CHAPTER EIGHT

SEDUCTIVE PLEASURES, ELUDING SUBJECTIVITIES:
SOME THOUGHTS ON DANGDUT’S AMBIGUOUS IDENTITY

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Introduction

The Indonesian popular music genre called dangdut, a unique hybrid mixture of mainly Western, Indian and Malay musical elements, has long been associated with the lower classes and cheap escapist, often highly sexualised, entertainment (Frederick 1982; Pioquinto 1995; Browne 2000; Wallach 2008; Weintraub 2010).1 In the 1990s, dangdut was increasingly appropriated by the elite, leading to media discourses of it as a ‘very very Indonesian’2 music. There was even speculation about its potential for ‘going international’.3 Yet, in addition to this optimistic discourse, both in late New Order Indonesia and – even fiercer – in the post-Suharto era, there have been continuous debates about dangdut’s ‘appropriate’ form, particularly with regard to the erotic dancing styles typical of the performance of the female singers. While Rhoma Irama, with his populist Islamic dangdut style, often called dangdut dakwah (Islamic proselyting dangdut), may during the New Order have been the established raja dangdut or ‘king of dangdut’, it is in fact the vulgar eroticism of many lower class kampung4-style dangdut shows that gives rise to most Indonesians’ associations and fantasies about the genre. There seems to be no neutral position with regard to dangdut: Indonesians tend to either love it (usually the lower classes) or despise it (the middle classes and the elite) as something embarrassingly kampungan – that is, ‘cheap’ and ‘low-class’.

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1 This chapter is based on a paper that was written for the 2003 KITLV international workshop ‘Southeast Asian Pop Music in a Comparative Perspective’; it was slightly updated and partly revised in early 2013. I am grateful to Bart Barendregt and Jan van der Putten for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Its remaining shortcomings are of course wholly mine.

2 In the words of former State Ministry Moerdiono, cited in Simatupang (1996:58).

3 See, for example, the interview with senior female singer Camelia Malik (2000).

4 Kampung means village or a poor, semi-rural village-like area in a town or city.

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From a more Islamic perspective, particularly the low-class, erotic performances by female singers may even be considered to be haram (forbidden by Islam), and be campaigned against, as happened with the East Javanese singer-dancer Inul whose (in)famous ‘drilling’ (ngebor) buttocks gained international notoriety – one of the rare instances when contemporary Indonesian popular culture attracted brief global attention as some kind of exotic sensation.5

In this chapter, I offer some general thoughts about the socially mediated cultural aesthetics that may be at work in making dangdut such a pleasure to its fans, and at the same time such a contested subject in the official public sphere of both late New Order Indonesia and the first decade after its demise in 1998. I suggest that some of the most distinctive pleasures dangdut offers might be related to multiple contradictions inherent in its social constitution. Dangdut’s prominent inclusive character, not only as a hybrid musical genre, but also socially as a strong status-levelling force, as well as the ambiguity and multiple meanings of its lyrics, performances and consumption practices have been explored before (Wallach 2008; Weintraub 2010; see also Wallach in this volume). Here I take a closer look at the euphoria-inducing psychodynamics of dangdut that, as I suggest, constitute a subjectivity ‘tainted’ by a strong ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ (Bauer 2011). In so doing I hope to offer some additional ideas about dangdut’s social positioning as an ideologically contested object of middle class and elite anxieties.

In the first part, the main focus is on the song lyrics and their relationship to common consumption practices. I suggest that it might be precisely the interplay of often contradictory significations at the levels of discursive symbolism (the lyrics) on the one hand, and presentational symbolism6 (the music, rhythm and dance, that is, the non-verbal dimensions of the performance) on the other hand, that is crucial to our understanding of some aspects of its socio-cultural meaning. The emphasis here is especially on the sad lyrics, as I try to understand why they can be danced to with the dream-like pleasure typical of dangdut dancing (joget or goyang). I believe that the pleasures (or ‘dangers’) of dangdut performances derive precisely from these contrasting levels of signification enacted in performance by the typically female singer and the predominantly male

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5 For detailed accounts and analyses of the ‘Inul controversy,’ see Heryanto (2008) and Weintraub (2008).
6 I borrow the terms ‘discursive symbolism’ and ‘presentational symbolism’ from Langer’s (1957) philosophy of symbolic forms.