

## **Comments on Katarina Graffman's working paper *The cruel masses***

**from Mark Hobart (London SOAS)**

### **Introduction**

First of all, let me start with an apology. It is 1.30 on a Monday morning before I have found time to write my comments on this very interesting piece. I fear it may not do it the justice it deserves.

The cruel masses indicates precisely why media studies needs to take anthropological approaches to media seriously. It addresses a set of issues that have been largely marginalized in much media studies to date namely the world of producers approached ethnographically as inherently problematic (or to be problematized), rather than as a straightforward process. As a short paper, inevitably *The cruel masses* raises more interesting questions (sometimes implicitly) than it can fully answer in the space available, and so is highly suitable as the start of a discussion. In general terms, perhaps it would have been better if the questions had emerged slightly more clearly, either at the beginning or even the end, as an indication of where the research was heading. Also there is a slight contradiction between the method, ethnographic fieldwork, and the presentation of results, which give the impression of relying heavily on quotations from interviews, supplemented by general observations of production. The nuances of differences between different producers and what producers say and what they do has no real opportunity to emerge. However I take it that this is primarily because of constraints of space. It does however point to a crucial feature of ethnography: its capacity to give readers the evidence with which to engage critically with the materials, which disappears in generalized accounts. The central idea is neat and works well: an inquiry into the sequential assumptions that Swedish TV producers in one company make about their imagined audiences. The paper whet my appetite for more detail than the paper could provide. The general argument is well taken though and makes very good sense. And, as with all ethnography, it raises broader questions, here not just about what comparative studies of producers might throw up but about Swedish society itself.

### **Specific thoughts**

My subsequent comments are a mixture of the specific and general, largely in the order that the thoughts came to mind while reading.

I was struck, first of all, by a degree of closure. The producers mostly imagined a single viewer statistical or referential. Producers themselves

are equally described as highly atomized agents, almost auteurs: the most complex description is of a producer, editor and executive producer/project leader (p 5). This raises questions about the extent analytically to which agency might usefully be considered as complex (Collingwood, *The new Leviathan*; Inden, *Imagining India*). The television producers with whom I have discussed the issue in various Asian countries all stress the degree to which agency is complex, distributed and rapidly changing in the process of production. This stands in contrast to the appearance of the producer as central during key aspects of shooting. This raises interesting questions therefore about a possible disjuncture between observation and reflexive commentary; and possibly between cultural styles of attributing agency.

As the notion of the 'Average person', is central to her analysis, Katarina might find Ian Hacking's *The taming of chance* interesting. There he describes the emergence of the idea of the 'normal' and 'average' with all their multiple senses ambiguities which are neatly encapsulated in the producers, comments. The average and normal are at once, gerundively, valuable and dismissable.

The shift from the average person to the reference person is interesting, though I remained slightly unclear (perhaps because I had to read the piece fast) as to how and under what circumstances this remained a statistical notion as against an instantiation of a single or multiple known people. The figure that is arguably missing is Bakhtin's idea of the superaddressee. On my reading this figure is clearly not the same as the reference person, as it is a much more idealized interlocutor indeed it looks rather like the producer lying back on the couch watching her/his own programme. In general I would have liked a slightly more developed account of the idealized nature of the relationship. Producers are imagining viewers. The paper is an exercise in such imagination, its routinization or its lack. On this point, rather pedantically, it may be worth distinguishing 'construct', 'constitute', 'survey', 'imagine', etc., each of which indicates a quite different relationship of creating something as an object of thought or action. 'Construct' has a strong idealist heritage. While this fits rather well, it should then presumably come at the end of the analysis of the particular practices of producers.

On this score, perhaps for reasons of brevity, Katarina slips into borrowing essentialisms e.g. It is the producers who are the conduits of corporate ideologies (p 2). I question whether the producers constitute such a clear category except in very general terms. The idea also reifies and essentializes ideology in a way that might have been acceptable in the early 80s, but looks a little dated, whether you agree with it or not, after Laclau's *The impossibility of society*. On the conduit metaphor, Michael Reddy wrote an interesting article (*The conduit metaphor a case of frame conflict*

in our language about language. In *Metaphor and thought*, ed. A. Ortony, Cambridge: Univ. Press.)

On p 4 I found myself wanting to know a great deal more about the circumstances under which Katarina elicited the statements from various producers. The point of ethnography is often not so much what people say as the circumstances under which they say it. That is missing. My impression is not just what Katarina went on to explicate, namely the idea of difference, but despite their protestations, a strong sense of the producers, sense of superiority. If it is not also condescending, I think I would like an explanation of how this could be. It certainly stands in stark contrast to how Indonesian television producers talk about their audiences, which is as much more complex unpredictable and critical. And here we come to my main thought about the paper: this is in a way an ethnography of how an élite imagines the masses. All the techniques the repeated and insistent closure around singularities (a single average/representative viewer), the refusal to consider the normal as in a normal distribution, as a complex and varied phenomenon, the caricature in the selection of the viewer's attributes, the use of facts, produced by the in-group itself are those by which an élite reaffirms its sense of superiority. Again I would like to know what are the specifically Swedish modulations.

On p 5 there is a crucial sentence. „The construction the average person is a strategy that does more to facilitate the communication within the TV institution than help the producers to build up a perception of the viewers.“ This gives us an insight into a second theme that is latent in this paper, namely that the average viewer is at best a token of a type that is marginal to another issue, about which producers might (or might not) be less willing to talk, namely their competition with one another both within and outside particular companies. One TV producer once said to me: „Audience ratings are how producers keep score between their rival programmes“. This in turn is not the only index, as the piece implies, of success (cf. the remarks about ratings as currency later). Reviews of programmes are never mentioned, neither are awards. I would like to know how they fit or complicate the picture.

On p 5 again there is a suggestive difference between what female and male producers imagine as the desirable attributes of programme hosts. The point needs expanding.

On p 6, the quotation of the female producer about her concerns at different stages of production is telling and well worth building on. It fits the whole argument about there being a dynamic to imagining.

The theme of the producer as viewer is not new (p 11). However the problem of the producer's innocence, is now a fairly well developed theme. At this

stage however I did find myself finally getting concerned at how I was continually being forestalled from a critical engagement with the piece by the repeated use of producers, as a blanket category. This is an essentialism that I think should be disposed of very early. All Katarina's evidence points to interesting differences, mostly obviously based on gender and experience.

For this reason, I did not find the conclusion particularly satisfactory, nor that it really reflected the richness of the materials. For example, the statement ( p 13) that „The producer and the audience share frame of references, making decoding possible“ does not follow. First, as AFC Wallace noted (in Culture and personality), we do not need to assume shared understanding or shared frames of reference in any act of communication. All we need, and may assume, is that there are rough structures of equivalence between speakers/broadcasters and listeners/viewers. We know nothing about what up to one million viewers made of what they watched (or at least the frame of reference they had and how would one establish that?). That is a quite different study. The synthesis is revealing. The producers, account of the framework is the one that matters, because viewers are disarticulated indeed they are so disarticulated that even the producers could not access their articulations if they wanted.

## **Conclusion**

This is a very interesting and provocative piece. I hope it will stimulate discussion and I am sure it will lead to Katarina writing interesting articles and perhaps a monograph based on her thesis.

Two main theoretical issues emerge for me. The first is the need for anthropologists interested in media to start considering more critically the whole question of the way that studies of the mass media make assumptions about the relationship of elites and masses, and often enshrine those assumptions, so making us complicit with the producers. The second is the need to be critical of the categories that the participants themselves use. This is easier when culture shock ensures the recognition of difference. It is harder when both are parts of the same, or cognate, intellectual élites.