vocabulary of human enjoyment and happiness should be so remarkably inadequate.

By contrast to so large and diverse a topic as consumption, ‘the everyday’ might seem a down-to-earth, even vaguely anthropological, notion, which usefully highlights what ordinary people do and so is a convenient way of designating an object of study or a field within which the mass media operate. To those in cultural studies reared on the English translation of de Certeau’s *The practice of everyday life* (1984) it may also connote a celebration of resistance to, and postmodern subversion of, bourgeois life styles. However the everyday, *le quotidien*, is inextricably linked with theories of Being, consciousness, agency and praxis in a long history of argument from Heidegger and Lucács through Gramsci and Benjamin to de Certeau and Barthes.<sup>8</sup> While they understood the everyday in quite different ways, just as Freud had denaturalized everyday speech, the protagonists agreed on the importance and necessity of critically rethinking what the everyday presupposed. In short, unless it is used entirely unthinkingly, the everyday problematizes and undermines itself. Is it – among other possibilities – the ordinary, drudgery, women’s work; the inauthentic, sordid, alienated; the utopian revolutionary; the conditions of consciousness and the subject, modes of becoming, lived immediacy; the importance of the insignificant, the disruption of bourgeois culture, the voice of the subaltern, a site for free expression, a strategy in the politics of representation? So the problem of the human subject, unproblematized in much writing about consumption, re-appears as a ghost at the banquet of the everyday.

A problem with thinking about the everyday is that those who do so, at least in their professional work, are hardly part of the everyday. So, it is interesting to consider how even Lefebvre, in trying to rescue the everyday from its stereotypes struggles to escape the presuppositions. A critique of everyday life which stressed ‘the petty side of life, its humble and sordid element’

would only bring the disappointing aspects of social praxis to the fore. It would emphasize the trivial and the repellent. It would paint a black picture of dissatisfaction. It would tend to concentrate on the sordid side of life, on suffering, on a rather old-fashioned populism...

The hypothesis of our study is rather different...it is in everyday life and starting from everyday life that genuine *creations* are achieved, those creations which produce the human and which men produce as part of the process of becoming human: works of creativity. These superior activities are born from seeds contained in everyday practice... Whatever is produced or constructed in the superior realms of social practice must demonstrate its reality in the everyday, whether it be art, philosophy or politics. At this level alone can it be authenticated... The human world is not defined simply by the historical, by culture, by totality or society as a whole, or by ideological and political super-structures. It is defined by this intermediate and mediating *level*: everyday life (2002: 44-45).

The everyday may be petty and sordid, but it is the substrate (almost literally in the image of seeds sprouting) from which the (rather Romantic) creative emerges and by which, in modern mass societies, it shall be judged in the end. But is the reference to

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<sup>8</sup> In an interesting review, Roberts (1999) explores how, through de Certeau, Barthes and cultural studies, the issues of politics and history which informed argument over the quotidian became trivialized and complicit with the capitalism it sought to question. His analysis of four kinds of argument is a useful starting point.

(1) theories of the everyday which claim to produce a subject without remainder (Heidegger); (2) theories of the everyday which produce a messianic subject (Lukacs, Vaneigem, Debord); (3) theories of the everyday which produce a subject as the embodiment of social contradictions (Gramsci, Benjamin, Lefebvre); and (4) theories which produce a subject whose agency is identified with symbolic displacement or recoding (Barthes, de Certeau) (1999: 27).

‘superior realms’ entirely ironic? Class is written across this account. The everyday is a level in a hierarchical reality,<sup>9</sup> not a frame of reference, a way of contextualizing human action or talking about social relations (as when Baudrillard remarked that every time he watched television he was a member of the masses, because it is a mass medium).

The notion of the everyday in modern societies poses a distinctive problem. What can we know about the lives and actions, let alone thoughts, of individuals in very large populations? Faced with such formidable problems of theory and method, we fall back on bridging notions like the everyday, which come to stand in for and constitute a largely unknowable reality.<sup>10</sup> As Ian Hacking has argued, what we are dealing with is the emergence of a new mode of imagining reality through measuring large populations – ‘the average’. The average bears on the idea of the everyday through different senses of the ‘normal’, which in European languages conflates description and evaluation. In the nineteenth century, two senses emerged which permeate much thinking about the everyday, namely the Durkheimian idea of the normal as right and good, and Galton’s notion of normal as mediocre, mundane and in need of improvement (Hacking 1990: 160-169). Now the normal and average are statistical realities which correspond to no actual individuals, because their work is to do something quite different. What they designate are tokens, trends and percentages, not persons, opinions and arguments. So they are highly problematic and misleading as a way of understanding people as thinking and feeling subjects.

Faced with so diffuse and intangible a concept, writers about the everyday not only land up imposing their own vision and projecting their own ideals, but are obliged to resort to examples and anecdotes to give substance to an abstraction. So Lefebvre wrote movingly of the unheeded daily chores of housewives as exemplifying the everyday (2002: 42-43), while de Certeau picked up on the informal economy through the practice of *la perruque*, working privately in company time. So what professes to be an empirical, demotic, even democratic concept cannot be, because it is inevitably caught up in the presuppositions that intellectual, political or other élites bring to imagining, surveying, pre-empting, speaking for or ignoring the majority of the population, in which they find it hard consistently to include themselves. So, not only are ideas of the normal or everyday unsuitable for inquiry about individual humans, but they so prejudice what might be going on as to make critical inquiry almost impossible.

The trends outlined above are very widespread in writing about media although they may not always appear so immediately. Consider the following:

The media are complicit in the generation of spectacle politics, reducing politics to image, display and story in the forms of entertainment and drama. Daily news is increasingly structured by the forms of entertainment and the soundbite, as are documentaries and TV magazine-style features on politics, while fictional films or TV mini-series narrate especially dramatic events or entire presidential dynasties. Consequently the public comes to see presidencies and politics of the day as narrative

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<sup>9</sup> In other words, philosophically, we are dealing with the ancient theory of substantialism, which comprises a world of objective unchanging substances (Collingwood 1946: 42-45).

<sup>10</sup> The problem is usually presented as one of mass societies and so distinctively modern – pre-modern peoples being assumed to be more knowable because their societies are supposed to lack the complex division of labour and so possibility of individuality of modern societies. Also anthropologists have addressed the issue differently by concentrating primarily on small communities in which they can, in principle, get to know a great deal about people’s lives. However serious ethnographic fieldwork takes years, poses heavy demands on learning language and attaining a degree of competence in another society, and is potentially limited in how generalizable the findings are.

and spectacle in an era in which entertainment and information inexorably merge (Kellner 2002: 160).

The argument rests on the idealist fantasy that you can represent reality or the truth *in itself* as opposed to representing something *as* something else. It essentializes the entire range of media into a single homogeneous pseudo-entity, while different kinds of television programme merge through a facile dualism, into entertainment *versus* information. It also presupposes a unitary will or purpose of producers, whereas anyone who has worked in or researched, say, a television studio knows a broadcast is the outcome of the conflicting wills of a complex agent<sup>11</sup> working against deadlines. More worrying is Kellner anticipation and dismissal of all possible audiences *a priori* as 'the public', and what they make of what they see is unproblematic because media scholars always already know what everyday audiences think.

### **How do you study television advertisements?**

In what follows I consider how subjects are imagined in a number of television advertisements in Indonesia. I have chosen television because advertisements reach the largest single audience. It is impossible to discuss the entire body of advertising across ten (check) commercial channels. Nor for my purposes is it necessary. Some brief scene-setting is, however, useful.

Over the period from the early nineteen nineties through the financial crash to the present, there have been significant changes, with the gradual internationalizing of images and production, as the international advertising agencies have established their presence. Advertisements cover the usual range from food stuffs and condiments, to soft drinks, confectionary, medicines and food supplements, cigarettes, cars and electronics. Soaps and beauty products feature large and an unusual variety of shampoo advertisements (linked to a debilitating scalp fungus). Over the years there has been a gradual shift away from recognizable 'local' figures and settings (which latter now occur most obviously in very expensive scenery shots for tobacco companies), and the happy family with never more than two children sanctioned by the New Order regime, towards images of the bourgeoisie, pictured as vaguely attainable. The task of articulating product with audience is often devolved on television stars, who may feature in up to 30 different advertisements at any time.

I do not attempt a quantitative survey of adverts and themes because I would argue such an approach is misplaced. You can count and measure representations because, as Goodman argued, as you cannot represent something as itself, but only as something else (1968: 3-43), you inevitably miss the point of representation as a process of transformation. And a close scrutiny shows how crucial such openness and ambiguity is to most television advertisements.<sup>12</sup> So content and discourse analysis are of questionable worth, especially when ethnography of audiences show that viewers keep coming up with new and unanticipatable interpretations. Anyhow, my concern is different. It is not an analysis of Indonesian television advertisements as such, but a

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<sup>11</sup> On agency, especially complex agency which comprise multiple individuals or groups contributing in different ways, see Collingwood 1942; Hobart 1990; Inden 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed advertising agencies have moved away from the blunt and questionably effective 'buy this' kinds of approach which replicate false assumptions about the efficacy of 'transmitting messages' common in development television. A major problem with such attempts at determination is that they ignore the fact that viewing has a history and audiences learn and get bored. The kind of advertisements I discuss below recognize this and so use ambiguity and irony.



reflection on the use of images of women in television drawing on advertisements as the main example.

Granted the complexities outlined above, how should we best set about understanding media advertising designed to sell commodities to Indonesians? What is at issue? And what is the role of such carefully contrived images in such advertising? If you look carefully at the practices concerned, neither the processes of reception nor production (Hall's decoding and encoding respectively, 1980) prove remotely as closed or determinate as generalizations from academic armchairs suggest. It is not just how viewers engage with advertisements, which is largely open and undecidable. Practices of production involve so many contingent considerations that those too are surprisingly under-determined.<sup>13</sup> For these reasons attempts at closure prove problematic around the 'preferred readings' or 'preferred meanings' which media industries place on products and which 'have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs' (1980: 134), because the practices, meanings and beliefs prove too variable, indeed partly unknowable.<sup>14</sup> And, as advertisements depend so much on images, the metaphor of 'reading', to which media studies scholars cling nostalgically (because texts are what academics are used to dealing with), seems singularly unapt. Conveniently, a different approach arising from film studies has addressed not only the issue of images and how images are supposed to work by determining the terms of the viewer's 'gaze', but is putatively universal and so equally applicable to Indonesia and Hollywood.<sup>15</sup>

### Images of women in television

It is impossible to summarize how women have been represented across fifteen years of broadcasting since commercial stations took off. However some trends are clear. Suharto's New Order (1966-1998), nostalgically for a régime ostensibly committed to modernization, decreed the proper roles for women were as wives and mothers. Women as independent or sexual were condemned narratively to bad ends in film and television. At the same time, as an affluent middle class emerged, so did a generation of educated, independent women who sought careers in the rapidly developing international industries in Jakarta and elsewhere. As commercial television sought audiences, and advertisers consumers, across the world's fourth largest country,

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<sup>13</sup> My ethnography on three Indonesian television stations (TVRI Yogyakarta, JogjaTV and BaliTV) shows how habit, deadlines, guessing what pleases the boss and sheer accident of what was possible on the day determine television output. As detailed ethnographic inquiry on different aspects of media production by three research students of mine confirms, matters are more complicated still. In different ways this applies to different kinds of production, whether it is decisions about programming or the stages of planning, shooting and editing programmes as Ivan Kwek has shown for the Malay channel in Singapore, Suria; or whether it is newspaper production or online blogs as Matti Pohjonen has described for Mumbai. The most immediately germane is Angad Chowdhry's ethnography of both a major advertising agency, Lowe Lintas, in Mumbai and the Advertising Standards Council of India. The sheer complexity of social relations, ambition and self-protection, attempts to anticipate clients, competitors, government and sometimes even viewers, introduces us to lived anthropological worlds far removed from the *a priori* rationality and generalization that besets most accounts of media production.

<sup>14</sup> Evidently I cannot cover here every possibility of how television in general and advertisements in particular work. One line of argument which requires further analysis is Althusser's notion of 'interpellation' by which viewers are hailed and recognize themselves through being addressed (1984), and so are fixed as subjects. However interpellation raises so many issues (e.g. Carroll 1988: 53-88; Dolar 1993) that it requires a separate discussion.

<sup>15</sup> This approach is usually identified with Laura Mulvey's famous piece *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema* (1992 [1975]). As we shall see, its purposes and argument have been widely misunderstood.

the possibilities of co-opting these women was obvious, because notionally they could attract audiences through their presence and looks, and sell designer dresses and a desirable life-style at the same time.

So a new generation of presenters flourished, not only in traditional female programming, but even male preserves like news and investigative journalism. More interesting are the higher rated spin-offs of news, like crime programmes, many of which are hosted by elegantly dressed, evidently highly educated, beautiful, articulate and definitely modern young women, worlds away from the under-class whose misfortunes they chronicled. Subsequently they took over the supernatural reality programmes which swept the ratings (Hobart 2006) and then charity reality shows as audiences bored of the former.

Between 2003 and 2005, the presenters who dominated the talked-about shows were women. The scion of the crime programmes was Caroline Zachrie, an exceptionally tall, Dutch-born, American-educated woman with commanding presence. Far more significant in a supposedly largely Muslim society, the late night Saturday series, *Angin malam* (Night breeze), dominated by its presenter Melati Sukma, was breaking new ground with frank intelligent discussion of themes from children's sex education to the New Man. These broadcasts were punctuated by a mysterious masked woman, *Putri Malam* (Woman of the Night) performing an erotic Javanese *Jaipongan* dance. The original dancer, Melly Zamrie, subsequently went on to her own talk show on TransTV, set in an orbiting space station, where the eponymous heroine TransWoman was accompanied by a male cyborg, who was only capable of speech via a synthesizer. The argument that this is simply the crude commoditization of female beauty misses the point. Young women were not only seen to be articulate, they articulated Indonesian society and its issues to the largest mass audiences it has ever had.

### Look here now

Among the most frequently broadcast advertisements are commercials for shampoo and beauty products, offering the lure of lustrous long black hair and smooth white skin. In most women are positioned as the object of the viewers' gaze. But for whom are they? They are broadcasting during both women's and general programming. And women overwhelmingly do the purchasing for these products. So the idea that these beautiful models are ultimately objectified for 'the male gaze' is somewhat problematic. Unless companies are paying advertisers to provide vicarious pleasure for men, the logic gets complicated and hinges upon assumptions about women's desires being determined by processes of emulation and identification, which depend upon the hegemony of male fantasy. As some of these advertisements are designed for pan-South East Asian audiences, are we to assume a patriarchal unconscious to which over 150 million males conveniently, unitarily and passively line up? The logic is not so straightforward.

Let us look therefore at some advertisements in more detail to see what is actually going on. Broadly typical of many run-of-the-mill advertisements was one of a series over the years for Ponds skin whitener. The main characters do not speak. The articulation of what is happening is left to the lyrics and a white-suited woman, presented as a Ponds' company employee.

*Lyrics: Now you are so white, you enchant me. I want you back, my love.  
I regret leaving you before.*

A young woman is waiting for someone in a smart shopping mall. A young man is observing her from some distance. The woman turns to look for the person she is

awaiting. A second young man pushes past the first observer, who looks down as the couple greet one another.

The scene cuts to the opening doors of The Ponds Institute. To a backdrop of six sequential images of the young woman's face, each noticeably lighter than the previous ones, a white-suited female employee addresses the camera to the legend: *Skin appears whiter in six weeks.*



The young woman as object of the gaze



The ex-boyfriend who now admires her whiteness



She was looking not at him but at her new partner who turns up



The clinical merits of the product explained



The object of the gaze and touch?



The rejected subject

Employee: Ponds White Beauty Vitamin B3 and double sunscreen makes your skin appear whiter and smoother.

Employee: Ponds White Beauty for skin that appears whiter and smoother.

Cutting back to the story, her boyfriend strokes the young woman's chin with his hand. She smiles at him. They walk off, while the first man turns away from the scene rejected and dejected.

At first sight the advertisement treats women not just as passive objects of the male gaze (indeed male touch), but as passive beings whose sole goal is make themselves attractive to desirable men. The preferred reading would appear to be that the former boyfriend regrets his loss, presumably because he failed to realize that Ponds could transform the woman he found unattractive.<sup>16</sup> The frequent use of close-up shots of the young woman's face seems to fit Mulvey's argument about the gaze in cinema (1992).

However we need to consider what is presupposed in slightly more detail. The advertisement takes it not just that white (and smooth) skin is desirable and that male choice is determined by women's appearance, while a woman's choice is confined to improving her body as best she can. How are we to know if women viewers identify with the woman in the advertisement? Why should the sun-weathered masses identify with rich metropolitans who live an impossibly remote and unattainable lifestyle? As village viewers picked out skin-whitening products as invitations to gullibility and impossible hopes (2002), the worlds of advertisers and viewers may be disjunct. Even this advertisement is slightly more complicated. The second woman is presented as a expert knowing, not a passive, subject. And the regretful lover, who is also shown in close-up,<sup>17</sup> may instantiate another cultural theme, much more familiar to most viewers, namely disappointment.

A second Ponds advertisement for anti-spot cream ostensibly takes a different tack.



The young woman who has clear skin



Running away from the young man



Men changing as the object of the women's gaze

<sup>16</sup> White skin as beautiful is a widespread theme in Indonesia, much of South East Asia and beyond.

<sup>17</sup> In fact close-ups of the male take up almost as much screen time as the woman. What are we to infer from this?

In the corridor of a university-like institution, a young woman<sup>18</sup> breaks away from conversation with a young man to look for her girlfriends, who have all hidden because they have facial spots and are embarrassed. They want to know why their friend does not. She holds up a tube of Ponds Perfect Care and one friend tries some on her hand.

After a scene in the Ponds' Institute where the product's working is explained, back in the university, the women stroll down the corridor but, seeing an attractive young man approaching, the spotty ones bolt off through a pair of doors to the side – straight into a changing room, full of undressed young men, who quickly wrap white towels about their private parts, while the women scream. In the background, the lead woman stands in the corridor with an aloof smile at the scene in front of her.

While the two advertisements play on similar themes, there are important differences, which complicate the representation of women. Although the spotty women scream at the sight of near-naked, and evidently embarrassed, men, it is they who gaze and men who are the objects. And the main actress shifts from being the object of the viewers' (presumptively male?) gaze to being the subject who gazes at male embarrassment at the presence of young women. The advertisement ends on a distinctly ironic note, with men depicted as passive objects of the female gaze. But what are these advertisements about? Are they simply cosy depictions of the joys of cosmetic creams? Or are they about loss and regret, a Javanese comment on uncontrolled behaviour, or many other possibilities?

Were space to permit, a review of advertisements for other products aired at the same time would show similar, or greater, complexity of representation. A car advertisement portrays an elegant woman inspecting a Honda Accord through binoculars, so exclusively in command that the male driver is objectivized as anonymous body parts. Ironically, conventional male fetishism about cars is reversed.



The woman gazes



At the car, while the man is shown only as body parts



Playing again on themes of desire, a tongue-in-cheek advertisement for the chocolate confection Timtam depicts a superior upper-class young woman watching a tennis tournament, apparently having a match-stopping orgasm after being offered Timtam.<sup>19</sup> And, back to beauty products, a mostly black and white feature for Lux soap showed a smart woman capably changing a car tyre on a deserted road, while a man sped past without stopping. Even for what might seem a backwater mass market, advertisers have become much more complex and ironic in how they appeal to viewers. Images of women as passive objects of fantasy – male, female, sexual or otherwise – do not, and cannot, work so simply, because the women say and do things. They articulate.

<sup>18</sup> To show how easy it is to impose your own presumptions, I had taken it that, as she was the central figure, the young woman was considered attractive, until a chorus of viewers retorted that she was plain ugly. There is a gap between producers' assumptions and viewers' understandings.

<sup>19</sup> In more puritan Malaysia the last scene was cut, so making the advertisement meaningless.



Too arrogant to tell him the score, she just points



She melts at the sight of the product



The ecstasy of chocolate...



...which stops the tennis match

The disjuncture of image and action is clearer still in two other examples.

An advertisement for Clear Anti-Dandruff shampoo is set in a martial arts' class. The master invites a young woman to a practice bout. As they take a hold on each other's clothes, the master glances at the white specks of dandruff on her black costume. Next we see her fall – the implication is that she lost her concentration because of the dandruff. After a diagram explaining the chemical action of the shampoo, we see the woman's clear, dandruff-free black hair slipping through the grasp of two male students as she takes them both on at once. The men assume a fighting pose, the woman's long hair flies neatly as she turns and they engage. She spins and the two men fly across the room to land in front of the master. He looks up. In close-up she looks at the camera—or at the master. In the final shot the young woman beckons with her left hand and with a quietly confident smile on her face, while she faces—ambiguously – the men in the class, the camera, the world.<sup>20</sup>

Only in the moment of male discovery of her scalp disease does the woman seem forcibly feminized and momentarily caught off guard. The rest is a celebration of grace and precision, of the capacity of a woman to better not just a man, but two men simultaneously. Her final smile appears quite different from the exaggerated *jouissance* of most male sporting advertisements. It suggests a woman who knows her own ability, who is as confident of herself as a subject as the women television presenters.

<sup>20</sup> The film-maker Garin Nugroho told me that, delightfully, the female star of this advertisement (made, as are many shampoo advertisements in Thailand) was a former male martial arts champion who had a sex-change operation. If reception is not what it seems, neither always is production.



Confident without dandruff, the young woman challenges two men and defeats them

Another Lux soap advertisement was broadcast at the same time.

To a Spanish tune with castanets, we see a young Indonesian woman in a dress, flanked by two Latin-looking men, facing the check-in desk of a palatial hotel. The man to her right leans close to her to smell her skin. Meanwhile the finger of the other man hovers just over the skin of her hand, as if about to touch her. In a whirl of images, a fan springs open in the woman's hand and strikes the man to her left on the nose. Turning to the second man, she points her fan at him and delivers a hard martial arts' kick to his stomach.



Rebuffing the importuning man...



With her fan which she throws...



And brings down the chandelier



In her imagination?

*An interval describes how Lux gives you smooth skin and a captivating smell.*

Back in the hotel foyer, we see the woman aim and deftly hurl her fan to sever the cord of a gigantic chandelier, which crashes spectacularly to the ground, as guests flee the explosion of glass. From a bar the two men look on passively. We see the woman look up and then see that the chandelier is still there. After shots of her smiling slightly, alternating with legends about the magic of Lux, we finally see her in tight close-up smile broadly at the camera.

This advertisement plays with least two contrasting interpretations. First, women remain objects of the male gaze and power. Here the woman's capacity to assert control over her surroundings and importuning men is illusory. In the end, whatever happens in her imagination, narratively the woman remains firmly within patriarchy. A contrary account however would question women's necessity to conform to, or ape, male roles. Although alone in an imposing and luxurious hotel, the woman is shown as at ease. Her reaction to intrusive males is swift and decisive. Her skill with her fan is capable of shattering the entire ambience of the hotel.<sup>21</sup>

However the men are reduced to distanced passive spectators. The woman's direct gaze at the camera seems like a confident look in the eye of every viewer or of the world, not the subject of patriarchy. Even were the latter so, in what sense does parading such vivid images of women's power of destruction or self-assertion neutralize its supposed impact on viewers? Indeed the woman's ability not to confuse imagination with reality and to have command over her power and desires suggests a mastery over self, which fits a broad range of Indonesian ideas about the subject. An interpretation of the advertisement as ironic and reflexive of the incompatible worlds of patriarchy and female emancipation makes better sense, although all the ways in which viewers may have understood it is another matter. Another complicating issue leaps to mind. The advertisements do not explain themselves. You have to bring to bear pre-understanding of what television and the advertisements are about and prior knowledge of previous and other advertisements. However, because such 'pre-text' or 'inter-text' is an open field, it spells the end of explanatory or interpretative closure.

### **Here's looking at you, kid**

The problem with interpretation is how do you decide between the range of possible interpretations made by one or all of the people involved in production, in media or academic analysis, or of tens of millions of viewers? Choosing between interpretations depends on whose criteria you use. As Foucault put it: 'one interprets, fundamentally, *who* has posed the interpretation' (1990: 66). In short, we are faced with questions about the nature of the knowing—or the viewing—subject and power, which here involve the gaze.

In a famous early manifesto, Laura Mulvey challenged interpretations of films as neutral texts to be read. Instead she argued that films position male and female members of audiences as differently gendered viewing subjects by virtue of the way that viewers' gazes, and their subjectivities (broadly as conceived in Lacanian psychoanalysis), are in significant part determined by how images – notably images of women – are presented. As she put it succinctly, psychoanalytical studies show how 'the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (1992: 22). If males are implicated in the viewing experience as voyeurs, women, additionally, are encouraged narcissistically to identify with female stars on the screen represented as the erotic objects of a profoundly gendered gaze.

What can Mulvey's argument tell us about representations of women in Indonesia? While engineering of women's images is evidently going on, how adequate is an

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<sup>21</sup> The fan is polysemic, not least perhaps in neatly linking Spanish and Indonesian dance in which latter women play leading roles. If you wish, you may read in a symbolic severing of the fragile cord that maintains the phallus aloft. However this is merely another version of the universal 'everyday' now projected into the Lacanian unconscious, to which only adepts have access. (In the absence of any coherent evidence that the Indonesian unconscious is necessarily so structured, I consider such analyses as problematic.)



analysis of the image which ignores the narrative and action? And what, if anything, does this tell us about what Indonesian viewers make of advertising images? Retrospectively Mulvey regards her piece as primarily pertinent to Hollywood films of a particular period, and is cautious about the validity of exporting psychoanalytical models mechanically.<sup>22</sup> Universalizing a theory designed for the therapy of individualized European and North American subjects as an axiomatic template from which to read the intimate reactions of entire populations in the rest of the world is at best speculative. As the unconscious is, by definition, not directly accessible to the subjects in question, the authority of the interpreter is unchallengeable.

How applicable are arguments about Euro-American film to Indonesian television? To what extent does positioning audiences before large screens in darkened cinema halls translate to the domestic circumstances of TV-watching? And how are we to address the historical and cultural differences in production and reception of a mass medium like television? What is meant by 'the gaze'? And is there something uniquely significant in the gaze in, or at, television?

The problem is there are too many gazes: 'the medical gaze', 'the carceral gaze', 'the tourist gaze' and 'the filmic gaze' *inter alia*. Do they have anything in common beyond the loose sense of someone looking intently at something? The medical gaze was Foucault's critical way of summing up the disciplinary practices by which medical specialists are positioned as knowing subjects for whom patients are objects of knowledge. Such knowledge operates through particular modes of reductive examination, here through anatomizing the patient's body and mind into objectivized parts or processes (1973). Other modes include examination through the surveillance and regulation of behaviour of groups of people, in schools, armies, offices or wherever, exemplified by the inscrutable inspection of inmates' conduct in prison cells (1977). For Foucault, the carceral gaze worked quite differently from the medical gaze to produce different kinds of knowing subject and examined objects, both being among the ways that, historically, Europeans extended control over their populations by categorizing, pathologizing, disciplining and so normalizing them in distinctive ways.

The filmic gaze is the most over-worked, essentialized and over-interpreted of all.<sup>23</sup> It might be easier were it confined to the practice, habit or right of noticing, looking, viewing, staring, gazing, admiring and so on asymmetrically, such that the person viewed cannot reciprocate. However, as humans do lots of looking of different degrees and kinds for different reasons and purposes, interpreting it all becomes fraught, if not impossible. So all forms of looking in daily life, cinema and perhaps even television now consolidated in 'the gaze', have to be anchored in a general theory of the psychic significance of looking designed not as a means of contextual analysis but as a universal theory of the development of the human psyche (Fink 1995: 90-97). Like other such structuralist approaches, its explanatory power comes at a high price. It cannot cope with contingency, with history, with dialogue or with culture as practice as opposed to an ideal system. One example should suffice to make the point. In a hierarchical society like Bali, the right, or better the authority, to stare at others who avert their eyes is widely vested in caste rather than gender. Nor is what looking is about the same the world over (Matilal 1986). Far from being universal, the gaze seems unable to travel further than a pedalo from Marseille.

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<sup>22</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>23</sup> An example is Doane's interpretation of *Un Regard oblique* (1992: 237-241). Some usage though is elegant and informative, for instance Dyer's analysis in the same volume (1992).

'The tourist gaze' shares the idea of staring at others' bodies from some privileged position. Indeed, Urry's book of that title starts with a quote from *The birth of the clinic*, and claims that, despite differences, the tourist gaze is 'as socially organised and systematized as is the gaze of the medic' (1990: 1). Any social or cultural institution is however, by definition, organized and systematized. While tourism might exoticize the objects tourists gaze at, equally it normalizes the tourists themselves. For the knowing subjects are those who determine what constitutes the gaze-worthy and so its immediate subjects and objects.<sup>24</sup> In these terms those doing the gazing are sold the impression of being knowing subjects, but the terms of their experience and activity has been largely laid down by others.

Do television viewers resemble tourists, except that their bodies do not travel? Neither determines what they see, nor the terms on which they see it. Their 'freedom' is normalized to a preference between options (which tour or channel to select) effectively predetermined by absent agents, and a choice of participating or not (going on a tourist holiday, turning the TV on or off). Indeed, there are circumstances when not to watch television is not to be quite normal. A difficulty with much post-Foucauldian invocation of 'the gaze' is that it essentializes complex historically and culturally specific practices for constituting subjects and reduces agency to the directionality of light waves. As Mark Poster nicely points out:

When an individual watches a TV ad he or she is watched by a discourse calling itself science but in fact disciplining the consuming subject to the ends of rationality and profit (1990:49).

He continues:

Ideological apparatuses, Althusser argues, constitute a centered subject which is illusory. TV ads, on the contrary, promote a decentered subject which undermines the distinction between the illusory and the real. TV ads undermine the distinction between science and ideology, true and false consciousness, the real and the imaginary. They are structures without direct referents, invented models of reality which themselves contest the distinction between the real and the fictional, strings of words and images that represent nothing but themselves (1990: 57).

What Poster makes clear is that looking or gazing should be equated with neither power nor agency. Nor do viewing subjects have a fixed human nature entirely separable from the mass media which surround them and in which they participate in different ways. However the argument remains problematic. Theory anticipates not only any possible viewer's actions and thoughts, but also any empirical inquiry. The advertisements themselves become the agents – just this time they spawn decentered – rather than centred – subjects. When consumer products have become agents, which seemingly think and contest, while the corporations and media personnel which produce them become instruments and the people who watch them passive and knowable *a priori*, we are in danger of becoming terminally confused.

### **Where does that leave us?**

The processes of production, distribution and reception of television broadcasting and advertising, and their constituent practices elude existing approaches because they depend on too many variable considerations to be easily encompassed. Coherence is

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<sup>24</sup> 'Even in the production of "unnecessary" pleasure there are in fact many professional experts who help to construct and develop our gaze as tourists' (Urry 1990: 1).

attainable only by retreating to a macro-level and by adopting mutually self-referring and vague concepts, which ignores almost everything of interest. Why academics reiterate ideas of the gaze, consumption, the everyday and retreat to the safety of statistics and generalizations is that it gives the appearance of keeping the evident complexity, variability and under-determination of human action at bay.

Even so cursory an examination of a few Indonesian television advertisements shows existing theoretical frameworks to be leaking beyond repair. In different ways theories articulated around consumption, the everyday and the gaze creak alarmingly. They each presuppose not just a universal human nature, unchanged by what happens in the media, but an entire raft of historically and culturally specific Euro-American ideas which pass as unquestioned axioms. Either of two approaches threatens this precarious ensemble: close empirical or ethnographic research, or cross-cultural comparison. Whereas the first tends to dissolve the purported facts, the latter highlights the Eurocentrism of the theories' presuppositions. Faced with such a double dissolution and the threatened recognition of the sheer complexity of explanation, the appeal becomes evident of universal *a priori* concepts which have been designed to be immune to any contradictory evidence (like the gaze and the unconscious), by which the former colonial masters retain mastery of the means of understanding. Given how uncertain such a world would be, those good old days seem nostalgically enticing when men were men and the natives were afraid. How much simpler when we thought we knew exactly what it meant when Bogart gazed at Bergman and said: 'Here's looking at you, kid!' And we imagined that it meant the same the world over.

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