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Afterword

Richard Fox

So, what is this thing called entertainment? How is it related to mass media? And why might this relationship be relevant to scholarship on contemporary Indonesia? Each of the four articles contained in this special issue implies a partial answer to these questions. In this brief afterword, I wish to pull at a few of the critical threads that both hold these articles together and suggest the possibility of their unraveling. Far from undercutting the importance of the arguments presented by our authors, I propose that this potential for unraveling—or, to switch metaphors, for unsettling the philosophical foundations on which they are based—implies both their originality as well as the radicality of their implications for future research on mass media in general, and on Indonesian entertainment media in particular.

As Mark Hobart notes in the 'Introduction' to this special issue, our point of departure has already landed us in critical trouble, as there is no self-evident reason to start from the assumption that 'entertainment' makes for a viable cross-cultural category. If we can assume, for instance, that entertainment is in a significant sense constituted by what it is *not*, following one of the fundamental insights of structuralist analysis, we might then be forced to consider more closely its opposition to any number of categories, including perhaps most importantly that of 'work' or 'labor'. Given that the social uses and significance of labor have themselves been anything but constant through the ages and across the globe (Marx and Engels, *passim*), arguably the same could be said of categories like 'entertainment' that are constituted in opposition to it. Asad has argued an analogous case for both 'religion' (1993) and 'the secular' (2003), demonstrating that the social significance of, and mutual relations between, these two categories have undergone a series of transformations through different historical periods. And it is hard to imagine why entertainment should be any different. Given the great historical variation in economic, social and political relations across—let alone beyond—Southeast Asia (e.g. Day, 2002), it should be the regularities, rather than the disjunctures, between Southeast Asian and Euro-American forms of life that require explanation.

Correspondence to: Richard Fox, Assistant Professor of the History of Religions in the Divinity School, University of Chicago, Swift Hall, 1025 E. 58th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. Tel.: +1 (773) 702 8200; Fax: +1 (773) 702 6048; Email: rfox@uchicago.edu

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Idol Thoughts

With this in mind, let me begin with one such regularity. It turns out that 'talent quest' programs look unmistakably similar whether one is watching in Indonesia (*Indonesian Idol*), Britain (*Pop Idol*) or America (*American Idol*). And, as Coutas explains ('Fame, fortune, *fantasi*'), this is no simple accident of fad or fashion. Rather, it is the deliberate—and rigorously managed—result of transnationally franchised television production. She argues, '[i]n many ways, the format itself, and not the people working within it, constitutes the most powerful cultural intermediary' (Coutas, this issue, p. 371). So, with the resounding success of the 'Idol' format in such culturally disparate countries,[1] it would appear that we are seeing the emergence of a very particular—and, importantly, transnational—configuration of capital, mass media and popular culture.

Such observations have conventionally been the cue for one or another variation on the theme of 'globalization', with its attendant—and broadly liberal—concerns regarding the consequences of Western power abroad. Although the problem has often been represented in terms of the deleterious 'effects' on local peoples, cultures and economies, in more recent years denizens of 'the local' (read: economically less-powerful places and nations) have increasingly been attributed by scholars with some form of agency in their encounters with 'the global'. In the latter accounts, people of 'developing' nations are generally offered some degree of recognition as being actively engaged in the kinds of 'meaning-making' and 'identity-formation' previously thought to be the preserve of those privileged enough to live in the 'developed' world.

Underpinning this debate is a permutation of the (suspiciously Manichean) opposition of structure vs. agency that has long dogged the human sciences. In other words: does a given instantiation of 'global culture' determine the form and consequences of its local manifestations? (= Structure, and so Bad.) Or do regional appropriations of 'global culture' transform it into something new and authentically local? (= Agency, and so Good.) In our case, the critical dilemma might be rephrased more specifically as follows: are Indonesians—as political subjects—*determining* the terms in which they engage with the 'Idol' phenomenon, or are they *determined* by it?

Coutas concludes that one's evaluation depends on what is emphasized: the popularity of the program—and the format more generally—may seem to provide evidence of cultural and economic imperialism; yet, at the same time, the program might also be described as a case of 'feeling glocal' (see Iwabuchi, 2004), the active expression of (local) Indonesian particularity in the idiom of a (globally) universal format. But can *Indonesian Idol* really be both at once? And, if so, how are these two evaluations analytically related to one another?

On the Importance of Being Élite

Let us consider the conditions under which our dilemma has arisen. Why might agency (or its absence) be of such critical importance to scholarship on Indonesian

media? Both Hobart ('Entertaining illusions') and Weintraub ('Dangdut soul') provide insightful analyses of the various ways in which different kinds of audiences have been discursively relieved of the ability to understand and comment on their own lives. Both authors stress that such representations of 'the audience' cannot be mapped onto actual viewers and listeners. But implicit in their analyses is the idea that these are *misrepresentations* that are also not without consequence. Perhaps for this reason, in his concluding remarks, Weintraub ('Dangdut soul') draws our attention to the context in which he is writing ('I too have spoken on behalf of "the people". I have imagined them as a group excluded from centers of power'; Weintraub, this issue, p. 411). This is an important point. But I think it can be pushed further, to recognize that such scholarly expressions of concern are themselves a key component of an élite discourse comparable to that explored both by him and by Hobart in their respective contributions to this volume.

Op-eds and editorials in Indonesian newspapers and magazines may frequently express an earnest concern for the fate of the benighted masses, with their insatiable appetite for all things violent, erotic, supernatural and otherwise opposed to reason and the progress of the nation. But, as Weintraub rightly notes, these decidedly paternalistic accounts are of little relevance to the lives of the people they purport to represent. After all, as we have seen in the case of dangdut, they are published in newspapers and magazines 'that most dangdut fans would never read, sandwiched between advertisements for products that most dangdut fans would never consume' (Weintraub, this issue, p. 411).

The scholarly analogy here is almost too obvious to mention. For instance, how many of those deemed 'subaltern' are actually aware of, let alone have any use for, what is said in *Subaltern studies*? Hobart makes a related point about a prominent Indonesian commentator's concern that popular TV programs about the 'supernatural' may cause the nation's children to 'think that life can improve without learning or even working hard' (Hobart, this issue, p. 393). However, as Hobart points out, the élite's concern in this connection would be more appropriately directed toward their own children than to the overwhelming majority of Indonesians that make up the country's dispersed and heterogeneous underclasses for whom, 'however hard they study or work, the supernatural arguably offers at least as rational and realistic a chance of success' (Hobart, this issue, p. 393).

The question I wish to raise in this connection is whether we are justified in extrapolating from Hobart's observation to make a similar argument regarding scholars' own expressed concerns for the underprivileged and misrepresented. With academic labor feeling the pinch under the growing pressure of a management culture focused on the bottom line, scholars' concerns for 'the masses' are beginning to look suspiciously similar to concerns they may have for their own well-being. In brief: an increasingly competitive academic job market—and what that entails for those lucky enough to find stable employment—leaves many faculty members (as an intellectual proletariat?) feeling that their lives are determined in significant ways by political and economic processes beyond their comprehension, let alone control.

Given the circumstances, finding current scholarship on mass media to be so thoroughly skewered on the forked dilemma of 'structure' vs. 'agency' makes for a rather ironic twist on an old debate to which I shall return in a moment.[2]

My primary point in raising the question of the scholarly context is not so much that professional circumstances exhaustively explain an otherwise laudable concern for 'the masses'. The genealogy for this orientation is decidedly more complex, and warrants careful and sustained consideration in its own right. Here I simply wish to point out that the now near-obligatory statement of concern for properly representing the 'agency' of the inadequately privileged often has about as much to do with their lives as an Indonesian politician's opinion on dangdut has to do with the day-to-day lives of those who actually listen to the music in *kampungs* from Sabang to Merauke. And this should be of no little importance to a set of disciplines that have traditionally aspired to social (and often political) relevance.

Practice: A Critical Difference

Returning briefly to *Indonesian Idol*, I should emphasize that I agree in general terms with Coutas' concluding assessment: specifically, that what we are seeing with the transnational dissemination of the 'Idol' format is neither 'global' nor 'local', but rather 'something else again' (Coutas, this issue, p. 371). However, it is not altogether clear what that alternative 'something' might look like. On closer inspection, there appears to be a degree of critical slippage occurring in the movement between her two evaluations—specifically pertaining to the nature of the object of study—and I believe a comparison with Barkin's analysis ('The foreignizing gaze') may help to clarify some of the issues.

If Coutas distinguishes between two possible evaluations of *Indonesian Idol*, Barkin is also faced with an important disjuncture—albeit one of a somewhat different kind. In his analysis of the Indonesian program *Anak Muda Punya Mau*, he notes that there are important differences between, on the one hand, the Indonesian program as envisaged by its producers and, on the other, the Euro-American formats on which they drew in creating it.

Although the Indonesian producers of *Anak Muda* drew heavily on 'certain aesthetic and narrative aspects of foreign [travel] programs', they 'did not concern themselves with the internal logic of [these] shows' (Barkin, this issue, p. 352). In other words, their use of these British and American programs probably had little to do with what the original producers in the UK and US had envisaged. Here we may note the structural analogy between this disjuncture and that with their own ideal audience. For, as Barkin points out, there is no easy fit between the vast majority of *Anak Muda*'s likely viewers and the 'foreignizing gaze' that is characteristic of 'the audience' as it is positioned by the program itself.

This lack of equivalence between the viewers of a program and its ideal addressee is, of course, hardly unique to Indonesia. But it does raise the important question of how producers, programs and viewers are related to one another critically.

Conventionally speaking, these are generally recognized as three of the key components of a 'communicative' process. However, it is at precisely this point—i.e. the point of critically linking the moments of 'production' and 'reception' in a unified process—that we see the slippage that I mentioned at the beginning of this section. What is the nature of this slippage? And why is it such a problem?

As Hobart suggests in his editorial 'Introduction', the model of mass mediation that is generally presupposed—in cultural and media studies, as well as in mass communications—leaves something to be desired. Simply put, their analyses ride on a weak theory of practice, in which entities such as text, meaning or 'the message' are assumed to exist both absolutely and prior to those occasions on which they are interpreted, 'decoded' or otherwise used. This approach requires that one assume *a priori* that the respective worlds of production and viewing are both determinate and commensurate. In other words: the analyst must take it as given that the actions of producers and viewers—though superficially different—are coherently rooted at a more fundamental level in a unifying set of mutually-consistent presuppositions regarding the nature of meaning, reason and intelligibility, the purposes of viewing, etc. On such an account, interpretations might differ from one viewer to the next (and also, as we have seen, between producers and viewers), but the *possibilities* for interpretation—and other uses—would ultimately be limited by the (propositional) 'content' of their object, usually imagined as a 'media text'.

This critical commitment to something akin to the 'media text' is what holds 'media studies' together as a discipline. (Without the coherence of its object, it would merely be 'Studies'.) However, it is also a classic example of philosophical substantialism (Collingwood, 1946). That is, it rides on the assumption that there exists a pre-discursive essence—or 'substance'—that unifies the various moments in its own historical transformation. (The latter would include, for example, the interpretations or 'decodings' of particular viewers.) However, unlike their hermeneutic counterparts in older (and often literary) disciplines, media scholars seem to have paid scant attention to the inherent circularity of the interpretive process as it is configured on the basis of this model. The interpretation of a text rides on prior knowledge of its context, while prior knowledge of context requires the interpretation of the very texts through which it is known. And so, in order to begin the dialectical movement between text and context, one must begin with what amounts to an interpretive leap of faith. This is, in part, a trace of the legacy bequeathed to hermeneutics—and, eventually, on to media scholarship—by theology and biblical studies (Fox, 2000).

Despite the inherent philosophical problems (Fox, 2003), one presumes this approach is 'methodologically' appealing not only for its happy agreement with 'common sense', but also for its foreclosure on the awkward consequences that arise from acknowledging irreducible difference (see below). Yet, as the contributions to this volume suggest, the facts—both philosophically and empirically—are stacked against it. Whether cast in terms of 'producers' and 'consumers' or, alternatively, 'senders' and 'receivers' (see Hobart's 'Introduction'), the model rides on a

constitutive—and ultimately theologically-derived—metaphor of a subtle substance moving through space. Quite literally 'transmission' is a 'sending across'. In addition to inherent problems of internal consistency, serious empirical research—like that presented in this volume—merely further highlights both the degree and frequency of the disjunctures that emerge between what are conventionally—if misleadingly—understood in terms of 'production' and 'reception'.[3]

Get Real

Scholarly faith in substance underwrites the possibility of interpretation—and, perhaps more importantly, the possibility of *understanding*—by limiting difference to degree, as opposed to kind.[4] The question is how we are to go about accounting for those actions that, on the face of it, seem anything but amenable to analysis in terms commensurate with academic discourse. Weintraub, for instance, notes that although 'the audience' for dangdut has long been fodder for commentary from the élite, the world of its actual listeners is something quite apart. He suggests, the 'heart and soul of what dangdut is all about' is the 'openness, spontaneity, and passion' that constitutes a certain 'undomesticated space' that is beyond the reach of the elite (Weintraub, this issue, p. 411). Hobart makes a similar point with respect to the worlds depicted in *kriminal* and *mistik* programming. But how is scholarship—arguably the very epitome of domestication—to position itself in relation to these forms of social life?

On reflection it seems that to acknowledge a radical disjuncture that is simultaneously irreducible would logically entail forfeiting our default position of epistemological privilege. And we then would be left in the rather awkward predicament of discerning the value of an 'expert' knowledge that is incapable of comprehending its object (at least in any traditional sense of the word). These are serious issues and, if properly understood, have far-reaching implications for even the most empirically-minded research. For, in fact, what is at issue is the very nature of 'the empirical' itself.

As one solution to this predicament, Hobart proposes what amounts to a Levinasian inflection of Bakhtinian dialogue. And I think this is one of the more attractive options on offer. On this approach, as I understand it, one would try in one's work to recognize the Other not merely as an object but, rather, as a subject capable of knowing and commenting on her own history and position in the world, as well as on the conditions of inquiry and the subject of the inquirer. Among other things, this would open up the possibility for cross-cultural questioning, if not necessarily a guarantee of understanding. Of course it also opens up the possibility of refusal. Ice Cube, the well-known American rap star, is reported to have refused to include lyrics in the liner notes of his records. The reason: he said he did not want them to be subjected to analysis by the white bourgeois intelligentsia. So, a more dialogic model may have its advantages, but it also comes with its own set of problems. Given the multiple disjunctures that constitute 'mass media', not least

among these is the possibility that we end up with an ethnographic analogue to reality TV which, as Hobart notes, is characterized by 'scrupulously avoiding reality, while claiming the opposite' (Hobart, this issue, p. 343).

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Notes

[1] See *Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idol_series; accessed 23 July 2006) for details on the 'Idol' programs that are currently on the air internationally.

[2] The problem dates back at least to the 19th century, with the various economic (e.g. Marx), sociological (e.g. Durkheim) and psychological (e.g. Freud) attempts to grapple with the legacy of Kant.

[3] It is worth noting that the *terminology* associated with this model (e.g. 'reception') is hegemonic to the point that it becomes difficult to avoid replicating it in critiques. That is to say, for the sake of intelligibility, one is often forced to adopt the very language that one wishes to subvert.

[4] In other words, on this basis, difference is always already reduced to a foundational—and knowable—sameness. One might compare, for instance, the New Order articulation of religious difference in which that 'difference' is ultimately subordinate to the deeper unity implied by a notionally universal adherence to one of the five state-sanctioned forms of monotheistic belief. On this account, 'difference' says more about similarity than it does about difference.

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