

MALAY POP: MASS MEDIA HEGEMONY IN INDONESIA POPULAR MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

Article discusses the domination of Malay pop music through textual analysis of songs, observation of musical programs, and interviews with important figures. The research data were obtained by library research and analyzed through a critical theory approach to gain an understanding of the text and its effects. The article concludes that Malay pop contains a strong uniformity which may be termed a phenomenon in the context of the culture industry, while also being dominant because of its legitimacy created by the media. The nature of Malay pop is also very profitable for those participating in it, therefore the spirit of capitalism was also quite dominant in this context. There is also resistance from the indie music movement, and its attempts to fight regressive qualities of music that are legitimized in the mainstream mass media.

Keywords: Malay pop, indie music, culture industry, hegemony, mass media

ABSTRAK

Artikel menjelaskan dominasi musik pop Melayu melalui analisis teks lagu, observasi acara musik, dan interview dengan tokoh di bidang musik. Data diperoleh dari studi pustaka dan dianalisis dengan pendekatan critical theory untuk memahami teks lagu dan dampaknya. Artikel menyimpulkan bahwa lagu Melayu pop mempunyai kesamaan atau ciri khas yang kuat sehingga dapat menjadi daya tarik di bidang industri budaya (culture industry) dan mampu mendominasi lagu lain karena pengaruh media. Muasal lagu pop Melayu juga sangat menguntungkan mereka yang terlibat di dalamnya, dengan demikian semangat kapitalisme juga sangat dominan di dalam konteks ini. Dijelaskan pula adanya resistensi dari gerakan musik indie dan usahanya untuk memperjuangkan kemunduran musik tersebut karena pengaruh multimedia.

Kata kunci: musik Melayu, musik indie, industri budaya, hegemoni, media massa

INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2008, the number of musicians in the *mainstream* Indonesian music industry increased with the presence of a new group bands containing uniformity in a particular music genre, that is Malay Pop. This phenomenon began with the existence of Kangen Band, which gained popularity through the increasing piracy rate in Sumatera, after which they signed a contract with Warner Music Indonesia, a major recording company. Then, many other bands with a strong uniformity emerged, such as ST12, Republik, Matta, Wali, Salju, Langit, Pudja, Vagetoz, Merpati, and Hijau Daun. These music groups dominated the television shows that broadcasted music programs throughout 2008, such as Inbox on SCTV, Dahsyat on RCTI, Klik on ANTV, and many more.

The success of these music groups within the mainstream music industry was often criticized by fellow musicians or music observers. Hafiedz (2008) wrote “the melancholic phenomenon of Indonesia’s music groups is degrading our popular music” or the opinion of Denny MR (an observer in the music industry) who wrote “these Malay songs a tasty, as in food, but become sickening if there are too many of them”. There were also criticisms of the Malay Pop phenomenon in other magazines and newspapers. Generally, these criticisms were directed or based on Pop Malay’s characteristics such as their banal lyrics, excessive melancholic sentiments within their songs, and dominant themes such as having an affair/cheating on a lover. Take a look at a part from a lyric by ST12 called P.U.S.P.A: *Jangan jangan kau tak terima cintaku/Jangan jangan kau hiraukan pacarmu/Putusanlah saja pacarmu/Lalu bilang I love you, padaku* (don’t you reject my love/ignore your lover/just break up with your lover/and say I Love You to me)... also take look at a song by Kangen Band, “Selingkuh”: *Pacarku sayangilah aku/Seperti ku menyayangimu/Pacarku cintailah aku/Seperti aku cinta kamu/(reff)Tapi kamu kok selingkuh/Tapi kamu kok selingkuh* (My love, take care of me/just like how I’ve taken care of you/My love, love me/just like how I love you/but why are you cheating on me).

The uniformity and the regression of musical quality were reaching the point of becoming a phenomenon in the Indonesian Popular Music in 2008. Major recording companies were on the edge of bankruptcy because of the growing rates of digital piracy that also caused sales of CDs and cassette tapes to decline. Major recording companies were then forced to take shortcuts by finding bands that were intriguing to society, and then making them as models so that the major labels could then reproduce the bands in the form of supposedly-new music groups. With complete disregard for their quality, the so-called market forecast had become a reference to avoid bankruptcy.

The characteristics of contemporary Malay pop music in Indonesia are their vocal technique (Malay-twisting/bending vocals) and the themes—mostly about love, especially in everyday life; having affairs with others; exaggerated worship toward one’s lover. The lyrics are very simple; indeed, sometimes they are so simple that they may be termed banal or non-poetic. Modern Malay pop songs are very easy to digest, which makes them very easily acceptable to listeners. But this approach to popular music production turned out to be considered to have produced a lowbrow musical genre. Malay pop music groups were once criticized by a small part of society, and indisputably they were loved by a great many people. Many music groups reached stardom by playing the Malay pop genre most notably Vagetoz, Kangen Band, Wali, Matta, Republik, Angkasa, Pudja, and ST12. Even as this research was being written up, major recording companies were still launching Malay pop bands in the music industry. Based on the facts mentioned above, it can be concluded that the Malay Pop music genre can be considered as a phenomenon in the Indonesian popular music industry especially in the context of the Culture Industry. (Adorno, 1991)

In the end, the dominating mainstream music which also tends to follow the trends reaches saturation point in the ears of audiences, and this saturation point affected the emergence of a counter-resistance against these musical industry trends. One example of this occurred in 1977, when pop music songs in Indonesia were considered to be uniform and lacking any significant variation; after this, the Prambors Teen Song Writing Competition (*Lomba Cipta Lagu Remaja Prambors*) emerged, which then came to be regarded as freshly-composed counter products against the mainstream pop music songs. According to Wendi Putranto, an editor of Rolling Stone Indonesia Music Magazine, nowadays the frontally launched counter product against dominating Malay Pop songs has been led by a band from an independent recording company (Putranto, 2008). Efek Rumah Kaca, from Aksara Records, frontally criticized the contemporary Malay pop movement with their song *Cinta Melulu*. Other than Efek Rumah Kaca, music observer Denny Sakrie stated that the counter products against the movement also came from the independent recording companies such as Fastforward Records, Sinjitos, and Nubuzz with bands such as Mocca, White Shoes & The Couples Co., Sore, The S.I.G.I.T, and Zeke & The Popo (Sakrie, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The background to the study above raises three questions that this article attempts to answer, which are; (1) can the musical uniformity within the Malay pop songs by Malay pop bands be identified as a 'phenomenal' product within context of Culture Industry in Indonesian popular music? (2) How do Malay pop music groups become a product of mass media hegemony within the context of popular music in Indonesia? (3) How do independent recording companies/indie labels launch counter products and counter hegemony against the dominance of Malay pop?

This research framework uses the concept of hegemony and the culture industry (Adorno, 1991). Hegemony itself is the process of creating, maintaining, and reproducing a set of values and practices in the sense of power and authority. To Antonio Gramsci, hegemony denotes the situation where the 'historic block' from the ruling class that demonstrates their power and social leadership against subordinate classes. Hegemony can work in a coercive way or alternatively be based on the consensual acceptance by the subordinate groups toward the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant groups. Hegemony is not a fixed set of ideas so it has a constant function to change. It emerges from social and class struggles which it, in turn, shapes, transforms, and influences; and its control over dominated groups can never be totally guaranteed. Hegemony operates through the institutions of civil society which characterize mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, and popular culture. This particular research project studied the connection between the roles of mass media, Malay pop phenomenon, music industry, and the counter hegemony by independent recording companies since the beginning of 2008.

Other than becoming a product of mass media's hegemony, the dominance of contemporary Malay pop is also a cultural phenomenon within the context of the culture industry and popular music. The term 'culture industry' is a concept that was coined by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their book the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). This work was written as their objection towards the presumption that art was independent and therefore had no connection with industries or commerce. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) adapted the term 'culture industry' to argue that the means of production within cultural artifacts were reproduced in a similar way to other kinds of industry produced consumer goods in tremendous quantity. All goods were reproduced with the goal of gaining as much profit as possible through use of a standardized procedure, and this means of production helped to produce a passive and standardized consumerism.

All such production is developed simply to gain profit. Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) used the metaphor of the 'production line' to emphasize the repetitive character of culture production. This

theme then was extended by adding the two extra concepts of ‘standardization’ and ‘pseudo individuality.’

The argument about standardization here points toward the non-existence of elements of spontaneity in the production of culture, because this has become a routine operation using specific formulae. Standardization means that popular songs are becoming more and more alike and their parts, verses and choruses more interchangeable. Pseudo-individualization disguises this process by making the songs appear more varied and distinct from each other.

In conclusion, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) argued that if culture was to be organized structurally as a capitalist production industry, it would thereby become standardized, formulized, and a repetitive element of mass culture. Hence, it would not have any aesthetic element and would lead to a specific type of consumerism; a passive and conformist type easily manipulated through the use of propaganda, advertising, and profit.

METHODS

In this research, the writer used three methods, these being textual analysis, observation, and interviews. A comparative study of 5 samples of contemporary Malay pop songs and 5 samples of independent recording companies’ songs was conducted to analyze the topic textually. Meanwhile, to analyze the domination of Malay pop that is legitimized by the mass media and its counter-hegemony by the independent recording companies, the writer interviewed the producers in charge of music programs on private national television channels, as well as the local level television channels Bandung TV. To analyze the resistance coming from the independent music movement, the writer interviewed local group Efek Rumah Kaca. This interview focused on Cholil Mahmud as the mastermind behind the resisting ideology toward the Malay pop phenomena/domination.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The theories of standardization and pseudo individuality are used here to analyze Malay pop songs through a comparative study with ‘Indie’ pop music songs. Elements such as the music arrangements, theme, lyrics, and the video clip provided by both sides are compared. In this study, the writer uses 5 songs of Malay pop and 5 songs of Indie pop. Table 1 below contains the list of the Malay pop songs that are being used in this research.

Table 1 Malay Pop Songs used in Research

Malay Pop Music Group	Song Title	Rec. Company (Major)
ST12	<i>Cari Pacar Lagi</i>	Trinity Optima Production
Kangen Band	<i>Selingkuh</i>	Sony BMG
Angkasa	<i>Jangan Pernah Selingkuh</i>	Warner Indonesia
Merpati	<i>Tak Selamanya Selingkuh Indah</i>	Nagaswara Rec.
Matta Band	<i>Ketahuan</i>	PPS

Table 2 Indie Pop Songs Used in Research

Indie Pop Music Group	Song Title	Rec. Company (Indie)
Sore	<i>Pergi Tanpa Pesan</i>	Aksara Records
Sindetosca	<i>Kepompong</i>	Nubuzz Records
White Shoes & Couple Co.	<i>Senandung Maaf</i>	Aksara Records
Agrikulture	<i>Kompor Meleduk</i>	Future10 Records
Efek Rumah Kaca	<i>Cinta Melulu</i>	Aksara Records

Based on the textual analysis, the elements of standardization and pseudo individuality on the Malay pop songs above showed that this genre is clearly a strong product of the culture industry. This is evident through the various elements used within the songs, namely: the non-exploratory sense of musicality; repetitive love themes, especially those centered on exaggerated worship toward a lover which then creates a sub-ordinate/dominant relationship within; the dominant issue of cheating and affairs, here reproduced in such a way as to give a fresh impression within the songs; references to everyday life that include slang words and colloquialisms, non-poetic choice of words; and predigested/banal/denotative meanings within the songs.

Meanwhile, the characteristics of Indie pop songs basically, counter all of the elements found in Malay pop. There is a creative use of music arrangement; varieties of theme within the songs (they are not always about love); the use of poetic lyrics; and even the video clips show more signs of creativity. It can therefore be concluded that the content of Indie pop songs emerged as a form of an alternative/counter product to a type of pop music in Indonesia that is uniform, repetitive and standardized, as in the case with Malay pop.

The domination of Malay pop in the Indonesian music industry was legitimized by the mass media, especially by private national television stations through their music programs. Prominent examples were Dahsyat music program on RCTI, Klik on ANTV, KissVaganza on Indosiar, and Derings on TransTV. But these examples were just followers. The first music program which then became the trend setter for other television stations, was Inbox on SCTV, first broadcasted in 2007 everyday morning. Below is the schedule list of a typical morning music program on the private national televisions.

Table 3 Schedule of Morning Music Program in TV

Program	Television Channel	On-Air Schedule
Inbox	SCTV	7.30-9.30 everyday
Derings	TransTV	7.30-9.00 everyday
KissVaganza	Indosiar	7.00-8.30 everyday
Dahsyat	RCTI	9.00-11.00 everyday

The writer observed these morning music programs to examine the amount of television exposure of Malay pop which then dominated the Indonesian music industry. It became that the Malay pop music genre was having a great deal of exposure through these live performances, video clips, and even simple interviews or gossip shows that were shown on the television morning music programs. Society seemed to welcome the Malay pop music groups because of the hegemony of the music program on television, which in turn gave birth to the mass reproduction of new Malay music groups which were published by major recording companies.

This process automatically made Malay pop a dominant music genre and a product created by the hegemonic mass media because of such frequent exposure through televisions. The great number of music groups in the Malay pop genre and their standardized musical arrangements allowed them to dominate the music industry, despite it being difficult to identify any individuality of the music groups because of their uniform elements within the genre.

The Malay pop genre was very profitable for those participating in it, such as the musicians, producers, recording companies, and even the mobile-phone content providers who sold song tracks through ring back tones (*nada sambung pribadi*). Below is the list of Malay pop music groups that made huge profits through ring back tones compared to non-Malay pop music/singers.

Table 4 Comparison of Malay and Non-Malay Music Industries

Malay Pop Music Groups		
Music Groups	Recording Company	Income via RBT/NSP
ST12	Trinity Optima Production	6 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 6 Billion
Hijau Daun	Sony BMG	6 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 6 Billion
Wali	Nagaswara Records	4 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 4 Billion
VagetoZ	Sony BMG	5 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 5 Billion
Kangen Band	Sony BMG	4 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 4 Billion
Matta Band	PPS	3 Million <i>download</i> = Rp 3 Billion
Non-Malay Pop Artist/Music Groups		
Artist/Music Groups	Recording Company	Income via RBT/NSP
D'Massive	Musika	5 Million <i>download</i>
Rossa = lagu Ayat-Ayat Cinta	Trinity Optima Production	2 Million <i>download</i>
Aura Kasih	Universal Musik Indonesia	1 Million <i>download</i>
Samson	Universal Musik Indonesia	1 Million <i>download</i>

kapanlagi.com, rileks.com, and lintasberita.com.
these sites above were accessed on May 16th 2009

From the table above, it can be concluded that some Malay pop music groups earned 3 - 5 billion rupiah from ring back tones alone (excluding those profit from live performance). This shows that the Malay pop genre is very profitable compared to non-Malay pop music groups, further reinforcing the mass reproduction of Malay pop groups published by the recording companies, regardless of the strong similarities between them.

Implicitly, this phenomenon was countered by local media (television) that broadcasted independent music programs such as Bandung TV with their program called REAKSI; PJTV with LOKAL LEBEL; and STV with ZIGGY WIGGY.

The writer observed REAKSI as an independent (Indie) music program to examine the implicit counter-hegemonic movement toward the domination of Malay pop. The writer examined the diversities as well as the non-commercial ideology of REAKSI through an interview with its producer. Based on the observation and the interview, the writer concludes that REAKSI - as well as other independent music programs - displayed a great variety of musical genres (rock, metal, rap, hip hop, dangdut, pop, etc), in contrast to music programs such as Derings and Dahsyat that focusing primarily

on standardized and uniform pop music. The dominating music program by private national televisions focused on showing artists/music groups from major and professional recording companies, although the uniformity and standardized image of the music gave a questionable impression, regarding quality and creativity. REAKSI did not broadcast any top 40 hits on their program, unlike the mainstream music programs which each had their own versions of top 40 charts within a period of time. REAKSI focused on showing and discussing the essence of the music, unlike mainstream music programs that sometimes includes gossip and jokes to fill the duration of the show. Therefore, it can be concluded that REAKSI countered the hegemonic mass media of mainstream music programs with a non-standardized, non-uniform, and non-commercial music program.

Meanwhile, the explicit resistance toward the Malay pop domination was led by indie music group called Efek Rumah Kaca (Glass House Effect, ERK), with their song “Cinta Melulu” (Merely Love). The song “Cinta Melulu” represented a feeling of boredom against the dominating mellow/love themes in songs that were shown in the mainstream media. According to ERK, this condition should be fought against, in order to mend the regressive quality of Indonesian’s popular music scene, and the resistance should serve different kinds of musical ideology against the Malay pop ideology in order that their domination slowly be decreased. (Interview was done on March 17th 2009).

These different kinds of musical ideology should also be able to reach the lower classes in society, because the hegemony that the mass media creates - together with the industry - tends to be very much accepted by the lower classes. The various kinds of music should also be given to the society intensively, through local television or mainstream but rebellious televisions programs so that society would be able to learn and consume various kinds of music, not just the standardized ones served up by the mainstream media. Although the resistance launched by the indie music movement was not of a huge scale, this act is arguably a vital counter-hegemony toward a cultural hegemony created by the mainstream mass media, the private national televisions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above analysis, the three questions posed above can now be addressed directly. First, the Malay Pop phenomenon is identified as a product of the Culture Industry because of the strong similarities between the Malay pop music groups themselves. These characteristics are the usage of love and affair themes, banalities and everyday life lyrics, simple musical arrangements, standardized Malay vocal techniques, and also standardized video clips. These uniform music groups were always reproduced and modified in order to appear new and fresh, but the analysis demonstrates that actually they were not in any significant new. This can be related to Adorno & Horkheimer’s pseudo-individuality conception. This phenomenon represented a regression of quality within the Indonesian popular music because of the imitative mentality. This musical genre, supported by major recording companies, stood to contradistinction to the music that published by the independent music movement: in other words, the indie music was not standardized or uniformed to anywhere the same degree.

Second, the contemporary Malay pop music became dominant through media support (television) with their hegemonic music programs. Society welcomed the Malay pop and automatically led to the reproduction of the music groups by the industry and the media. Their presence produced large profits for others that involved in the industry such as recording companies, cellular mobile phone provider, television stations (which increase ratings), and other musicians. This reproduction of Malay pop music groups created a cultural domination within the context of popular music through their high profits.

Finally, counter hegemony through Malay pop music by the Indie music movement was represented through Indie music programs on local television stations that emerged as an alternative to the hegemonic music programs. Music programs such as REAKSI, and ZIGGY WIGGY supported the Indie music movement by launching counter-hegemony through the promotion of alternative kinds of music against the dominant, commercial and highly-earned Malay pop music.

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