

Mall danger

The Opinion



Jakarta is dangerous – or, at least, many every day experiences make it feel so. Security guards are prevalent; in uniform, at guard houses, smoking cigarettes, waving mirrors beneath cars as they approach the entrances of malls and hotels. Surveillance is one means of creating both a threatened sense of security and a sense of fear. Part of the contestation and re-configuring of space relates to practices of surveillance, which is an act performed with an intent to trace, track and record the movements of potential and possible suspects. Surveillance, meaning to ‘watch over’, is a somewhat ambivalent practice; it seeks to prevent crime, yet simultaneously casts a suspicious gaze on those who are being watched.

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SURVEILLANCE IS PERFORMED through various technologies. Practices are aligned with positions of power, because watching seeks to control, regulate, categorise and counter unwanted behaviours and actions. Surveillance has not disappeared with the demise of colonial and authoritarian states, but is a practice that continually adapts and lends itself to varying conditions and circumstances. Surveillance is seemingly restrictive and prescriptive, yet in other circumstances it may be creative and countering of dominant or mainstream narratives. So, does surveillance necessarily work in favour of a dominant political or ideological power?

Throughout the streets of Jakarta, and elsewhere, codes of ethics are placed at entrances to inner urban communities. In another case, Lippo Karawaci, a ‘private city’ west of Jakarta, has its own private infrastructure with its own security staff, acting as police.¹ The signs suggest and invoke the values that are supposedly held within the particular community. At times they are no more than a simple recital of nationalist or religious sentiments. Elsewhere, large statues of national symbols (such as the Garuda) symbolically invite the viewer or passerby to keep the nation in mind. That is, to remember that one is part of a great and grand imagined community – a particular nation, with its necessary memories, narratives and ideologies. Surveillance is, thus, something that one performs against oneself, as well as something that can be performed by an other, outside and external force. Surveillance may simply take on the form of reminding the citizen of the ideologies they are supposed to espouse.

Recent urban developments in Asian cities show increased questioning of fixed definitions and values that are applied to notions of public and private space. This is apparent in some of the footage that is found in *Recording the Future* (RtF; an audio-visual archive developed by KITLV, LIPI and Offstream Productions). At the Mangga Dua Square mall, for example, the camera crew record the surveillance to which the visitors are subjected to; a uniformed security guard waves an endlessly beeping detector over visitors and the bags they carry, whilst maintaining a constant banter with other nearby security guards. The laxity of this screening suggests that this mall is open to a wide range of visitors. It is a mall that is at the lower end of the highly competitive quest for prestige and elitism within Jakarta’s mall culture.²

Recording the Future has a muted connection to surveillance. Some recordings from the RtF archives mimic surveillance practices; for example, the long-duration tripod recordings at major intersections and at the port in Ternate. This ongoing

audio-visual archive, however, only became possible with the decline of the Suharto-led New Order government – an era during which surveillance played a key role in determining and undermining the rights and freedoms of movement and expression. The footage of RtF isn’t neutral; the project (with its multiple collaborators) presents the many micro-narratives that make up everyday life in Indonesia. The project aims, rather openly, to “observe ... the way people use public spaces”. A more combative attitude towards the state is in part facilitated, however, by the activist and provocative inquiring of Lexy Rambadeta – a prominent voice throughout many hours of the recordings. Ratih Prebatarasi, a more recent collaborator, adopts a subtler, more open approach. Some passersby who are questioned in RtF are reluctant to express a political opinion, choosing vague positive statements instead of direct praise or criticism. Elsewhere, the camera crew are themselves subject to monitoring and censure. They are forbidden from filming in a bakery in Mangga Dua Square, and on another occasion a security guard inquires as to whether or not they have permission to record in the mall. Schulte Nordholt and Steijlen have pointed out that this project would never have been possible in the pre-New Order era.³

Malls are simultaneously sites of play, consumption and performance. In the case of Mangga Dua Square, for example, (at least in the past) visitors would come to sing songs on karaoke stages or play video games in gaming parlours. Elsewhere in Jakarta, malls such as Grand Indonesia or Senayan City, are home to the boutiques and shops of luxury brands. These shops, which receive only a small number of visitors, enhance a mall’s claims to grandeur, opulence and affluence. These are spaces in which visitors are invited to wander, gaze and consume with their eyes the objects displayed resplendent before them. Such wandering evokes notions of *flânerie*: wandering aimlessly, consuming and classifying what is around oneself, yet avoiding being taken over by strong emotions; being a somewhat critical, but nonetheless complicit participant in everyday life.

Conversations with security guards (both uniformed and ununiformed) revealed unexpected threats to the *flâneurs* who visit malls. When asked about the common crimes committed in malls, security guards responded that hypnosis is at times applied to unsuspecting visitors. Hypnosis, apparently, can be performed on those who are wandering aimlessly, not concentrating on anything in particular. It is at these moments that the hypnotists strike. With gleaming signs, displays and sales, malls are an arena for hypnotists to perform their art. Under hypnosis, a victim may unwittingly visit an automatic

teller machine and pass over large amounts of cash to the hypnotist. The security guard interviewed at Mangga Dua Square mall, however, reassures the *Recording the Future* camera crew that they know who the perpetrators are.

The hypnotists, looking for aimless wanderers, are themselves under surveillance. Moreover, their methods are known by the enforcers of security. Hypnosis, real or otherwise, is common in anecdotes; it is a disturbance of daily behaviour. It is a slip from normal behaviour when one is in control, to an inexplicable situation when one suddenly finds oneself not able to control or determine one’s actions. A mall, with its formalisation and limitations on behaviour, disrupts established patterns of interacting with others and ways of relating to one’s surroundings. As van Leeuwen writes, one indeed needs to learn how to behave in a mall. And thus, despite allusions of frivolity and fun, malls may not be spaces that one can enter without a sense of caution. One may involuntarily withdraw large amounts of cash and give it to a stranger.

Malls in Jakarta, based on preliminary observations at Mangga Dua Square and elsewhere, are spaces that provide relevant case studies for the crossovers and problematic dichotomy of acting as one pleases and being subjected to a watchful gaze; malls are subject to the gaze of security staff and hypnotists. Nonetheless, malls are spaces in which identities can be shaped and where mingling with strangers takes place.⁴ Degrees of public and private are subject to negotiation. Practices of surveillance and security seek to maintain a degree of exclusion; these practices, however, are not impenetrable to subversion.

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Notes

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