

## The Changing Art of Seduction

**Bart Barendregt** reflects on ritual courtship, performing prostitutes, and erotic entertainment

**D**o the performing arts play a role in sexual selection? How does music influence mating practices in different cultures? Can the performing arts create social settings where sexual relationships germinate and grow – even where sex is a disruptive force, an arena for competition and conflict? And if so, where does this power of the performing arts come from?



*Geisha playing the zither  
(Michael Maslan Historic  
Photographs/Corbis)*

The performing arts everywhere play an important role in expressing erotic feelings. Playing an instrument is often used to attract the other sex, and the singing of amorous songs between young men and women is widespread in Asia. According to one colonial travelogue, skill and verbal ability in poetry were a passport to female favour among the highland Malays of Sumatra: 'A kind of flirtation goes on independently of the open and public display of skill, and it is often accompanied with the interchange of flowers and other mute symbols which all have a mystical meaning' (Malayan Miscellanies 1821). The highland Malays ascribed evocative powers to lovers' verses: in the past, when young men went traveling, they might give their beloved a piece of bamboo with an inscription, which the girl was to read aloud daily to ensure the success of her lover's venture and his faithful return to her.

This supposed magnetism of music is not unique. Similar seductive scenes abound in early travelogues, ranging from the courtesans of the celestial city Kin-Sai, famed from Marco Polo's descriptions, to later stories of Kyoto-Gion's geishas who lured their customers with their three-stringed shamisen. Drawing upon notions of the seductive Asian woman, oriental dancers such as Matahari and Little Egypt brought this art of seduction to the West. Many descriptions of such arts, as presented by critics like Edward Said, Rana Khabbani and Ashis

Nandy, are based on misunderstandings – sometimes intentional – and generally say more about the western audience’s longing for a sensual other expressed through a depiction of the East as a place of lust and sexual pleasures. As a result, the Orient has long been perceived through the seductive performances of its women, something that the journalist Sheridan Passo (2005) describes as the ‘Asian Mystique’. Given all this, it is surprising how little is actually known about these arts and the often intricate ways they lured and seduced their audiences.

### **Passions performed: is there an erotic component to the arts?**

Seduction stands for different things in different places, but little attention has to date been paid to local conceptualizations. Western dictionaries define seduction as an act of winning someone’s love or sexual favour, though seduction has also been interpreted more negatively as enticing someone to stray from the straight and narrow path. From the sirens of Greek mythology, Indian celestial nymphs (*apsara*) who seduced both gods and men, to the attractiveness of today’s pop idols, special evocative powers are often attributed to the lovers’ song. Indeed, many believe that there is something inherent in music that affects people.

What makes the human voice seductive and what defines a sexy voice? Is a sexy voice a biological given or a play upon cultural expectations? Wim van der Meer (this issue, p. 39) suggests that whereas visual factors in the mate-selection process are well-known, often studied and exploited in the arts, the seductive aural stimuli of the human voice should receive equal attention. Van der Meer describes how Indian singers, such as Kishori Amonkar and Lata Mageshkar, might be seen as evolutionary ‘mutants’ mastering their voice in skilful and subtle ways that deeply affect the listener.

*Tokyo’s Kabukicho, the world’s largest red light district  
(Courtesy of Matt Abar)*



*Tiffany's cabaret show in Pattaya, Thailand (Wong Ying Wuen)*



Biological assets aside, much of the idea of what is seductive seems to be culturally determined. Judith Lynne Hanna clearly summarises this idea in her 1988 book, 'Dance, Sex and Gender'. 'Non-human animals' drive to reproduce stimulates the dramatic and colourful ritualized movement displays that are referred to as

"mating dances". Similarly, the impulse for dance among humans may be reproductive, but it is mediated by culture.' Our response to sexual stimuli depends on our attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Is it the use of the dancer's eyes as she secretly flirts with her audience, her erotic movements, or the aphrodisiac scents she uses? Or perhaps her soft, almost incidental touch when passing by, or the pleasing foods and drinks she serves? Hanna comments on this, stating that it is the overall bodily experience that explains why the arts are so popularly seductive and why their performance becomes a vehicle for Eros: both the arts and sexuality use the same instrument – the human body.

The art of seduction traditionally plays upon all the senses simultaneously, and its study might not only gain from biological or musicological perspectives, but from recent work on the anthropology of the senses. Veit Erlman's (2004:3) 'Hearing Cultures' observes that ours is essentially a visual age. Popular music is a good illustration of this, as image is often favoured over sound. This can be seen in singing competitions like 'Americas Idol' and its spinoffs. At the same time, the performing arts perpetuate sensual cultures and 'languages' which convey things that in ordinary circumstances would be censored or create unease.

### **Risqué songs, fertility and the social function of seduction**

Youth throughout upland Southeast Asia and among the many minorities of southern China have traditionally exchanged repartee songs in which male and female singing alternate. Primarily associated with agricultural rites, these songs were often sung while collecting in the

forest or working the fields. Such courtship songs were part of village feasts or temple festivals in Buddhist Southeast Asia: youths of neighbouring villages were invited for a communal meal, dancing, and question-and-answer games during which candidate-lovers were questioned. In the course of the night, screened from view, such songs easily became a battle of the sexes, and in some cases turned into sexual play.

Risque songs with an overt double entendre, erotic puns and sexually implicit behaviour normally constrained by society can, in one carnivalesque moment, become the norm. In his contribution, Frank Kouwenhoven describes such performances in northwest China: 'flirting' is directed 'towards the gods, and there is a begging for life, for rain, for protection of the crop, and for fertility of the women'. The *lam klawn* of northwest Thailand, the *phia pha* songs of the Hmong and the *hua'er* songs described by Kouwenhoven all seem to point to the importance of singing seductive songs in the selection of marriage partners. In Southeast Asia, such ritualized courtship songs were part of a wider set of entertainments, including cockfighting, couple dances, and riddling games meant to express wit and sexuality.

Such song festivals were often fruitful arenas for contact – traditional dating agencies as it were – and were supervised by elderly persons experienced in such affairs, with performers ultimately proposing marriage to one another. In the mountains of northwest China, love affairs during these festivals might even result in extramarital children, a welcome gift to women whose marriages had not been consummated. Fertility was the message of such festivals and an explicit theme in the songs. Ritual courtship through the performing arts therefore contributed in important ways to the general welfare of society. The temporarily release and the free reign of normally suppressed ideas, however, are not restricted to the agrarian societies described here. Especially in Asia's feudal past, when the open expression of sexuality was quite constrained, the arts seem to have been a welcome solution to the expression of otherwise disallowed passions. Here one can speak of a professional class of performers specialized in the art of seduction, truly turning ritual courtship into a performance.

## Professional seduction: courtesans and performing prostitutes



*Gandrung Temu, Kemiren village, East Java, 2001 (Ben Arps)*

In many Asian societies, courtesans were important promoters of the higher arts, teaching noble young men to appreciate poetry and music and initiating them in etiquette and cultural aesthetics. Their salons and teahouses were places where men were entertained and could discuss topics that other women in society were hardly aware of.

It is important to point out that sexuality was often sublimated, and erotic play and flirting did not necessarily lead to real sexual play. Those who misunderstood this often lumped together all sorts of courtesans, depicting them uniformly as performing prostitutes. Not all performers were paid for sex and if they did engage in sex, it was often by choice, their music and dance aiding their selection of a partner. In India, as Jolanda Boejharat describes, professional seductresses ranged from vulgar harlots and cheap dancer-prostitutes to the formerly highly-respected *mujarewali*. The last were professional performers, trained in music, dance and etiquette, who cleverly made and still make use of their audience's expectations, performing seduction as seen through male eyes. Middle Eastern, Indian, and Chinese treatises on love recognize dance as one of the amorous arts that a woman should cultivate to please her lover (Hana 1988: 56). Men, however, wrote most of these treatises. In the case of *mujarewali*, choreographers and dance teachers were also mainly men, who dictated the way women should behave and move to depict seductiveness. This 'male gaze', as Boejharat writes, later reappears in many Bollywood movies devoted to courtesans: 'Nevertheless, if in the movies the male gaze determines much of the action, in real life the courtesan knows how to play this male gaze to get what she wants.'

## Male versus female gaze and the third sex as seducer

It is, however, not only female entertainers who seduce, as Akiko Takeyama shows in her contribution on today's male host clubs in Tokyo. To perform as seductive men, hosts stylize all aspects of their appearance and bodily movements to live up to the fantasies of their female clients. According to one female informant: 'I also perform as if I eagerly adored my host so as to heighten the romantic mood and feeling of intimacy. In that way, he treats me even more specially.' The boundaries tend to blur between performed seduction or performance

as seduction but what they have in common is that once sensual fantasies take over, people are easily persuaded into other things, in this case ordering another bottle of expensive liquor, which will gallantly be brought to the table by the male host.

In many Asian societies, the third sex was thought to have qualities that enabled them to seduce in ways that ordinary males or females could never manage. In Indonesian theatre, transvestites often personify fantasies of the other sex, using sexual parody and erotic gestures that ordinary people would not get away with. Another example of performing transvestites is the Indian community of self-confessed eunuchs known as *hijra*. Most *hijra* specialize in song and dance and act in sexually provocative ways, dancing in public, using coarse and abusive speech and gestures, and lifting their skirts to expose mutilated genitals when their authenticity is challenged (Hanna 1988: 108). Like other hermaphrodite performers, the *hijra* reflect an ancient Asian ideal of a combination of male and female into a single whole.

In Thailand, male to female transgender is generally accepted by society; *kathoey* gay or effeminate men are sometimes hard to tell apart from women. To pay for an often-desired surgery, *kathoey* work in cabarets or bars where they draw international tourist audiences. While associated with prostitution, such performances also work to affirm one's gender, as seducing a male audience emphasizes the *kathoey's* role of beauty queen – a good example of how a further 'professionalisation' of the art of seduction is taking place in some of Asia's entertainment centres. One can think of Thai go-go girl bars in Bangkok, the performative aspects of the *Bakla* gay beauty pageants in the Philippines, or the many karaoke bars with singing prostitutes found in Asia's cosmopolitan centres.



*Kathoey cabaret in Bangkok: the third sex performing seduction (Wikipedia)*

### **Ancient taboos and new moral reveille: the fear of seduction**

Many of the arts of seduction have been influenced by the forces of modernity. In much of Southeast Asia, courtship songs have disappeared, mainly due to the modernization of agriculture and the substitution of hired workers and machines for communal labour. As communal work dwindled, the context for repartee songs disappeared; they are now seldom exchanged, even at harvest festivities. Some genres survive as paid performances and have been recorded; courtship

songs out of context have often become overtly associated with prostitution. Another threat to the musical art of seduction is the rise of a new sensorial ideology that privileges the visual, with the art of seduction experiencing the same fate as many other traditional arts: the lack of an interested audience able to understand them. Often the arts of seduction are discredited as being associated with the lower senses, especially with unfettered female sensuality. The arts of seduction have been cleaned up, de-eroticised and re-invented to bring them in line with the national narratives of Asia's post-colonial societies, or have otherwise been brought into conformity with a new moral climate fuelled by competition over the interpretation of religion.

My own description of *nasyid* – Islamic boy-band music in Southeast Asia – seems to be the anti – Ithesis to many of the arts discussed thus far, as it is seemingly the art of no-seduction. Especially in religious contexts, seduction has more often than not been negatively valued and equated with sin and immorality. With their moral behaviour, clean-cut appearance and lyrics that stress there is no love other than God's, *nasyid* bands seem to have little in common with their western counterparts. At the same time, the moral messages conveyed seem to be yet another form of the persuasion that music is so well-known for. The success of this Islamic pop music has thus far led to only a few female pop groups: Islamic hardliners fear the perils of the female voice, in which the fear of seduction is a key argument. The transformation of the art of seduction, however, is due not only to changing norms or a new moral climate, but also to new ways of mediating it.

### **The art of seduction (re-) mediated**

Exotic dance has become yet another trendy past-time for western housewives desiring to seduce their husbands. Over the web, one can acquire CDs such as *Erotic Dance Rhythm*, *Aphrodisia* or *Kama Sutra Special*, the latter promising an exploration of the soulfulness of India by 25 musicians through an elegant interpretation of the ancient text: 'Lovers will enjoy dozens of rare, authentic native instruments which blend Indian and raga traditions and bring the Indian flavour of the Kama Sutra alive!' The art of seduction is back, re-mediated in new and often unexpected forms. Such new appearances are not unproblematic. In his contribution on the *gandrung*

of Banyuwangi, east Java, Bernard Arps (this issue, p. 45) shows how today's erotic singer-dancer is mediated by video CD recordings and radio broadcasts, but is also found in Banyuwangi's public spaces. Arps takes the analysis of seduction in the arts further by pointing to its political utility for local power holders. The result is a decontextualized and sanitized *gandrung*, but importantly, she remains a seducer.

The introduction of new grassroots media and inexpensive information technologies have led to mass seduction on an unimagined scale, as illustrated by two recent media hypes. In Indonesia, the influx of cheap Video CD (VCD) technology has done much to change the existing media landscape. One of the unforeseen effects has been a resurgence of pornographic imagery, ranging from student-made amateur movies to a VCD containing a sexually explicit recording of a live dance performance (in a Balinese village) called *joged bumbung* (often translated as 'porno dance'). The popular *dangdut* singer Inul, however, is a better example of what the modern day art of seduction can bring us. Inul Daratista, from Pasuruan, east Java, then 24 years old, taught gymnastics before becoming a pop singer. She had been popular for some time among the lower social strata when the illegal distribution of an amateur VCD showing her erotic up-and-downward movements suddenly rocketed her to nation-wide fame in 2001. Her dance-style was soon compared to that of a drill, giving her the title of Ratu Ngebor, Queen of Drill Dance. Ever since, Indonesians have been divided into pro or contra Inul camps. In a similar way, Furong Jiejie, or Hibiscus Sister, recently shot to fame when seductively-posed photographs were posted on the bulletin boards of two of China's most prestigious university campuses. Hibiscus Sister (or Lotus Flower as she prefers), in an interview with the *South China Morning Post* on the media ban of her weblog, laughed at the idea of being a threat to officialdom: 'I just wanted to dance, and sing and write heartfelt, meaningful prose.' This example makes clear how otherwise familiar strategies for seduction have found new space on the internet.

Websites for dating agencies, web-cam courtesans and new mobile media have proven fertile ground for today's arts of seduction. All the same, there are considerable continuities as witnessed in ritual courting poetry published in SMS manuals for mobile phone users in the Philippines, China and Indonesia. In many Indonesian cultures, it was common to have lovers' verses written on bark cloth or bamboo to be recited at special occasions. Similar ready-made constructions, to



improvise on and forward to others, are in use today: poems for different moods and occasions, and sexually-implicit jokes and erotic puns not so different from the ones traditionally used in courtship songs.

The elderly nostalgically remember the Malay repartee songs, as they recount how they first approached their beloved through song, and how she responded by adding to it. Nowadays, mass-mediated versions of such poetry exist, disseminated via cassettes, radio broadcasts, and at modern versions of village feasts. Courtesans are now a popular topic for many Asian movies, from *Ai Nu* (Confessions of A Chinese Courtesan, 1972), the much-acclaimed *Rouge* (1987) and *Haishanghua* (Flowers of Shanghai, 1998) to the Bollywood courtesan movies. These films provide modern audiences with glimpses of the sensorial regime that the art of seduction once was, thus posing a counter-modernist historical consciousness. How much it will contribute to our understanding of the ways seduction works through art remains a question. Early in 2006, the sensual Orient and its female performers once again stand in the limelight in the Broadway-style rendering of Arthur Golden's 1997 novel, 'Memoirs of a Geisha' (2006). L'Oreal beauty queen Gong Li and other seductive faces are teaming up with cosmetics giant Max Factor and its advertising campaign to lure new audiences to the theatres. Seduction is truly of all ages, and the arts have in many cases been its main advocate.

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