

The windmills of criticism on understanding theatre in Bali

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Criticism, like the windmills of Don Quixote, is not always quite what it seems to be. It is certainly possible, if one wishes, to identify institutionalized forms and emergent (or atrophying) traditions of criticism, political or otherwise. One can also analyze the ‘public spaces’, occasions and styles of criticism as they have developed, or failed to, under different conditions in more or less uncivil societies. For various reasons I find difficulties with taking this approach seriously. Such false substantialism¹ leads easily to delightful conclusions like so-called ‘western liberal democracies’ arguably suffering serious critical hyper-inflation and the rest of the world comparative critical recession. Part of the problem, I shall suggest, stems from trying to establish the essence of criticism out of context and from focussing on the critic at the expense of the critical audience. Like Don Quixote I may be tilting at windmills, in which case critical readers will doubtless subject me to suitable ridicule. The allusion to Cervantes is intended inter alia as a reminder, not least to myself, that a critical approach to criticism itself involves issues of complex changing genres, of which the heroic anthropologist cannot plead innocence without being foolish.

Let me begin naïvely. Criticism is a loose word. In everyday speech it may be attributed to anything from vituperation to damning with faint, or even fulsome, praise. What is Mark Anthony doing in those famous lines?

For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men (Julius Caesar iii, 2.)

Criticism as a disciplinary term is a many-splendoured thing, but some of the presuppositions implicit in everyday usage carry over. Political cultures of criticism, as social criticism, is likely to be linked by most continental European readers, I imagine, to the long tradition of critical theorizing, most recently associated with the Frankfurt Critical School.² Continental European – perhaps especially German – of usage is something which someone reared like myself more in Anglo-American academic discourse has to learn. From the standpoint of many academic subjects in Britain and the States, not excluding philosophy, criticism – let alone social criticism – is more than a little alien as a serious term. Criticism is not an integral part of knowing in the dominant empirical, positivist tradition, because if one’s senses are working normally and one has the correct methodology, there is no need for criticism. At best criticism tends therefore to be reduced to corrective treatment for methodological error and is associated more commonly therefore with criticism of one’s mental faculties or even personal abuse. This latter picks up on criticism in the Arts, where it is personal opinion (*alias* unnecessary subjectivity) outside fact and science.

Allowing for differences of usage, is it not possible however to identify among the range of instances features which are essential to critical statements, or at least which ones serious commentators agree are essential? There are two obvious points here. First, intellectual traditions are not watertight compartments. Whichever way we turn, the notion of ‘criticism’, whether in everyday speech or different disciplines, would appear to drag in the associations of judgement of a particular class or profession, which is represented as authoritative. Sometimes this authoritativeness is claimed to be underwritten by objective truth.³ In other words, criticism

¹ I avoid invoking the notion of ‘civil’ or ‘non-civil’ society, for the same reasons that I am sceptical about hypostatized accounts of criticism, discussed in detail below. I am grateful to Peter Worsley for first suggesting to me the possible relevance of Bakhtin to the analysis of Balinese history and theatre and to Ron Inden for his useful suggestions on the draft of this chapter.

² On the importance of Kant in constituting this argument about rationality, see Asad’s thoughtful discussion in this volume.

³ Raymond Williams sums up some of the problems. The crucial development of the notion of criticism...

depended on the isolation of the reception of impressions: the reader, one might now say, as the CONSUMER of a range of works. Its generalization, within a particular class or profession, depended on the assumptions of personal impressions and responses, to the point where they could be represented as the STANDARDS of *judgment*... The notion that response was

involves relationships of knowledge and power. This bears on the second point. One needs to consider not just, or so much, what criticism *is*, as what is *represented* as criticism or critical, and the conditions under which judgements are held to be authoritative. And the question of what criticism is **for**, what its goals are, is generally overlooked. There are no grounds for exempting the widespread academic use of ‘critical’ and ‘critique’ from such reappraisal. Critical thinking about criticism is still in its infancy.⁴ Unfortunately the critical evaluation of the presuppositions in the writings of others is far more rarely carried through to the presuppositions of the critique itself. For instance, Clifford’s celebrated critiques of ethnographic writing are notably unself-critical about its own presuppositions (1983, 1986, 1988; cf. Hobart 1990).

Clearly I am treading on deep waters here, because the notion of criticism has been invoked in different ways. What I wish to do provisionally is suspend the search for an epistemological essence called criticism, in order to explore how the problem of commentary on public statements and actions is approached in one non-Western society in certain situations.⁵ If the issue of criticism is to be approached, as I wish to approach it, as particular historical and situated practices, then we may need to consider the circumstances under which utterances and actions are attributed with critical import and the rôle of listeners as active participants in deciding what are critical acts. Mark Anthony’s remarks about Brutus require the audience to do some work.

My argument is organized as follows. First I briefly consider recent forms of public criticism in Bali and in particular theatre, which has long been recognized as a privileged occasion for criticizing the failings of both audience and public figures. I then examine an excerpt from a shadow theatre play to argue that the audience plays a crucial rôle in whether and how to interpret what is said **as** critical. I conclude with an attempt to outline an account of criticism as part of the process of understanding. At best it is probably Quixotic tilting at the vision, implicit in much critical theory, of the critic as empyrean, as God, the intellectual or the scientist, who has some privileged position, set apart from the actualities of social life. This last is, incidentally, one definition of the sacred.

Critical practices in Bali

One could, I suppose, write a history of forms of institutional criticism in Bali, although I am ill qualified to do so. It is, for instance, not very clear to me quite how Balinese villagers articulated their responses to the rule of royal courts and their stewards during pre-colonial and colonial times, not least because different accounts vary in representing this from a benign and largely symbolic domination to cruel exploitation.⁶ It is also unclear how far such discourse as there was was about the nature of the régime itself rather than about the perceived failings of particular incumbents to office. What seems more evident is that, after Indonesian Independence, there was very lively argument – indeed the present government’s view is that it was excessively lively and destabilizing – nationally, and to a degree locally, over the appropriate constitution and form of government for the country. In the aftermath of what is usually described as the abortive Communist coup of 1965

judgment depended, of course, on the social confidence of a class and later a profession. The confidence was variously specified, originally as *learning* or scholarship, later as *cultivation* and *taste*, later still as SENSIBILITY. At various stages, forms of this confidence have broken down, and especially in C20 attempts have been made to replace it by *objective* methodologies, providing another kind of basis for judgment. What has not been questioned is the assumption of authoritative judgment (1983: 85-86).

⁴ In fact, what are to my mind the more sensitive uses of the terms in anthropology carry precisely this note of reflexivity (e.g. Scholte 1974, 1978).

⁵ It is striking how easily the notion of criticism lends itself to catachresis. For instance Kantian *a priori* categories are often used in English to give it the semblance of structure, as in ‘a space, or time, for criticism’ or even ‘the cause, or weight, of criticism.’

⁶ On the history of changing representations of Bali, see the account by Vickers 1989.

and the mass execution of communist party members, there have been stringent precautions against the revival of party politics in favour of a consensual focus on economic development, guided by the state ideology of *Pancasila*. The effect has been the effective demise of debate on political alternatives and on overt criticism in favour of government directives and criticism of the populace for its failure on various grounds to implement these directives. In the village ward of Pisangkaja where I work, the living still have reason on occasion to recall the deaths of nineteen local men – about one in ten household heads – following the coup, an event which has continued to overshadow public life in various situations.

It would be easy to argue that recent events coming on top of the habit of subservience to aristocratic authority accounts for what might appear as the indirectness of much popular criticism in Bali in recent years. One could argue though with at least as much justification that Balinese widely appreciate skill in the use of rhetoric in public speech, not least as an index of the speaker's maturity. Certainly there is a formidable repertoire of named rhetorical techniques (see Hobart forthcoming), of which those in authority are expected to be exemplary masters, even if they may fall short in practice. Argument in ward assembly meetings, in coffee stalls, indeed on many public occasions are often perceived as openly critical of the shortcomings of those in authority and not just those in the village. Despite the *dirigiste* ethos of government, it was interesting, if inconclusive, to note the frequency with which officials would complain to me about how hard it was to do or say anything without villagers raising a barrage of accusations of mismanagement, dereliction of public duty, impropriety and so forth. Although it is impressionistic and even ethnocentric, I am often struck by how intelligently critical Balinese villagers are in everyday life, compared say to the other society I know best, British academics. I would be loathe to pre-empt discussion of the processes of criticism by confining it to spuriously identifiable institutional forms.

There is one institution however which Balinese themselves often speak of as a vehicle of long standing for wide ranging public criticism, when necessary, namely theatre. There are many kinds of theatre, from the 'classic' shadow theatre found in several parts of the Indonesian archipelago, through various kinds of (masked or otherwise) genres of historical play, to popular drama (also notionally historical).⁷ Despite the arrival of television in rural Bali in the late 1970s and growth of a mass audience from the middle to late 1980s, theatre has long been and remains not just a popular form of entertainment, but a means of re-enacting Balinese history and a way of reworking cultural representations of what it is to be Balinese. It is almost obligatory to hold performances on each of the two or three nights of temple ceremonies, of which there are many, and on other occasions. So theatre is popular in every sense.

Plays are potentially critical in three inter-related ways among others. First they draw on what are considered to be accounts of the past (Balinese or, less commonly, Indian) to recreate political régimes, principally through court life, as examples which set the implicit standard against which the present may be judged.⁸ Second, the performers usually use the theme of the plot or the occasion to draw parallels with, or digress into remarks about, recent local happenings, usually to point to shortcomings, whether attributed to villagers or to the great and not-always-so-good. Third,

⁷ For the 'classical' account of theatre in Bali, see de Zoete & Spies 1938. Classificatory accounts like these serve to fix a wide range of theatrical practices, which vary from place to place, into a constructed 'system'. As Balinese come to read such accounts, they have the effect of providing the division into genres with a retrospective appearance of reality. Spies seems to have had an especially important and distinctive effect in helping to constitute the image of contemporary Bali to outsiders, including such anthropologists as Mead and Bateson, see Vickers 1989: 105-24.

⁸ On the ways in which Balinese versions of Indian ideals of kingship, especially those from the Ramayana are reworked, see Worsley 1972. In what follows I use the appropriate diacritics when the original reference is in, or to, Old Javanese. I omit them, as is contemporary Balinese practice, when the original reference was Balinese. For instance *niskala* [use OJ] is the Old Javanese for 'the unmanifest', but Balinese simply *niskala*.

it is common to use potential moral situations in the plot to give admonitory advice or cautions (*panglèmèk*) about how to behave and not behave in comparable situations in which people may find themselves. There is a vocabulary of the techniques used, known to the performers and more educated villagers. Whether, when and by whom, the plays are treated just as rattling good yarns, full of jokes, or as more morally edifying and critical commentary depends, as far as I have been able to establish to date, on the predilections of different villages and on age.⁹ On the whole, older villagers expect shadow theatre to dwell at the greatest length on the nature of the polity and to include the most moral and didactic commentary, and popular drama the least. How much potentially current criticism is included, and how elegantly or effectively it is phrased, depends on the skill of the performers. It is this last aspect that tends to suffer most in televised plays; and is often replaced by explicit lectures on what government requires of the masses. However I have seen several broadcasts, which the audience read as trenchantly critical of pomposity and inefficiency of self-serving officials. The professional actors with whom I spoke were well aware of the greater caution needed when they appeared on television, but interestingly they almost always said that the absence of a live audience was what hampered them the most. Why this might be so, we shall see shortly.

One can only go so far with sweeping generalities, so let me turn to one actual shadow theatre performance. Balinese shadow theatre draws its plots mainly from the nine *parwas* of the Indian Mahabharata, and more rarely from parts of the Ramayana, which have been rendered into Old Javanese, the textual language of Java and Bali, by local scholars (see Pigeaud 1967:116-19). An important addition are servants, often glossed as ‘clowns’, who paraphrase or comment in Balinese on what the textual characters do and say in Old Javanese. While accepted wisdom has it that the audience does not understand Old Javanese, and therefore much of what is being said, this is far from true; but it is too good a neo-colonial representation of the ignorant native to be often questioned.

The occasion of the shadow theatre play in January 1989 before an audience of some 400 was a large festival in the lineage temple of the local royal court, the prince of which was also head of the local administrative village, *perbekelan*, and widely spoken of as weak and favouring his cronies. The puppeteer, *dalang*, was from a village ten kilometres away and from a senior, but less powerful and affluent, branch of the same family, the Cokorda (‘foot of the god’, one may not address more elevated parts of the royal personage). The story, *lakon*, which the puppeteer chose was a minor episode dealing with the fate of Aswagani, the son of Arjuna by the daughter of a serpent (variously identified). He is rejected by his father, despite proving conclusively who he is. He is then deceived by a heavenly nymph, *dedari*, whose clothes he stole while she bathed and who agreed to marry him if he returned her clothes. (This last always sets up trouble.) Aswagani’s grandfather, Brahma, gives him the power, *sakti*, to destroy even the gods in heaven, at which point he transforms into the demon, Sang Nata Kawaca. The plot ends with the gods – not unlike a number of contemporary political régimes – stripped bare of power and pretence, wondering how to save themselves. (In the *parwas* the story concludes with Sang Nata Kawaca revealing the source of his power when he is tricked by the nymph in cahoots with his own father, Arjuna, who kills him.)

The scene translated below is an *intermezzo* as Sang Nata Kawaca, in his ferocious transformation, Détya, is about to wreak havoc in heaven accompanied by his two servants, the brothers Dèlem and Sangut. Sangut, by repute the wily one, bumps into that most sinister denizen of the other world, Sang Suratma. Somewhat like the Greek Moirai, he determines the moment of

⁹ Men sometimes claim that women in general are less interested in the moral aspects of theatre - a view disputed by women. In part the claim seems linked with the fact that shadow theatre conventionally attracts a larger male audience than other genres. From my research to date on women’s commentary on theatre and morality, my impression is that, if anything, they are at least as sensitive as men to the moral aspects of plots and situations in everyday life.

death by writing one's death warrant or, in Balinese imagery, by crossing one off his list. The scene ends with the approach of Sang Nata (Détya) Kawaca.

On bribing a God

Italic type indicates words in Old Javanese;

Bold type indicates words in English;

Underlined type indicates words in Indonesian.

- Sangut: Ooh! I beg your pardon, but is this the king of the *pemedi* or a God?¹⁰ I have never seen anything like it, is it a *pemedi* or a sea slug?
- Sang Suratma: Hey! Who are you calling a seaslug? Don't insult me like that.¹¹ *You are in the Presence of none other than Lord Suratma.*
- Sangut: Oh. Are you Lord Suratma?
- Sang Suratma: *That is right.* I write the letters which seal the fate of human souls. If you do wrong, I cross you off. If I cross you off with red ink, you're dead.
- Sangut: Oh. So that's it. Now, if I offered you money, you wouldn't cross me off?¹²
- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's a lot of money, I'll arrange to cancel it. If it's only a little, say enough to buy root crops,¹³ you'll still be struck off. If it's half,¹⁴ I'll half cross you off. You'll be very ill indeed.
- Sangut: If it's **lots** and **lots** and **lots** of money.¹⁵ I mean as **much** as I have got?
- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's **really a lot**, then I'll cancel the crossing-off **totally**.¹⁶ You can live to be two hundred and ninety years old. That's how it is.
- Sangut: Bah! That's wicked of you to be calculating like that. You shouldn't do that, even if you are in charge of the letters. Only if someone's done wrong should you cross them off. Don't mix money up in it, you should be ashamed of yourself.
- Sang Suratma: Why not? If I don't, my children will have nothing to eat.
- Sangut: Worse still! You shouldn't do it. You shouldn't do it. Don't try and talk your way out of it.
- Sang Suratma: Wow! Who are you anyway? Are you a soul?
- Sangut: I am a servant.
- Sang Suratma: So. What have you come here for?
- Sangut: I am following my master.
- Sang Suratma: Détya Kawaca?
- Sangut: Yes.
- Sang Suratma: Bah! If that's the case, I'll beat you to death. In short, you're done for.
- Sangut: I heard! I wouldn't do it. Why beat me to death? Those letters you're carrying, just use those. Don't start asking to beat people to death as well.
- Sang Suratma: Where is Détya Kawaca?
- Sangut: Who's this, sir? If I were you, I would get away before he tramples you underfoot, and you shit in your pants.¹⁷ Don't go near him.

¹⁰ *Pemedi* are a kind of malignant spirit. They are usually invisible to humans, but by report they are horrifyingly ugly and misshapen. Sangut is being deliberately insulting about a figure whom he knows to be divine, if not what divinity.

¹¹ There are two contrasting senses of *ajum*, which usually connotes 'to flatter', but may also be 'to denigrate'. It suggests heavily value-laden comments about a person for a purpose.

¹² Throughout Sangut addresses Sang Suratma properly by his full title but, for the flow of the English, I have simply glossed this as 'you'.

¹³ Taro, sweet potatoes -poor food by Balinese standards.

¹⁴ In the play it is not clear half of what. In their commentary the Balinese I asked said it was half of whatever wealth Sangut had.

¹⁵ The original word used by the puppeteer was '*pull*', the English word 'full', which has crept into Indonesian. I have glossed it more idiomatically.

¹⁶ The original was '**total**'.

Sang Suratma: Eh! I don't want to get trampled on. I'm off, right now.
Exit Sang Suratma, Enter Dèlem

Sangut: (*To himself*) I didn't know there were still Gods around who did their hair in knots as if they were wearing caterpillars!

Dèlem: Who was that 'Ngut?

Sangut: That's an old acquaintance from years ago, although I haven't seen him for a long time.

Dèlem: Since when did you have friends in heaven?

Sangut: A long time. We used to go off looking for work sawing wood together.

Dèlem: Oh! Why are Gods going along with you to look for work sawing wood together?

Sangut: That was Lord Suratma, the one who seals your fate. He kept shouting he wanted you, he really wanted to lay into you, jump up and down on you and smash your head in. He does it by writing you off with red ink. If he does it across your chest, you'll get lung trouble. If his pen goes right up to your head, your brain goes soft.¹⁸

Dèlem: Oh! That Lord Suratma's not so smart. (*Shouting*) I just want to twist, twist, twist his neck until it's kite string, chop it off with a knife, tug it till it comes off, smash his teeth in with a rock, smash him up, smash him up till he yells out, kick him into hell, so that for once His Excellency Lord Suratma himself should go to hell. (*Then, hearing Détya Kawaca approach, he reverts to an obsequious tone*) I'm coming, my Lord.

A problem of commentary

It may be helpful to take the reader briefly through this scene.¹⁹ Sangut, the servant, is both re-enacting 'popular Balinese ambivalence' towards a dread figure and showing not so much his gall, as anticipating his cleverness. When Sang Suratma objects to being called a sea slug, the puppeteer neatly hints at two related themes in his use of the Balinese root *ajum*, which suggests either flattery or denigration (see the footnote above). Without being explicit, and so leaving it to the audience to draw the inferences, the puppeteer is playing upon the ambivalent behaviour of underlings towards their superiors, where public obsequiousness goes hand-in-hand with more cautiously expressed criticism, or even excoriation. There is also an allusion to the popular view that flattery, or sucking-up, gets you anywhere with self-important officials in contemporary Bali.

The next section is a parody on bribery, made the more contemporary by the introduction of a couple of English words which are known to some of the younger and more educated Balinese. It ends with Sangut being offered an inflated boon, a most unlikely promise because no one in Bali has been known to live to be two hundred and ninety. Once again the 'sub-text' is a warning against trusting assurances about what the great and good claim they will do for someone in the indefinite future – a theme echoed in the plot as a whole, which dwells on the failure of the notionally 'good' Pandawa brothers to fulfil their promises. At this point the mood changes and Sangut pushes Sang Suratma into the whingeing and hypocritical justification of his corruption, so often heard in life. Suratma then re-exerts his authority (Who are you anyway? 'I'll beat you to death.') only to have its logic undermined by Sangut, who sets it against the immediate threat of real physical violence. (Sang Suratma carries out his lethal work, like many Balinese lords, from a safe distance – in his case cosmologically or narratively.) The episode is also an elegant instantiation of the complex relationship of superior and inferior, which carries the reversal of

¹⁷ The reference is to a particular kind of diarrhoea, often associated with fear. It also looks like an indirect reference to Sang Suratma's habit of farting repeatedly. The judge over death himself has the characteristics of a man close to death.

¹⁸ I.e. 'you go mad'. Evidently this is the Balinese equivalent of bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

¹⁹ *Pace* Sperber and Wilson (1982, 1986), there is much background ('pre-text' in Derridean terms) which cannot be inferred by some theory of contextual implication.

formal ideology within it. Sangut appears to offer a suggestion ('If I were you...') which is, perlocutionarily, a warning, almost a threat. A major, if often partly implicit, topic in theatre is the kaleidoscopic relationship of master and servant, patron and client. The passage is a commentary upon the recurrent theme in this play and others on agency, on the extent to which servants subtly alter or criticize their master's wishes and orders in various ways, while seeming to maintain a suitable deference.

With the arrival of Sangut's elder brother, Dèlem, the mood shifts again to play cleverness against a parody of rustic simplicity and bombast, a structural possibility of the brothers' as often cast. The puppeteer is also moving back to familiar, and safer, ground after what was taken as trenchant criticism of the host and distinguished officials in the audience. Sangut plays upon his important connections, and so patronage ('Since when did you have friends in heaven?'), by suggesting the humble realities ('looking for work sawing wood') to which people with grand titles often have to descend in practice. Before the recent introduction of electricity, it was not unusual to see impoverished men of aristocratic lineage (usually lower ranking *Satriya* and *Wèsiya*) sweating over the semi-skilled, but heavy and menial, labour of sawing planks by hand. (The puppeteer had such a magnificent title himself and, from my conversations with him, it was clear that he was aware of the ironies.)

Sangut then spells out and, by its absurd specificity, lampoons the link between divine agency and death. Sangut's unadorned account of the workings of divine punishment as simply mechanical offers a neat parody of the imagery with which spirit mediums may try to persuade their clients of their skill and insight into the workings of the non-manifest (*niskala*). Balinese often find themselves in need of mediums while being sceptical of the good faith of many practitioners, an ambivalence which is nicely touched on by the puppeteer. The scene ends with Sangut succeeding in pushing Dèlem into empty bravado – his 'stock' role – at least while there is no real threat. Dèlem's seemingly picturesque images of violence once more touches on the emphasis in certain texts upon 'fantastic and gruesome methods of warfare', 'elaborate, and to our taste exaggerated'.²⁰ More immediately it is a picayune imitation of the threatening language used by Bima, the second of the five Pandawa brothers, and the rivals of Dèlem's own usual masters. Bima's threats are truly intimidating because he tends to carry them out; Dèlem's are not only empty bombast, but lead to the absurdity of promising to condemn to hell the being in charge of determining such a fate.²¹ Dèlem's collapse into obsequiousness is not brought about though by the return of Sang Suratma, but simply of his own master approaching. Anachronistically, I am reminded of Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*.

Such a reading however raises almost as many problems as it promises to clarify. How, for instance, did I settle on this commentary? The great mystery of much anthropological interpretation is how it is arrived at. To the extent that it is illuminating, it may be because it appeals to our own momentarily significant categories. After all, I have said nothing yet about what Balinese made of the scene, or the play. The evident difficulty is that members of audiences in Bali and elsewhere often do not form clear-cut views or communicate them as academic commentaries. The assumption that people do rests upon what Reddy (1979) has shown to be a beguiling 'conduit metaphor' of meaning: that language is a vehicle which contains a meaning, transmitted from the

²⁰ A. Teeuw *et al*, *Siwaratrikalpa of Mpu Tanakun* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 32, 31.

²¹ Dèlem's logical confusion points to the disjuncture of the worlds of the audience and the narrative. Gods are *niskala*, non-material, unmanifest, and therefore largely unknowable to humans. Yet textually they are described as having quasi-human attributes as when they lust after humans, fight, flee and so forth. In what sense one can speak of Sang Suratma as in, as opposed to of, hell points to the divergence of textual and everyday narratives, the ambiguity being compounded by the servants, who are at once characters in theatre (but not in the written epics), but also imitate 'real' servants.

speaker to receptive listeners. An imaginary mental entity, the meaning of the play, and an essentialist question 'what do people think' of a performance bears directly on problems of understanding theatre. To explore these issues, I outline briefly first what Balinese did say about the play and under what circumstances. Then, I suggest an alternative approach to social criticism, which requires revising presuppositions about agency.

In fact, the commentary above is a hybrid. It is based partly on my own inferences from the inadequate base of having worked for four years in the community in question.²² It is based more substantially on a commentary, lasting for over eight hours of tape alone, by a group of four men in the audience, who often gathered to chat over such matters in the coffee-stall belonging to the wife of one of them, and with whom I often worked. Who they are – or rather that they are who they are, and not the manifestation of the hermeneutic spirit of the Balinese – is relevant to my argument.

Briefly the group consisted of an 83 year-old actor, a poor scion of the Cokorda family and a former leading teacher of *Arja*, 'romantic operetta' (as poor a gloss as I have encountered). Then there were two Pradéwa, members of the rival aristocratic dynasty, a wealthy seventy-year-old farmer and shadow theatre buff; and his neighbour, a very poor ex-flower seller in his sixties with a genius for the idiosyncrasies of language. The last was a low-caste driver in his early fifties, the ex-village head, well-known actor in popular drama and one-time professional hit-man (and when necessary my body guard). It is a slim basis in evidence, but anthropological evidence is usually much thinner, Geertz's *Thick description* (1973a) notwithstanding.

As we were walking back from the performance, these men were discussing how well the performance compared with those of other good puppeteers. The flower-seller approved of the *panglèmèk*, the (perlocutionary) effect on anyone listening seriously and the oblique criticism (*sesimbingin*) of people who are corrupt. The old actor and the driver kept chuckling over how neatly these had been woven in. 'Like sitting on a banana stem', the driver said, 'you get a wet arse' replied both the Pradéwa with smiles.²³ (Every act has its consequences.) They then settled down to considering how good the voices and movements of the various puppets had been, interrupted by one or another retelling relevant bits of the plot, to suggest that Arjuna had behaved badly. The farmer became quite irritated though and complained that the puppeteer had got the genealogy of the serpent wrong. We dispersed.

On three of the following five nights, I asked these men what they thought of the performance in more detail. With the lapse of time they had become more critical and reflective. A major theme was Brahma's gift of power, *sakti*, to Aswagani/Sang Nata Kawaca. The old actor could not decide whether this was justified or not. Brahma and Wisnu, he said, were the specialist warriors among the Gods.²⁴ Should Brahma though have put his grandchild before the state (here heaven, *suarga*) or not? The driver thought it a good example of putting family first and government second. Brahma forgot his duty to heaven. The farmer said the problem was Sang Nata Kawaca was overcome by desire, *kamomoan*,²⁵ in thinking himself too *sakti* and in wishing to destroy heaven. The driver retorted by giving examples of how the Cokorda who was the village head put personal and ward interests before those of the village as a whole.

²² While it is vogueish to question any equation of time in the field and authoritative knowledge, at least time so spent does not preclude the possibility of acquaintance with what people said and did. The anti-empirical thrust of so much interpretive anthropology however, is not unconnected - in those instances I know of - with the very poor ethnography of its proponents.

²³ 'Caranegakin (*ge*)debong', 'belus jitné.

²⁴ Siwa is often spoken of as superior to the other two deities of the *Tripurusa* and so more remote from direct intervention in human affairs. He is not therefore more ineffectual. On the contrary, he often emerges as the quiet agent of action, other deities being the instruments.

²⁵ The term connotes wildness and lack of reflectiveness. It seems often to be considered a consequence of arrogance.

They then turned to the scene of Sangut and Sang Suratma. The actor and farmer did not think it appropriate to introduce corruption. It turned out though, that, when the other two queried them, their reservations were not about its introduction into the plot, but that it was an indelicate matter to speak of openly. They agreed that it was good advice on how not to behave and that the audience greatly appreciated and laughed over the episode. They all then became involved in a technical discussion of exactly what rhetorical device the puppeteer had used. (Balinese have a complicated vocabulary for such indirect criticism.) They were laughing at how Sangut had tried to bribe Sang Suratma, until I asked whether it was he who had started it. Rapidly they switched – evidence of how an anthropologist, despite oneself, affects interpretation – and gave some splendid examples of how the powerful frighten the weak into offering them gifts or bribes. It was the image of Sangut trying out a bribe and the fact that he took the first action to which they returned – so much for the anthropologist’s intervention.

Finally they came to Aswageni’s behaviour. The old actor and the farmer spent a long time working through his genealogy to determine the antecedent pattern of events (to see if it threw any light on the justness of his actions). The flower-seller interjected that Aswageni had been tricked: he had been pushed to desperation (of which last the flower-seller had experience). They then suddenly agreed that the fault was Aswageni’s because in transforming into a giant (*raksasa*), he changed character accordingly. The actor said that, anyway, Suprabha had not been duplicitous and went back to his memory of other versions he had heard, where there was no mention of deceiving Aswageni. The farmer added that Aswageni had let his desires overwhelm him and couldn’t face the difficulties (*sangsara*) of life. It wasn’t, they decided, the gift of *sakti* which made him arrogant and want to destroy the Gods themselves. They then turned to Arjuna. The driver said that he was embarrassed to admit in front of his family that he had slept with a serpent (and been deceived by her human form). No, said the actor, Arjuna had sired so many children, he had forgotten the circumstances in most cases! How could he remember them all? If he had forgotten, where was the fault? The driver replied that forgetting is a fault and they all, the actor included, concurred.

‘Does Arjuna get to heaven?’ the driver asked. They then reviewed what they could remember of the end of the Mahabharata to check. (The point seemed to be to find out whether one could establish fault or not by the consequences of actions, *karma pala*. Arjuna did not make it.) The driver, who had been musing for some time, then came up with an explanation which silenced everyone. Arjuna is embarrassed because his son had grown up and Arjuna had never performed the requisite life-cycle ceremonies (*manusayadnya*). And further he had never married Aswageni’s mother. So Aswageni is illegitimate to boot. With this, they said that that was as much as they had to say on the performance and conversation moved on to other matters.

No matter how great one’s ethnographic or textual knowledge, it is not possible to anticipate the drift of the discussion or the grounds of criticism. I am not, of course, arguing that this example is representative of Balinese thinking. On the contrary, the diversity of views makes it difficult to settle upon definitive interpretations, or to define the parameters of criticism. I would suggest that such regularity as is perceptible may be more appropriately discerned in the style of argumentation, in how Balinese set about understanding and commenting on actual performances.

Agency in theatre

It is time to consider what these titbits of Balinese ethnography have to do with the political culture of social criticism and questions of agency in analyses of theatre and history. This bears directly on criticism. I shall argue that, because social criticism may not have been institutionalized, it does not follow that criticism does not occur as a practice. Further, a focus on practice raises questions about how useful it is to talk of a ‘culture’ of social criticism as some essential,

distinctive institution. We tend to stress of the act of criticism and the critic as agent, at the expense of the situations in which listeners infer critical intent.

One might note to begin with though that there is an important form of closure in Western accounts of indigenous textuality and critical thinking. Commentary and criticism are considered largely Western prerogatives or abilities. Natives are commonly represented as believing naively; Westerners judge critically or, like Kierkegaard, believe tempered by doubt. Natives have symbols (which allow – hermeneuts to identify – prolix interpretations): we have reason, which of its essence is potentially critical, as in ‘critical theory’, which relies upon the use of rationality in some form. A good example of this trend is to be found in the ‘rationality debate’, which is shot through with highly dubious assumptions about the supposedly quite uncritical nature of natives’ beliefs. Even the serious possibility of commentary is taken away. Academics’ use of native informants is reminiscent of Dutch colonial policy. They provide the raw material, or the crude labour, from which Westerners engineer finished products. Remarkable as it may seem, to the best of my knowledge no one has ever asked Balinese systematically to comment on their own activities, largely I suspect because as mere instruments of their culture no one seems to have considered that they could, and do, comment at length.²⁶ Clifford Geertz’s apparently generous suggestion (1973b) that the Balinese cockfight is a meta-social commentary is something of a backhanded compliment. There is an awful lot of blood spilt and money invested for a drop of critical reflection, which is itself static and incapable of leading to change. Anyhow it takes the Western superior knowing mind, or rather Geertz’s, to discover the commentary at all.

Much confusion has been caused by the conflation of text as a particular work and textuality, its context of creation or reproduction. The focus on the former as ‘the text’ tends to privilege the products of acts of inscribing (whether written or oral) and so separate them as the essential object of study independent of their performance, be this, say, reading (including reading to oneself) or enacting in theatre. It also defers attention from both performances and commentaries, which arguably form part of textuality as a practice. The complementary notion to this rigidified text is ‘voice’, the expression of human consciousness and inter-subjective awareness which becomes codified through cultural inscription (see Hobart 1990: 306-12). If one looks at the much-vaunted examples of these true voices speaking, one discovers they are much the same as what we ignorant bunglers do when we interview people.²⁷ Far from being unmediated by the distorting process of conventional ethnographic writing, such quests for the authentic native voice turn out to beg all the old questions of translation and are supremely the product of the inquisitive anthropological enterprise. In my experience (sic), in most societies people do not go around soliloquizing on their lives either without invitation or without being considered distinctly odd. The primrose path of longing for such an originary site in which to anchor authenticity is as much a historically and culturally specific narrative construction as is the voice which it seeks as its object.

The image of ‘the text’ is central to most Western studies of history and theatre in Bali. Dutch philological scholarship was largely concerned with establishing the correct, or complete, version among the many rescensions which existed (e.g. Hooykaas 1966). Structurally-inclined anthropologists have similarly sought to establish the essential template of Balinese thought underlying its local diversity. Culture-as-text, proposed by interpretive anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, has in fact broadened, and mystified, the scope of ‘the text’ and, in treating symbols as the essence of culture instantiated in ritual and theatre, left it more transcendental than ever. Ironically,

²⁶ Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity enshrines the conditions of critical possibility, which in practice leaves most non-Western peoples only able to respond to conflicts or change and unable to bring them about endogenously.

²⁷ A good example is Crapanzano’s *Tuhami: portrait of a Moroccan*. 1980.

in Geertz's fullest account (1980: 104-34), the source for these symbols is none other than the abstracted version from Hooykaas himself (1964). *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

The essential object of study becomes text, structure, culture or symbols as the transcendental agent, and Balinese social groups and persons become the instruments through which agency-in-general is manifest but which remain divorced from actual places and occasions. What is notably missing is any account of historically, situated practice or agency. For instance, Balinese read so-called 'dynastic chronicles' (*babad*) to interested audiences on particular occasions and these readings constitute part of social action. The agents, to use Collingwood's terminology (1942) are 'complex' and consist in a group of people who have come together for a common course of action. The readings are part of a continuing process of social activity, in which the composition, public goals and future actions of such complex agents are reworked. At least until the advent of television, theatrical performances (often using 'historical' plots) were also performed on specific occasions at the invitation of complex agents, whether courts or local associations of various kinds. Local preferences about plots and style are discussed between performers and spokesmen for the group in question.²⁸

The vision of Balinese audiences being the passive recipients of culture transmitted through the medium of actors implies an epistemological model of communication in which meaning becomes the 'content' to be transmitted. This gives rise to such questions as what Balinese think is the 'meaning' of a story, history and so on, which has proven notoriously difficult, if not meaningless (sic), to try to establish. An alternative account of communication which recognizes the importance of agency in actual situations can be extrapolated from the work of Bakhtin.

Bakhtin's basic scenario for modeling variety is two actual people talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time and in a particular place. But these persons would not confront each other as sovereign egos capable of sending messages to each other through the kind of uncluttered space envisioned by the artists who illustrate most receiver-sender models of communication. Rather, each of the two persons would be a consciousness at a specific point in the history of defining itself through the choice it has made – out of all the possible existing languages available to it at that moment – of a discourse to transcribe its intention *in this specific exchange* (Holquist 1981: xx; italics in the original).

The shift in emphasis to considering history-as-read and text-as-performed involves examining the consequences for subsequent social action on definite occasions in particular places. It raises, correspondingly, new questions about what Balinese do with, and following, such performances including any public interpretations that they might make and the consequences of these acts.

It is not possible here to elaborate on the implications of taking performance-as-practice on which see Hobart 1990, 1991). Rather I wish to note three points. First, there are advantages in approaching history and theatre this way. Not least it is more commensurable with Balinese ways of talking about such events and actions. It also avoids introducing questionable transcendental essences, like culture, language, meaning, space and time, and turns attention to what different agents do in different actual circumstances. There are neither grounds *a priori* nor empirically to assume that such agents necessarily behave essentially similarly. Many western academics still tend to write about processes which depend on complex agency as if they were substantive. Theatre then becomes 'a public space' – or more subtly 'an institutionalized time' – for criticism and we are launched into a wonderful journey of metaphorical make-believe. To judge from the popularity of works which represent other peoples' actions in terms of images aimed at titillating Western

²⁸ As Zurbuchen noted however (1987: 236-38), the final choice remains with the puppeteer, who will not normally reveal to anyone which plot he intends to perform. This is in part because he is listening to the conversation while he is offered hospitality and may not have decided which plot and how best to play it.

readers' imaginations, it is too good a way to fame, if not fortune, to give up readily.²⁹ In the ensuing excitement, we tend to forget that such an approach sidelines questions of how different and heterogeneous audiences and actors understand what they are doing, what they say about it and how it affects what happens subsequently.

Finally, I would like to note a methodological problem. Inviting Balinese to comment on the performance is artificial, in the sense that part of the commentary would probably not have happened, or happened as it did, had I not instigated the occasion for discussion. Before one dismisses the exercise as futile however, might I make two points? First, Johannes Fabian (1990: 3-20) has advanced a tantalizing argument for treating ethnography itself as one performance among the many which are going on in social life. The sense of 'performance' here though differs significantly from current anthropological usage based on crude metaphors of culture-as-drama(turgical). Second, on what are supposedly concrete (sic) accounts actually based? The alternatives are mostly not so much more artificial as plain imaginary. Either, like the interpretivists, we ignore the vulgar natives altogether and focus on the beauty of the symbols or meanings themselves. Or we have the eyes, ears and nose of the omnipresent, omniscient, and if not omnipotent quite surreal, empirical ethnographer – an imagination of surveillance not even dreamed of in Bentham's Panopticon. It is difficult to be in all the places at the moments people are chatting over such performances: so the artificiality of such discussions is partly a practical problem. More generally Balinese villagers have other matters to occupy themselves with. The main point I wish to make though is the value theoretically in switching from the predominant stress on culture as a holistic transcendental agent to the diverse forms agency is argued as taking in actual situations and its consequences for anthropological analyses.³⁰

Bakhtin and Bali

The invitation to write this chapter gave me an opportunity to think about how Balinese rework their history and represent the world in theatre. An obvious starting point was the work of Bakhtin. I have found it hard to square Clifford and Marcus's, and their associates', account (1986) with the author of *Marxism and the philosophy of language* under his *nom-de-plume* (if indeed it be that) of Volosinov. Descombes has noted that there seem to be two Foucaults, an American and a French one, with precious little in common.³¹ I have begun to wonder whether there were not (at least) two Bakhtins. (I subsequently discovered that Graham Pechey has arrived at an almost identical position, 1990: 31.) I shall not belabour the point here, because I wish to explore the possible relevance of Bakhtin to understanding Balinese theatre.

²⁹ To invert the title of Lakoff and Johnson's well-known book *Metaphors we live by* (1980), I fear too often we create metaphors others die by.

³⁰ There was much discussion during the conference from which this volume derives on the relationship between criticism and violence. In part this turned on the question of whether violence was the continuation of politics by other means. As should be clear, I think such discussion is partly misguided, because it treats violence, like criticism, as a substantialized essence and ignores the circumstances under which people constitute acts as violent and attribute responsibility for them.

³¹ As Descombes remarked

the American Foucault is someone whom one would gladly engage in 'dialogue'. The French Foucault does not believe in 'dialogue'.... Nor does he seek 'a common language' or respect venerable traditions (1987: 21).

Bakhtin emerges as an amiable pluralist, whose method permits, or obliges, one to 'find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent' (Clifford 1986b: 15). It is not so much that we are told that dialogue 'is not reducible to dialectic', (Clifford 1986b:43, fn.) or even that Bakhtin-Volosinov has ceased to be a Marxist in any sense, but that he is to be found underwriting precisely the individualistic subjectivism which he so trenchantly attacked (Volosinov 1973: 48-52, 82-94).

Briefly, I would like to consider the possible applicability of Bakhtin's ideas of 'heteroglossia', 'genres' and 'chronotopes' to the analysis of Balinese shadow theatre, and the problems of using an approach derived from a quite different literary and historical milieu. Oxymoronically, anthropological pundits state that Balinese shadow theatre is both the hegemonic discourse of traditional authority and the most celebrated vehicle for criticism of that authority. Their own authority largely cannibalizes earlier sources, because no anthropologist knows the Old Javanese, high and low Balinese needed to understand what is said.

Bakhtin's analyses of the history of European literature has a *prima facie* bearing on the study of theatre and criticism in Bali. First, it offers a way of talking about genres which need not be essentialized. Second, where people make use of different genres, or a single genre exemplifies diverse styles, the possibility of using one to comment critically on another is present. Third, Bakhtin's (and Volosinov's) arguments to the effect that discourse and texts are more usefully treated as dialogic than reduced to varieties of monologue seem relevant to the consideration of what Sweeney has called 'radically oral societies' (1987: 38; cf. Bakhtin 1981a, 1986a; Volosinov 1973), of which Bali would arguably be an instance. My stress on the importance of texts and commentary as dialogically related performances can conveniently be linked with such a general approach. Bakhtin's account of the phenomenon of 'heteroglossia', the diversity of languages or styles of speech (Bakhtin 1981b: 263), which he argues coexist in literary forms like the novel, can be applied for instance to theatre in Bali. Equally his analysis of uses of 'chronotopes', how space and time are narratively constructed or represented in different genres of European literature (Bakhtin 1981c), would seem just as applicable. Precisely because such ideas of Bakhtin's are so suggestive however, they can easily be adopted wholesale and uncritically. How far one can import or impose such notions on other peoples' historically and culturally situated practices without coming an act of hegemony – and without anachronism and anachronism – needs to be considered (cf. Fabian 1983).

Let me therefore examine for a moment the light which Bakhtin's work on chronotopes might throw on existing interpretations of theatre in Indonesia. Because such representations of space and time bear directly on how agency is portrayed, I shall confine myself here to these. According to Bakhtin the narrative construction of chronotopes differs between genres and is in fact away of differentiating them.

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions (Bakhtin 1981c: 84-85).³²

So it would seem that examining chronotopes may tell us something about genre. This definition of the link of chronotopes and genres creates problems, however translated, to which I shall turn shortly in a critical review of the applicability of Bakhtin to Bali.

Different ways of representing space and time may coexist and form part of heteroglossia. What grounds though do we have for thinking that notions of heteroglossia and multiple chronotopes might be worth applying to Bali? It would not be hard to argue a case for the applicability of ideas of multiple, divergent forms of speech to Balinese social activity. Ordinary language use is an example. Low caste people address their superiors in high Balinese and high caste people speak to their inferiors in low Balinese, the two being largely lexically distinct. In addition royal characters in most theatre speak Old Javanese, which is a different language altogether and that used for most 'classical' written works. These forms of speech are often essentialized as complementary 'language levels' but, as style, composition and often theme differ between them, 'speech genres'

³² How one translates depends greatly on how one chooses to read the original: even here agency is irreducible, if ignored. Consider Godzich's translation of Todorov's translation of the same sentences (see my remarks on translation below), where 'intrinsic' becomes 'essential' and 'precisely', 'categorically' (Todorov 1984: 83).

may be a more useful gloss. Much of the nuance of Sangut's exchange with Sang Suratma depends on his slipping from high to low Balinese, as he suddenly switches from supplication to telling Sang Suratma off for his greed, a subtlety which has obviously been lost in translation. In fact it is often not easy to translate an utterance from low Balinese into high, still less Old Javanese into Balinese. If one looks carefully at Balinese usage in theatre for instance, when servants are said to *ngartiang* the Old Javanese speech of the heroes, they rarely 'translate' in any literal sense. The word might be glossed at least as well as 'paraphrase' or even 'comment', which has the advantage of bringing out the agency involved in such translation.³³

In what ways might differing, but coexistent, styles of speech or representations of space and time bear on shadow theatre in Bali? Most of what has been written on shadow theatre, *wayang*, is about the neighbouring island of Java, where matters are quite clear according to Clifford Geertz. There is no problem of heteroglossia it seems, nor how the audience appreciates what is going on. For 'the average man "enjoys" the *wajang* without explicitly interpreting its meaning' (Geertz 1973c: 138). Indeed it is possible for a perceptive anthropologist to tell us what Javanese see or look for in it.

It is not the external world of principalities and powers which provides the main setting for human action, but the internal one of sentiments and desires. Reality is looked for not outside the self, but within it; consequently what the *wajang* dramatizes is not a philosophical politics but a metaphysical psychology' (Geertz 1973c:134).

The authenticity of experience is neatly anchored because we are told that, for the Javanese

...the flow of subjective experience, taken in all its phenomenological immediacy, presents a microcosm of the universe generally; in the depths of the fluid interior world of thought-and-emotion they see reflected ultimate reality itself' (1973c:134).³⁴

If agency seems to be displaced in this account from the puppeteer and audience, a further displacement also takes place. For

events are not just there and happen, but they have a meaning and happen because of that meaning (Geertz 1973c: 131).

The time-bound realities of good and evil, pleasure and pain, love and hate are dwarfed and rendered meaningless by the timeless and ultimately amoral background against which they are fought out' (Geertz 1960:270).

Here, not only is meaning the cause, or transcendental agent, of human actions, but theatre carries the audience temporarily into that transcendent realm. Significantly Geertz's analysis involves no epistemological problems: the categories are universal and there is no problem of different or contradictory representations. At least, if matters are not straightforward, we are not told how Geertz manages to produce such a confident interpretation.

Also writing about Java, Becker has proposed what, at first sight, is a quite different interpretation. The gods, heroes, giants and clowns occupy 'a multi-cultural world, a world of multiple epistemologies' (1979: 212; note that 'culture' and 'epistemology' are near synonyms here).

³³ Lakoff has recently contrasted translation and understanding. 'Accurate *translation* requires close correspondences across conceptual schemes; *understanding* only requires correspondences in well-structured experiences and a common conceptualizing capacity' (Lakoff 1987: 312). Not only are we lumbered with a universal, asocial and *a priori* prescription consisting of correspondence theory squared and a realm of mental entities (concepts), but also essences galore in speech treated as reified monologue.

³⁴ cf. Taylor (1985) on the problems of conceiving of 'the self' in terms of spatial metaphors of interiority and exteriority.

In the coincidence of epistemologies...the real subtlety of [shadow-theatre] appears. The major epistemologies are (1) that of the demons, the direct sensual epistemology of raw nature, (2) that of the ancestor heroes, the stratified, feudal epistemology of traditional Java, (3) that of the ancient gods, a cosmological epistemology of pure power, (4) that of the clowns, a modern, pragmatic epistemology of personal survival...Between each of these epistemologies there may be – and usually is – a confrontation and a *perang*, a battle' (1979: 224).

Although he does not cite Bakhtin, Becker's analysis of epistemologies involves different ways in which person and agency are represented in narrative. These depend upon constructions of 'temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' (1981c: 84).³⁵ What is more, Becker is quite unambiguous that heterogeneous epistemologies coexist in shadow theatre as performed.

Becker's analysis was an important and influential break with the then-fashionable, largely contextless and unsituated interpretation of symbols as a monologic system and a route into the hidden recesses of the Javanese mind. Unfortunately the break is not complete enough; and the difficulties into which Becker's study runs show how agency all too easily becomes displaced onto abstract entities and the anthropologist's narrative takes over from the original subject. It is epistemologies which confront one another, ancient gods which are resurrected (as if they were not contemporaneous, which they certainly are in Bali), natures and traditions made manifest rather than invented (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) or reproduced. While Becker starts promisingly with a radical view of what is going on in shadow theatre, he gradually conflates 'epistemology' with 'world view' and 'culture', so we are back to a view reminiscent of Clifford Geertz, which is perhaps why Geertz hailed this article as an example of his interpretive method (1983: 31-32; cf. Hobart 1982). However interesting Becker's insights, they are ultimately cast, as are Geertz's, in the Orientalist's timeless Asia of Hegel's unfettered imagination.³⁶

In other ways, Becker's analysis of shadow theatre is reminiscent of Bakhtin's depiction of the epic in Western literary history in its vision of meetings as brought about not by will or human agency, but by chance, in a world without hours or days which leave a trace.

All moments of this infinite adventure-time are controlled by one force – *chance*...this time is entirely composed of contingency – of chance meetings and failures to meet. Adventuristic "chance time" is the specific time during which irrational forces intervene in human life; the intervention of Fate (Tyche), gods, demons, sorcerers...Moments of adventuristic time occur at those points when the normal course of events, the normal, intended or purposeful sequence of life's events is interrupted. These points provide an opening for the intrusion of nonhuman forces – fate, gods, villains – and it is precisely these forces, and not the heroes, who in adventure-time take all the initiative' (Bakhtin 1981c: 94-95, italics in the original).@

In Western epic, according to Bakhtin, space is abstract and lacks the distinctiveness of any actual place, with its people and history.

The nature of a given place does not figure as a component in the event; the place figures solely as a naked, abstract expanse of space' (1981c: 100).

Here heroes undergo events, but remain basically unchanging. For

It goes without saying that in this type of time, an individual can be nothing other than completely *passive*, completely *unchanging*...to such an individual things can merely *happen*. He himself is

³⁵ See also the long section where Becker lays out a intriguing account of how narrative constructions of space and time in Javanese shadow theatre differ from Aristotelian principles (1979:216-26).

³⁶ Where, as Ron Inden has noted, we find 'an Idealism of the imagination, without distinct conceptions;- one which does indeed free existence from Beginning and Matter(liberalates it from temporal limitations and gross materiality), but changes everything into the merely Imaginative'. (1990: 7; citing Hegel 1956:139).

deprived of any initiative. He is merely the physical subject of the action' (1981c: 105, italics in the original).

In Becker's account only the clowns live in something approaching the lived-in world, but as Bakhtin argues (talking about the emergence of the novel) 'the clown and the fool, however, are "not of this world," and therefore possess their own special rights and privileges' (1981c: 159). Anyway, Sangut reminded Sang Suratma that he was a servant, which is *prima facie* a quite different role.

The servant is the eternal "third man" in the private life of his lords. Servants are the most privileged witnesses to private life' (1981c: 124-25).

Becker, rightly, stresses the extent to which different epistemologies, or chronotopes, are simultaneously portrayed in Javanese shadow theatre. He does not try to reduce its heteroglossia to monologue, far less attempt to epitomize all theatre or even the whole of Java in terms of a single genre in the way in which Boon, in a ludic response to the arduous business of ethnography, tosses up between the whole of Balinese culture being epic or romantic. In one of the most remarkable acts of essentializing I have encountered, Boon cheerfully concludes not that one can usefully talk about one strand of shadow theatre, or some kinds of literature or theatre as romantic, but that Bali as a whole is in some sense romantic (1977: 3-7). The implicit parallels between Becker's and Bakhtin's accounts are striking though. But are they the result of a remarkable confluence of ancient Greece and contemporary Java or the imposition of the superior knowing subject? One begins to wonder whether ethnography owes less to the Jumbo jet than to the time machine.³⁷

There are, in short, grave difficulties in importing studies of European and American literature and theatre into Indonesia. It may be as well briefly to sketch out some of the problems. Clearly such studies may be of heuristic value in highlighting previously neglected topics and in providing an example of how a subject might be approached. As with the use of sustained metaphors in anthropological analyses however – whether culture *as* a language or a text, or politics *as* theatre – there is the demonstrable danger of turning a means of considering a problem into a substantialized essence, as also tends to happen with the notion of criticism. Metaphor is a contrastive way of illuminating an issue, which easily leads to a false identification of tenor and vehicle. Culture is neither a language nor a text; politics is not theatre. Similarly the use of Western ideas about genre to describe or understand literary and theatrical activity across societies or historical periods runs the risk of creating imaginary classifications and, more serious, of obscuring indigenous practices and commentaries. Classification arguably involves *inter alia* an act of power or attempted hegemony by those who assert the applicability, or worse the truth, of the classifications.

Bakhtin's writing about genres has rightly engendered interest and discussion among Western academics. It follows neither though that his account is free of problems, nor that it may be applied without extensive reworking to societies, like Bali, which have at least a partly separate history of theatre and commentary. On my reading of Bakhtin's work on chronotopes (1981c), there is a potential problem of Residual Unresolved Lurking Essentialism (what one might call RULE), especially if taken out of the context of his – and even more unambiguously Volosinov's (1973) – writing on the dialogic nature of language-as-speech. Elegant and thought-provoking as it is, Bakhtin's analysis of how space and time have been represented in different literary genres, at times he seems to be contrasting such representations with some external measure of 'the real world' of 'everyday life' and 'biological and maturational duration' (1981c: 150, 121, 90). At other times Bakhtin himself provides the criticism of the assumptions behind this extra-historical

³⁷ Although I am critical of certain parts of Becker's analysis, or the presuppositions which inform it, he remains one of the most interesting and original American scholars writing on Java. His erstwhile student Zurbuchen (1987) has written an excellent account of the puppeteer as agent in Bali, although she does not use that particular terminology.

yardstick³⁸ by appearing to write about ‘real life’ as it is constituted in the heteroglossia of different, or certainly subsequent, narratives.

In Bakhtin’s depiction of the development of genres in Western literature, distinctive representations of space and time appear to inhere in, and to be fundamental to, certain written works. Should one however take the unsituated work as the appropriate object of study? Perhaps one should rather consider the work as it is read or enacted to a particular audience. Audiences do not, and can not, listen to a reading or watch a performance without some prior background and expectations, however hard it is to define these. Nor is it wise to conceive, as we tend to, of audiences as passive recipients of messages, according to the model criticized by Bakhtin himself. Even were Western audiences reduced to such passivity, I would argue that there is plenty of evidence that Balinese ones are not. An analysis of essential features of a written work without reference to what the readers and actors, but also the audience, may be putting in, assuming and understanding is an arid exercise. The importance of reading as an act is underwritten by the problems of working out how to understand Bakhtin’s writing on chronotopes. Ostensibly Bakhtin largely treats chronotopes there as determinable from the written work. Yet Bakhtin’s analysis of European literature is itself a particular historically situated reading, not the final determination of its essential features. A close consideration of much of his other writing, which stresses the dialogic nature not only of speech but of written works, suggests that it would be contradictory to take this at face value. Neither he, nor we, know how such epics were understood when actually read and performed. To paraphrase Quine: genre is what performances become when they are divorced from actors and audience and wedded to the work (Quine 1980: 22).

Bakhtin’s insights into the history of European literature offer suggestive ways of approaching the problem of discussing how Balinese represent space, time, causation and agency in different forms of theatre and writing. Direct comparison of Europe and Bali though is fraught with peril. Comparison makes all sorts of implicit assumptions and easily leads to hypostatizing the subjects being compared as if they shared essential features in common.³⁹ Etymologically if nothing else, genre is cognate with both gender (and genus, see Baxter and Fardon 1992). The difficulty is that ideas about genus, that is kinds or classes of being and event, not only differ cross-culturally, but may be used indifferent ways in practice. Balinese ways of classifying things have barely begun to be studied but, in strong nominalist fashion, they tend to eschew ranked taxonomies based upon grouping kinds into genera in favour of a very large number of named terminal kinds. @foot{There are few general terms, such as *beburon* ‘animal’ and *paksi* ‘bird’, even ‘fish’ requires further clarification as *ulam segara*, ‘sea meat’. Even in using the word ‘theatre’, I am already imposing a genus term. The (high Balinese) word *sasolahan* covers what we would call theatre (including shadow theatre), a range of named dances and even, at one time, films.} Such a view, incidentally, is consistent with the widespread view that the visible world (*sakala*) is continually transforming (*matemahan*).

Attempts to classify Balinese theatre by genre are premature and may well be misplaced. Different named forms of theatre seem to be distinguished by a complex of factors which includes the textual sources of the plots, the repertoire of characters and the latter’s medium of representation (e.g. by masked, or unmasked, actors, by shadow puppets). New theatrical ‘genres’ which take elements from existing ones frequently appear; existing forms change; and of which ‘traditional genre’ an actual performance is an example (e.g. *Prèmbon*, *Bondrès* or *Arja*) may be

³⁸ A more recent example is Bloch’s presumption in ‘The past and the present in the present’ (1977) that there is a real, fixed and self-evident yardstick of time as universal, linear and irreversible, against which ‘ideological’ deviations can be measured.

³⁹ On the problems of comparison, see Hobart 1987; and on the questionability of applying notions of genus and gender cross-culturally, Hobart 1995.

unclear to Balinese, should indeed they worry about it.⁴⁰ Genre as a classificatory or critical device seems to come into its own when talking about past performances, rather as Volosinov pointed out that the systematic nature of language was first postulated by philologists to deal with ‘dead’ languages (1973: 71-73).

It is easy to forget that the system in language – like the positing of genres – is a (questionable) methodological assumption. The recent introduction of Western-style institutions to Bali seems to have a hypostatizing effect on theatrical performances. Recently television, arts festivals and the growing importance of the Balinese Academy of Arts (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia) as a centre of excellence are crystallizing the variety of regional practices into an increasingly fixed and overarching framework, as they assume an enunciative function and turn local audiences into passive viewers. More seriously, imposing ideas of genre on Bali pre-empts the study of how Balinese set about acting in and commenting on actual performances; and how the performances and commentaries change according to the prevailing circumstances. Bakhtin’s work may be useful as an example of the issues one might wish to consider in deciding how to set about an analysis of literary or theatrical events. The presuppositions and categories of such an analysis would have, however, to be reworked comprehensively for the society in question. Bakhtin did not go to Bali, still less did he constitute Balinese practice.

This apparent digression into Balinese theatre is relevant. Arguably it seems sensible to consider criticism as a process in its social context, and theatre is one of the occasions when critical comment is widely expected. Such a step however, as we have seen, leads easily into hypostatizing speech genres into essences, which enshrine ahistorical meanings and worldviews and treat people like Balinese as mere instruments of holistic culture. Many western academics tend to write about processes which depend on complex agency as if they were substantive. Theatre then becomes ‘a public space’ – or more subtly ‘an institutionalized time’ – for criticism and we are launched into a wonderful journey of metaphorical make-believe. To judge from the popularity of works which represent other peoples’ actions in terms of images aimed at titillating Western readers’ imaginations, it is too good a way to fame, if not fortune, to give up readily.⁴¹ In the ensuing excitement, we tend to forget that such an approach sidelines questions of how different and heterogeneous audiences and actors understand what they are doing, what they say about it and how it affects what happens subsequently.

A post-critical era?

The previous discussion suggests some awkward conclusions about criticism. Sceptically, and slightly tongue in cheek, if, as some suggest we are in a post-modern era, where the certain and systematic nature of knowledge can no longer be taken for granted, we are correspondingly in a post-critical era. Any theory of criticism which is based on a static model of epistemology is subject to the objections which proponents of post-structuralism and post-modernism have put forward of a unitary system of certain knowledge, universal in scope and independent of history. If there are knowledges, rather than simply coherent ‘knowledge’, to the extent that these knowledges are not entirely commensurable, presumably it follows that the critiques which are based on such

⁴⁰ For an introductory sketch of *Arja*, see de Zoete & Spies 1938: 196-210, who mention neither *Prèmbon* or *Bondrès*, which seem to be forms that flourished later. Commentative and classificatory accounts like these serve to fix a wide range of theatrical practices, which vary from place to place, into a constructed ‘system’. As Balinese come to read such accounts, they have the effect of providing the division into genres with a retrospective appearance of reality. Spies seems to have had an especially important and distinctive effect in helping to constitute the image of contemporary Bali to outsiders, including such anthropologists as Mead and Bateson, see Vickers 1989: 105-24.

⁴¹ To invert the title of Lakoff and Johnson’s well known book *Metaphors we live by* (1980), I fear too often we create metaphors others die by.

constructions of knowledge are not so either. To the extent that criticism depends on the exercise of rationality in some form, if the notion of rationality can be argued to be at best heterogeneous, at worst unworkable and ethnocentric, so does a coherent notion of criticism.⁴²

There is a serious, or admonitory, strand in raising the question of whether we might be in a post-critical era. It is that a vague, uncritical notion of criticism has become devalued, or trivialized, by over-use. Just as Baudrillard (1983) has pointed out that representation has turned into the simulation, as practices of representation have changed (1983: 11-12). So much public and political criticism now arguably partakes in such simulacra. The metaphor of hyper-inflation refers to Baudrillard's argument about So it is not entirely nonsensical to speak of the 'hyper-inflation of criticism', or even of 'critical fatigue', depending on whether one prefers an economic or a mechanical metaphor. On another score, there is a long 'tradition' of designating certain epistemological moves as 'critical' from Kant's critiques of reason, to Sellars's 'critical realism' to the 'critical rationalism' of philosophers in the 'rationality debate'. Not to put too fine a point on it, as it is used nowadays, criticism here steers dangerously close to a defence of reworked positivist and enlightenment presuppositions, in which all objections to the canon are dismissed, usually *a priori*. Insofar as critical thinking in the social sciences fails to apply the critique to itself, it is open to similar objections.

Evidently my strictures apply more obviously to Anglo-American philosophy and philosophy of the social sciences than to certain strands of continental European thinking where the problems of reflexivity, dialectic and history have been taken much more seriously. One obvious example is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. I, for one, find myself in some perplexity, which centres on how far it is possible to underwrite an objective and universal account of criticism on transcendental grounds. My present position is, I think, pretty compatible with a contextualist or historicist view such as, say, Geuss's reading (unsympathetic as it is in parts, as such analytical philosophical critiques often are) of Habermas's reading (1971) of Adorno

Agents' epistemic principles and their standards of reflective acceptability just vary historically. Our standards of reflective acceptability and the social and cultural ideals in terms of which we criticize societies and ideologies are just part of our tradition and have no absolute foundation or transcendental warrant. For Adorno we must start from where we happen to be historically and

⁴² I would submit that the long-running 'rationality debate' casts precisely such doubt on the workability of a simple, universal definition. For recent discussion see Wilson 1970; Hollis & Lukes 1982; Overing 1985; and a review by Scholte 1984.

As I understand Balinese critical practices – theatrical and otherwise – it is not possible to ignore the historical and cultural situations in which criticisms are aired. Criticism on this account is an act in which people engage under various kinds of circumstance and is directed towards an object. That object cannot be entirely extrapolated from the conditions of its production and appreciation, including the particularities of the occasion, context, the words used and so on. Mind and the world are therefore not dichotomously separable. Events and actions may be potentially important in themselves, because past actions and their consequences are the raw materials (*lakar*) for critical reflection in at least two ways. Present circumstances (including individual human, or divine ones for that matter) bear the traces (*laad*) and are the consequences of past actions and events. And, second, critical thinking may reveal differences as easily as it may similarities. While people in theatre sometimes scrutinize, say, the past to try to discern a pattern or a broader significance behind events or in words themselves, perhaps more often they use the particular to apply, qualify and so rethink general precepts. The past provides an object through which to reflect on the outcome of diverse human interests and the divergence, and sometimes inscrutability, of human purposes. What happened, what is happening and what may happen are equally important, but you can only do something to change what is happening now, whenever now is. To understand (*ngaresep*) involves a two-way relationship ('*resep*' being a 'two-sided word' in *kawi* and Balinese, Zoetmulder 1982: 1543). It is both critically to penetrate, enter into and so affect, the matter in question and to be penetrated, entered, and affected by it. As you affect and change what you understand, understanding affects and changes you too. So distance does not confer superior knowledge, but more likely ignorance, disengagement, indifference. How can you criticize what you do not understand (on which, see Collingwood below)?

culturally, from a particular kind of frustration or suffering experienced by human agents in their attempt to realize some historically specific project of 'the good life'. The critical theories we propound in the course of this undertaking are extraordinarily fragile historical entities, which, even if effective and 'true', can never lay claim to any absolute standing – they are effective and 'true' only relative to this particular historical situation and are bound to be superseded (Geuss 1981: 63).

It is the later Habermas in particular (e.g. 1968, 1981), which poses comparative problems with the idea of knowledge as emancipatory and as grounded in universal criteria.⁴³ First, Habermas's shift from a work model of human activity to one of communicative action still begs questions about the nature of communication (see the Holquist quotation above). Recourse to communication arguably involves an additional set of presuppositions to those of action or work. And, if we are not to omit indigenous discourses altogether, Balinese notions of work and action seem to me far more potentially commensurable, at least in part, than that of communication, for which I have had difficulty identifying comparable Balinese terms of discussion. Second, the problem is not so much that humans through work may come to understand what they are thinking about better and explore new ways in which they may articulate ideas and the world about them. It is that such understanding may be grounded in 'truth' – which raises awkward questions about its transcendental or immanent status – and that such understanding provides the possibility of an emancipation, however incompletely realizable. Not only are there echoes of a timeless epistemologically guaranteed truth (see Hobart 1985), but there are unconsidered presuppositions about 'freedom' from one's social conditions of living – consider the etymology of 'emancipation' – and of a Christian *telos* of salvation, here peculiarly available to library-bound scholars.

This brings us to a more general question. What is criticism **for**? Those Balinese with whom I have discussed the matter generally stressed that re-enacting the past in theatre was designed *mituturin*, to make the audience aware of the relevance of moral examples from that past. Likewise more direct admonition, *panglèmèk*, was aimed at making members of the audience reflect on their behaviour and so change it in the future. To the extent that a performance failed to induce reflection on action, in that respect it was in vain (*gabeng*).⁴⁴ By contrast, in one way or another, critical theories tend to view the goal as emancipation through the operation of reason of some kind. Benhabib has however noted two contrasting versions of such emancipation as 'fulfilment-progressive' and 'transfigurative-utopian'.

By the term 'fulfillment' I mean a view of social transformation according to which emancipation carries to its conclusion, in a better and more adequate form, the already attained results of the present. Emancipation is realizing the implicit but frustrated potential of the present. The term "transfiguration," by contrast, is intended to suggest that emancipation signifies a radical and qualitative break with some aspects of the present. In certain fundamental ways, the society of the

⁴³ As Benhabib has noted (1986: 41-42), Habermas shifts ambivalently between two contrastive possibilities of emancipation: 'fulfilment-progressive' and 'transfigurative-utopian'. There are serious problems in claiming to underwrite a radically emancipatory project on the basis of reason.

The alternative is clear: *either* emancipation is radical, and in that case it has to be its own ground and to confine what it excludes to a radical otherness constituted by evil or irrationality; *or* there is a deeper ground which establishes the radical connections between the pre-emancipatory order, the new 'emancipated' one and the transition between both - in which case emancipation cannot be considered as a true *radical* foundation. ...if the founding act of a truly rational society is conceived as the victory over the irrational forces of the past - forces which have no common measure with the victorious new social order - the founding act cannot itself be rational but is itself utterly contingent and depends on a relation of power' (Laclau 1992: 124).

⁴⁴ Obviously much of what is taken as criticism works indirectly, as when people tell, or act differently towards, the person criticized. If the latter responds, this may also well be indirectly, through a third party. Equally someone may, for whatever reason, treat statements or actions as critical to someone else and respond purportedly on their behalf. I am grateful to Jeremy Kemp for pointing out this last possibility to me.

future is viewed to be, not the culmination, but the radical negation of the present (Benhabib 1986: 41-42).

To this one might wish to add a Habermasian version of some partly emancipated human condition through reflective knowledge. While one could identify possible parallels in Indonesia, for instance, in the idea of the coming of a just king (*Ratu adil*) or in the meditative practices of *Brahmana* priests (e.g. Hooykaas 1966), I am far from convinced on the evidence available that either the escatologies or the means of achieving the goals are commensurable.⁴⁵ As relatively little research has been carried out as yet on which Hindu and Buddhist treatises are to be found in Bali, far less what use is made of them, any general conclusion would be premature. I am left with the suspicion that the emancipatory goal of a transcendently-based critique are more historically and culturally specific than is usually maintained. It is to such inadequately considered presuppositions of critical theories on offer that I address my devil's advocacy of a post-critical era.

To end on a less pessimistic note, there is another sense in which the notion of criticism however may be, and has been, used, which partly overlaps with some usages in critical theory. It is, I think, more fully historically situation, dialogic and dialectic (whatever that fraught term may be taken to mean), without being reductively relativist. It centres on the link between understanding and criticism, as part of a historically constituted scale of forms. As the idea has been better put by Collingwood (from whom I take it) than I can express it myself, I cite him.

Comprehension and criticism, or understanding what the writer means and asking whether it is true, are distinct attitudes, but not separable. The attempt to comprehend without criticizing is in the last resort a refusal to share in one essential particular the experience of the writer... If we refuse to criticise, therefore, we are making it impossible for ourselves to comprehend... Comprehension is inseparable from criticism in the sense that the one necessarily leads to the other, and reaches its own completion only in that process... If criticism must go with comprehension, and if comprehension means sharing the author's experience, criticism cannot be content with mere disagreement; and in fact, whenever we find a critic systematically contradicting everything his author says, we are sure that he has failed to understand him... Criticism, when these two aspects of it are considered together, may be regarded as a single operation: the bringing to completeness of a theory which its author has left incomplete... Theoretically, the relation between the philosophy and the philosophy that criticizes it is the relation between two adjacent terms in a scale of forms, the forms of a single philosophy in its historical development (1933: 217-20).

Such a view not only brings out clearly the dialectical relationship between ostensibly opposed views, but the inextricable link between understanding and criticism, as well as the extent to which acts of understanding and criticizing are historical acts of agents. One might note that emancipation is not the central goal of such an activity. Rather there is a going-beyond (but not necessarily progress).

In this last sense, we could never be in a post-critical era, without giving up understanding as well. It is this usage of the idea of criticism, dialectically understood, that seems to me to be worth pursuing. It also becomes clear that our task of understanding the people with whom we work, in these terms (which must include theirs', including other peoples' ideas of such crucial notions as 'dialectic' and dialogue') has barely begun and will necessarily be fraught with difficulty. In a

⁴⁵ On the complexities of Indian ideas about liberation (e.g. *mokṣa*, *niḥśreyasa*, *apavarga*) through knowledge (variously defined) in Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophy alone, let alone for the differences between Nyaya and Vaisesika, see Potter 1977: 24-37. I would merely note that in the relatively simpler world of Balinese village society, emancipation, if one wishes to call it that, is notionally possible through the act of *moksa*. But the conditions of possibility of such an act involves the permanent destruction of the being who does so. Salvation, if one will, involves extinction.

sensitive critique, Fabian outlines the dangers of uncritical liberal and Marxist assumptions about what it is we think we are doing and why. Evoking the spectre of the unintended consequences of anthropologists' own actions, he points to the dilemmas inherent in doing ethnography at all (1991).⁴⁶

There is the further danger, noted by Talal Asad, that our efforts further strengthen the 'strong' languages of critical commentary, like English. Short of giving up the pursuit of understanding or, more likely, watching other people being eristically eliminated or subjugated however, I wonder if we can escape the dilemma of whether or not to write critical ethnography. Ethnography in this sense can never be done perfectly. At least though I think that we can recognize, and perhaps still write about other peoples' practices of commentary and criticism, if we bear certain *caveats* in mind. Such writing will need to be self-critical and cannot ignore its potential unintended consequences (that bugbear of so much systematic thinking). If it is not to be latter-day epistemological imperialism, it will also involve other peoples' commentaries and criticisms feeding back into anthropological discourse. (The effect of course will be to discombobulate what was anyway never as combobulated as it seemed.) Anything short of such a goal would be a travesty of any serious recourse to 'dialogue'. I have scant hope that anyone will pay much attention to such ideas though. Even in the tiny world of anthropology, hegemonic interpretations and professional advancement militate against anything so self-critical. At best I fear the verdict on this Quixotic adventure will be:

He's a muddled fool, full of lucid intervals.
Cervantes Don Quixote, Ch. 18.

⁴⁶ To the risk of the anthropologist becoming the 'ultimate *collaborateur*' of political domination (1991: 181), there is no simple solution.

There seems to be nothing we can reasonably do except to give up writing altogether or hope to get away with it without causing too much harm. Perhaps, under the circumstances, the question must be how to do *damage*; how to shake, subvert and alter at least those ideological certainties which our discipline has been contributing to the justification of imperialism (Fabian 1991: 194, italics in the original).

The present chapter is intended to tickle, as it is unlikely to shake, such certainties. The reader who thinks that either Fabian or I are beating our breasts about imaginary problems might find Pecora's article (1989) on the political agenda in Clifford Geertz's writing salutary.

Collingwood's views also suggest a way of approaching the vexed and under-considered question of how appropriate it is for anthropologists to be critical of the people with whom they work. On this reading, one cannot understand uncritically, nor should one criticize without trying to understand. Evidently more saying on this topic, but that is a paper in itself.

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