

# CRITICIZING GENRES: BAKHTIN AND BALI

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The conception of this paper came about through the inopportune failure of two structures – my spine and pelvis – to articulate, leaving me on my back. While thinking about how Balinese rework their history and represent the world in theatre, the enforced idleness gave me time to read some Bakhtin. I had found it hard to square James Clifford's and his associates' account<sup>1</sup> with the author of *Marxism and the philosophy of language* under his *nom-de-plume* of Volosinov. Descombes has noted that there seem to be two Foucaults, an American and a French one, with precious little in common.<sup>2</sup> I began to wonder whether there were not (at least) two Bakhtins.<sup>3</sup> I shall not belabour the point here, because I wish to explore the possible relevance of Bakhtin to understanding Balinese theatre. It hinges, like my back, on the question of articulation.

## BACKGROUND

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. Oxymoron-

<sup>1</sup> James Clifford, 'On ethnographic authority', in *The predicament of culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988). 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 valuable criticism of the original draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> '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'. (Vincent Descombes, 'Je m'en Foucault', *London Review of Books*, 5 Mar. 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', James Clifford, 'Introduction: partial truths', in *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (London: California University Press, 1986), 15. It is not so much that we are told that dialogue 'is not reducible to dialectic' (Clifford 'Introduction', 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 (Valentin Volosinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka & I.R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 48–52; 82–94).

<sup>3</sup> I subsequently discovered that Graham Pechey has arrived at an almost identical position in 'Boundaries versus binaries: Bakhtin in/against the history of ideas', *Radical Philosophy*, 54 (1990), 31.

ically, 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,<sup>4</sup> because no anthropologist knows the Old Javanese, high and low Balinese needed to understand what is said. With no further ado, let us proceed, after some bare background, to a scene from one such performance.

Balinese shadow theatre, like most other theatre, draws its plots mainly from the nine *parwas* of the Indian Mahab(h)arata, and more rarely from parts of the Ramayana rendered by local scholars into Old Javanese, the textual language of Java and Bali.<sup>5</sup> 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 a good neo-colonial collective representation of the ignorant native and so rarely questioned.

The occasion of the performance in January 1989 to 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*) 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 them. (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

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ronald Inden *Imagining India* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) on hegemonic texts and their often uncritical reproduction in Indological writings.

<sup>5</sup> On details, see Theodore Pigeaud, *Literature of Java: catalogue raisonné of Javanese manuscripts in the library of the University of Leiden and other public collections in the Netherlands* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967), 116–19.

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 death by writing one's death warrant or 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?<sup>6</sup> I have never seen anything like it, is it a pemedi or a seaslug?
- Sang Suratma: Hey! Who's calling me a seaslug? Don't insult me like that.<sup>7</sup> *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?<sup>8</sup>
- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's a lot of money, I'll cancel it (the crossing-off). If it's only a little, say enough to buy root crops (taro, sweet potatoes – poor food by Balinese standards), you'll still be struck off. If it's half,<sup>9</sup> I'll half cross you off. You'll be very ill indeed.
- Sangut: If it's **lots** and **lots** and **lots** of money. I mean as **much** as I have got?

<sup>6</sup> *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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> The original word used by the puppeteer was 'pull' = 'full'. I have glossed it more idiomatically. Sang Suratma uses the English word 'total' below, which works adequately.

- Sang Suratma: Ah! If it's **really a lot**, then I cancel the crossing-off **totally**. 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.<sup>10</sup> Don't go near him.
- Sang Suratma: Eh! I don't want to get trampled on. I'm off, right now.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

[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 aquaintance 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 will get lung trouble. If his pen goes right up to your head, your brain goes soft.<sup>11</sup>

Dèlem: Oh! That Lord Suratma's not so smart. (Shouting) I just want to twist, twist, twist his neck until it's kite string, cut 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 Detya Kawaca approach, he averts to an obsequious tone) I'm coming, my Lord.

It may be helpful to take the reader briefly through this scene.<sup>12</sup> Sangut, the servant, is both re-enacting 'popular Balinese ambi-

<sup>11</sup> i.e. 'you go mad'. Evidently this is the Balinese equivalent of bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

<sup>12</sup> *Pace* Sperber and Wilson there is much background ('pre-text' in Derridean terms) which cannot be inferred by some theory of contextual implication. On which see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: communication and cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

valence' towards a dread figure and not so much showing his gall, as anticipating his cleverness. When Sang Suratma objects to being called a se 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, which ends in Sangut being offered an inflated boon, a most unlikely promise because no one in Bali has been known to live to be 290 years of age. 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 distant 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'm going to 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 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' rôles 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 touch on the emphasis in certain texts upon 'fantastic and gruesome methods of warfare', 'elaborate, and to our taste exaggerated'.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 has shown to a beguiling 'conduit metaphor' of meaning: that language is a vehicle which contains a meaning, transmitted from the speaker to receptive listeners.<sup>15</sup> An imaginary mental entity, the

<sup>13</sup> A. Teeuw *et al*, *Śiwarātrikalpa of Mpu Tanakun* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 32, 31.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Reddy, 'The conduit metaphor – a case of frame conflict in our language about language', in *Metaphor and thought*, ed. Anthony Ortony (Cambridge: University Press, 1979).

meaning of the play, and an essentialist question ‘what do people think?’ of a performance bearing 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, 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.

The group, briefly, consisted of an eighty-three-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 idiosyncracies of language. The last was a low-caste driver in his early fifties, an 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’ notwithstanding.<sup>17</sup>

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 (*sesimbing*) 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.<sup>18</sup> (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.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick description: towards an interpretive theory of culture’, in *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> ‘*Cara negakin (ge)debong*’, ‘*belus jitné*’.



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.<sup>19</sup> 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 (*momo*<sup>20</sup>) 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.

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, when the other two queried them, that 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 Aswagani'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 Aswagani 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 Aswagani's because, in transforming into a giant (*raksasa*), he changed character accordingly. The actor said that, anyway, Supraba had not been duplicitous and went back to his memory of other versions he had heard, where there was no mention of deceiving

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> The term connotes wildness and lack of reflectiveness. It seems often to be considered a consequence of arrogance.

Aswageni. The farmer added that Aswageni had let his desires overwhelm him and couldn't face the difficulties (*sangsa*) 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 Mahab(h)arata 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 (*manusayadñya*). 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. 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

What these tidbits of Balinese ethnography have to do with text and genre is the subject of the rest of this paper. First, I consider the question of agency in analyses of theatre and history. Secondly, I shall consider how heterogeneous styles of argument may bear upon indigenous commentary and criticism as practices.

One might note to begin with though that there is an important form of closure in western accounts of indigenous textuality. Commentary and criticism are considered largely western prerogatives or abilities. Natives are commonly represented as believing naïvely; 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. A good example 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.<sup>21</sup> The apotheosis of this view is German 'critical theory', where reflexivity and self-reference rank superior to objective, or scientific, knowledge. The object of epistemological imperialism is not confined to the tropics.

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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

<sup>21</sup> 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. 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. Clifford Geertz's apparently generous suggestion in 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight', in *The interpretation of cultures*, 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.

<sup>22</sup> See Mark Hobart, 'Who do you think you are? The authorized Balinese', in *Localizing strategies: regional traditions of ethnographic writing*, ed. Richard Fardon (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1990) 306–12.

<sup>23</sup> A good example Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: portrait of a Moroccan* (London: Chicago University Press, 1980).

the many rescensions which existed.<sup>24</sup> 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, in Geertz's fullest account,<sup>25</sup> the source for these symbols is none other than the abstracted version from Hooykaas himself:<sup>26</sup> '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 R.G. Collingwood's terminology,<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

The image 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

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Christiaan Hooykaas, *Surya-Sevana: the way to God of a Balinese Śiva priest* (Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde. Vol. 72, 3, Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1966).

<sup>25</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara: the theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton: University Press, 1980) 104–34.

<sup>26</sup> Christiaan Hooykaas, *Agama tirtha: five studies in Hindu-Balinese religion* (Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde. Vol. 70, 4, Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij).

<sup>27</sup> *The new Leviathan or man, society, civilization and barbarism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942).

<sup>28</sup> As Zurbuchen notes however, 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 (*The language of Balinese shadow theatre* (Princeton: University Press, 1987), 236–8).

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'.<sup>29</sup>

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 performances-as-practice.<sup>30</sup> 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.

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 has advanced an interesting and 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).<sup>31</sup> Secondly, on what are supposedly concrete (*sic*) accounts actually based? The alternatives are mostly not so much

<sup>29</sup> Michael Holquist, 'Introduction', in *The dialogic imagination: four essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), xx.

<sup>30</sup> On which see Mark Hobart, 'Who do you think you are? The authorized Balinese', in *Localizing strategies: regional traditions of ethnographic writing*, ed. Richard Fardon (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press; and Smithsonian Institute, 1990) and 'The patience of plants: a note on agency in Bali', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 24 (1990).

<sup>31</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Power and performance: ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theatre in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison: Wisconsin University, 1990), 3–20.

artificial as plain imaginary. Either, like the interpretivists, they ignore the vulgar natives altogether. 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 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 diverse forms agency takes in actual situations and its consequences for anthropological analyses.

#### BAKHTIN AND BALI

Bakhtin's analyses of the history of European literature has a *prima facie* bearing on the study of theatre in Bali. 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'.<sup>32</sup> 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<sup>33</sup> 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,<sup>34</sup> 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 people's historically and culturally situated practices without committing an act of hegemony – and without anachronism and anachronism – needs to be considered.<sup>35</sup>

Let me conclude therefore by examining 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

<sup>32</sup> Amin Sweeney, *A full hearing: orality and literacy in the Malay world* (London: California University Press, 1987) 38. See also Valentin Volosinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*; and Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and novel: towards a methodology for the study of the novel', in *The dialogic imagination: four essays*, ed. Holquist; and 'The problem of speech genres', in *Speech genres and other late essays*, trans. Vern McGee, eds. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', in *The dialogic imagination*, 263.

<sup>34</sup> 'Forms of time in the chronotope of the novel', in *The dialogic imagination*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

confine myself to these. According to Bakhtin the narrative construction of chronotopes differs between genres and is in fact a way 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.'<sup>36</sup> So it would seem that examining chronotopes may tell us something about genre, which forms one subject of this volume. This definition of the link of chronotopes and genres creates problems, however translated, to which I shall turn later 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 heteroglossia and multiple chronotopes might apply 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' 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, for instance, one looks carefully at Balinese usage in theatre, 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.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> 'Forms of time in the chronotope of the novel', 84–5. 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'; Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: the dialogical principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester: University Press, 1984), 83.

<sup>37</sup> George Lakoff has recently contrasted translation and understanding: 'Accurate *translation* requires close correspondence across conceptual schemes; *understanding* only requires correspondences in well-structured experiences and a common conceptualizing capacity.' (*Women, fire and dangerous things*, (Chicago: University Press, 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.

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'.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

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'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Ethos, world view, and the analysis of sacred symbols', *The interpretation of cultures*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> Geertz, 'Ethos, world view, and analysis of sacred symbols', 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.' 'Ethos, world view, and the analysis of sacred symbols', 134. Cf. Charles Taylor on the problems of conceiving of 'the self' in terms of spatial metaphors of interiority and exteriority in 'The person', in *The category of the person: anthropology, philosophy, history*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> 'Ethos, world view, and the analysis of sacred symbols', in *The interpretation of cultures*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> *The religion of Java* (London: Chicago University Press, 1960), 270.

<sup>42</sup> 'Text-building, epistemology and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theatre', in *The imagination of reality: essays in southeast Asian coherence systems*, eds. Alton Becker and Aram Yengoyan (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1979), 212. Note that 'culture' and 'epistemology' are near synonyms here.



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.<sup>43</sup>

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'.<sup>44</sup> What is more, Becker is quite unambiguous that heterogenous 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<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> However interesting Becker's insights, they are ultimately cast, as are Geertz's, in the orientalist timeless Asia of Hegel's unfettered imagination.<sup>47</sup>

In other ways, Becker's analysis of shadow-theatre is reminiscent

<sup>43</sup> 'Text-building, epistemology and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theatre', 224.

<sup>44</sup> 'Forms of time in the chronotope of the novel', 84. See also the long section in 'Text-building, epistemology and aesthetics in Javanese shadow theatre', 216–26, where Becker lays out a intriguing account of how narrative constructions of space and time in Javanese shadow theatre differ from Aristotelian principles.

<sup>45</sup> *The invention of tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: University Press, 1983).

<sup>46</sup> 'Blurred genres: the refiguration of social thought', in his *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretive anthropology*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31–32. See also my critique of Becker and Geertz in 'Is interpretation incompatible with knowledge? the problem of whether the Javanese shadow play has meaning', *The interpretive study of Java*, (Second Bielefeld Colloquium on South East Asia, University of Bielefeld, 1982).

<sup>47</sup> 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 (liberates it from temporal limitations and gross materiality), but changes everything into the merely Imaginative'. (*Imagining India*, 7; citing Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The philosophy of history*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 139.)

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.<sup>48</sup>

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'.<sup>49</sup> Here heroes undergo events, but remain essentially unchanging. For 'it goes without saying that in this type of time, and individual can be nothing other than completely *passive*, completely *unchanging* . . . to such an individual things can merely *happen*. He himself is deprived of any initiative. He is merely the physical subject of the action'.<sup>50</sup>

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'.<sup>51</sup> 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'.<sup>52</sup> 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 romantic.<sup>53</sup> The

<sup>48</sup> 'Forms of time in the chronotope of the novel', 94–5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 124–5.

<sup>53</sup> *The anthropological romance of Bali 1597–1972: dynamic perspectives in marriage and caste, politics and religion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 3–7.

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.<sup>54</sup>

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. 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, there is a potential problem of Residual Unresolved Lurking Essentialism (RULE), especially if taken out of the context of his – and even more unambiguously Volosinov's – writing on the dialogic nature of language-as-speech.<sup>55</sup> Elegant and thought-provoking as it is, in his analysis of the representation of space and time in different literary genres, Bakhtin seems sometimes to be contrasting such representations with an external measure of 'the real world' of 'everyday life' and 'biological and maturational duration'.<sup>56</sup> At other times Bakhtin himself provides the criticism of the assumptions behind this extra-historical yardstick<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> 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 has written an excellent account of the puppeteer as agent in Bali in her *The language of Balinese shadow theatre* (Princeton: University Press, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin, 'The problem of speech genres'; cf. Volosinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*.

<sup>56</sup> Bakhtin, 'Forms of time in the chronotope of the novel', 150, 121, 90.

<sup>57</sup> A more recent example is Maurice Bloch's presumption in 'The past and the present in the present', *Man*, n.s., 12 (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.

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 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> Comparison makes all sorts of implicit assumptions and easily leads to hypostatizing the subjects being compared as if they shared essential features in common.<sup>60</sup> As Paul Baxter and Richard Fardon point out in the Introduction to this volume, etymologically if nothing else, genre is cognate with both

<sup>58</sup> Willard van Ormon Quine, 'Two dogmas of empiricism', in *From a logical point of view: nine logico-philosophical essays*, second edition, revised (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 22.

<sup>59</sup> How such an exercise is dubious is pointed out by Felicia Hughes-Freeland in her review of James Boon *Affinities and extremities: crisscrossing the bittersweet ethnology of East Indies history, Hindu-Balinese culture, and Indo-European allure* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990) in *Man*, n.s. 27 (1992), 203-4.

<sup>60</sup> On the problems of comparison, see my 'Summer's days and salad days: the coming of age of anthropology', in *Comparative anthropology*, ed. Ladislav Holy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); and on the questionability of applying notions of genus and gender cross-culturally, see my 'Engendering disquiet; or is there kinship or gender in Bali?', in *Gender in South East Asia*, ed. Wazir-Jahan Karim (forthcoming).

gender and genus. 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 in different 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.<sup>61</sup> 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 unclear to Balinese, should indeed they worry about it.<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 Dance (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 preempts 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

<sup>61</sup> There are few general terms, such as *beburon* 'animal' and *paksi* 'bird'; even 'fish' requires further clarification as *ulam segara*, 'flesh of the sea'. 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.

<sup>62</sup> For an introductory sketch of *arja*, see Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies *Dance and drama in Bali* (London: Faber & Faber, 1938) 196–210, who mention neither *prèmbon* nor *bondrès*. 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. The rôle of Walter Spies in creating and classifying contemporary Bali is a theme in Hildred Geertz's work in progress and is well discussed in Adrian Vickers, *Bali: a paradise created* (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>63</sup> Volosinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, 71–3.

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.

In view of my argument that we have barely begun the serious study of Balinese theatre and that existing categories of analysis often involve acts of hegemony, a formal conclusion would be out of place. A better understanding will, I suggest, not be possible until we stop treating speech genres as essence which embody ahistorical meanings and world views; nor until we stop treating people like Balinese as mere instruments of holistic culture. It may be useful to explore the significance of the different ways in which the world is reworked discursively. It is not that we need closer philological examination of scenes like that of Sangut and Sang Suratma transformed into new text; but rather we need to look at what different groups of Balinese have to say about it and how it affects social action. There seems to me to remain a deep divide, yet to be crossed, between Becker's commentary on the meaning of shadow-theatre and the ways in which four Balinese set about commenting on the performance. If criticism is about the articulation of discursive structures then, like the ailing anthropologist, the sooner we get off our backs and start detailed inquiry the better. It will only be the first step.