Cinema and Television in Singapore

Resistance in One Dimension

Kenneth Paul Tan

BRILL

Cinema and Television in Singapore

Social Sciences in Asia

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VOLUME 16

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the result of a political scientist's attempt to understand the political significance, possibilities, and limitations of art and popular culture in contemporary Singapore, a young and ultra-modern city-state with global aspirations that are beginning to transform the authoritarian strains of government, market, and culture into more complex and less stable articulations of often contradictory ideas, values, and practices. Singapore's creative talent in these interesting times do not simply propagate the ideas of the dominant classes, but can now find new spaces and resources for critiquing the status quo, presenting new imaginative realms of possibility, or maneuvering more subtly for negotiated positions in a dynamic struggle for hegemony. Others among Singapore's creative talent adopt a spirit of playfulness that distances itself from, and yet participates fully in, the dominant cultural and political discourses. However, dynamic struggles and an ironic spirit are not completely open-ended, but seriously limited by parameters defined by the powerful logic of authoritarian capitalism that continues—in cunning ways—to transform oppositional, resistant, and alternative expressions into profitable and system-supporting commodities that circulate in a culture of thoughtless and undiscerning consumerism.

My academic interest in film and television began in 2000 when I started teaching political science modules in the University Scholars Programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS), an interdisciplinary undergraduate program that made innovative use of multimedia. Films, in particular, were useful materials for vividly illustrating abstract political science concepts to students; and, as sites of political activity, they eventually became in my mind primary objects of political science analysis. In some respects, they were missing pieces of the analytical puzzle that Singapore politics had been, and continues to be, for me. Soon, I began teaching an advanced module on the politics of art and popular culture in the Political Science Department at NUS. I am grateful to my students for the lively conversations and debates in class during which many of my ideas were formulated, challenged, and developed.

INTRODUCTION

Articulating Critical Theory and Cultural Studies

This is a book that explores, through a close study of contemporary made-in-Singapore films and television programs, the possibilities and limitations of resistance through art and popular culture within a one-dimensional society, defined as an industrialized and globalized capitalist society whose oppressions, repressions, exploitations, contradictions, tensions, and crisis tendencies have been contained, controlled, manipulated, and hidden by deeply entrenched authoritarian institutions, practices, beliefs, habits, and instincts.

The nature and extent of this resistance can be determined within an analytical space defined by two theoretical limits that draw from the work of the Frankfurt School, whose members, intellectually rooted in the traumatic experiences of Nazi Germany, worked in 'exile' for a significant time in the US, where some of their intellectual energies were directed toward critical research on the irrational and authoritarian strains that they identified in American society (Jay 1973). Through a political economy perspective of cultural production, these intellectuals critically theorized how mass culture, as opposed to autonomous art, not only supported ideologically the systemic authoritarianism of a one-dimensional capitalist society, but had itself become materially subsumed into the system as potentially lucrative products of the culture industry. This is the first theoretical limit: the principle of complete encapsulation. The second, the principle of pure autonomy, was envisioned in autonomous art which—freed from the necessary laws of the market, politics, and morality—was idealized as a purely alternative realm of possibilities, the imaginary basis of a Great Refusal of the status quo.

Taken seriously, these theoretical limits will serve as important parameters for an analysis of resistance that draws from the work of the now-defunct Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, England: a more empirical approach that negates the elitist and exclusionary tendencies of the Frankfurt School by regarding the products of mass culture—or more accu-

rately perhaps, popular culture—as sites of ideological negotiation
and struggle; and audiences not as consumer dupes but active, re-
sistant, and even oppositional decoders of meaning. Audiences bring
to bear their subjective frameworks of interpretation whenever they
encounter a cultural text. These encounters might, as Frankfurt
School critical theorists are more likely to assume of culture indus-
try products, lead to a 'preferred' reading of the intended meanings
that draws from and supports the dominant ideological formations
of one-dimensional society, often aimed at sustaining a belief in an
identity of interests among different groups within such a society.
However, as cultural studies analysts are more likely to assume, these
encounters sometimes produce oppositional readings and very fre-
quently produce negotiated readings in which some components of
the intended meanings are accepted whereas some others are re-
jected. To frame this more open-ended analysis, this book will draw
from parts of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall's extensive and
evolving work on media, culture, and ideological struggle, which
was inspired in integral ways by Italian post-Marxist theorist An-
tonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony and which culminated in Hall's
analysis of 'authoritarian populism' in the 'historic bloc' that has
come to be known as Thatcherism. Marcia Landy, an American
film studies professor, describes how

> the study of culture becomes crucial in identifying the ways in which the
> reigning hegemony has succeeded in persuading subaltern groups of an
> identity of interests, and also in identifying areas where hegemony is, in
> fact, fragile and untenable. (Landy 1994, 96)

One-Dimensional Man, an influential book by Frankfurt School criti-
cal theorist Herbert Marcuse (1964/2002) is often interpreted—mis-
takenly—as an account of advanced capitalism as an inescapable
and permanent social order that integrates plurality into a techno-
logically rationalized monolith. This book deliberately begins with
this extreme position—the absolute domination of capitalism—in
order to set up a theoretical limit against which a more dynamic,
dialectical, and open-ended analysis of Singapore's popular cul-
tural developments might be constructed. In other words, by es-
tablishing exactly what ideological resistance and opposition are up
against (the one-dimensional society as 'worst-case scenario'), these
struggles embedded in Singaporean films and television programs

can be more vitally understood and demonstrated, and the prospects for resistance and opposition not overstated.

Yet, Marcuse himself was clearly aware of counter-tendencies within a one-dimensional society, even if he did not specify and elaborate on them in his book. In a discussion of the theoretical limitations of Marcuse's work, sociologist George Snedeker acknowledges that even in its "elaborate though idealized description of an unimpeded and monolithic capitalist control," the work nevertheless "leaves room for political struggle" (Snedeker 2004, 11). Critical theorist Douglas Kellner suggests that *One-Dimensional Man* should be

> read as a theory of containment of contradictions, forces of negation, and possibilities of liberation that exist but are suppressed and contained … Marcuse continues to point to these forces and possibilities, and to recognize the liberating potential hidden in the oppressive social system … [I]t is preferable to see it as a system of contradictions, tensions and conflicts which capital desperately tries to manage—and profit from—but which oscillates from stasis to change, from oppression and domination to struggle and resistance, and from stability and containment to conflict and crisis. (Kellner 1984, 272-74)

Elsewhere, Kellner describes how

> Marcuse was engaged in a lifelong search for a revolutionary subjectivity, for a sensibility that would revolt against the existing society and attempt to create a new one. (Kellner 2001, 86)

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Kellner identifies a "fundamentally political" Great Refusal that manifests itself as a

> refusal of repression and injustice, a saying no, an elemental opposition to a system of oppression, a noncompliance with the rules of a rigged game, and a form of radical resistance and struggle. (Kellner 2001, 94)

Viewed—correctly—in this less static way, the one-dimensional man thesis might not in the end be incompatible with a cultural studies approach that focuses on the analysis of opposition, resistance, negotiation, and consent in the active and dynamic formation of hegemony.

This book's analytical strategy does not aim crudely to fuse what are really two rather separate critical approaches; but it does aim to take seriously Kellner's recommendation to bring together the two approaches in a complementary, multiperspectival, and interdisciplinary articulation that might "overcome the weaknesses and

limitations of the other" (Kellner 2002, 31). For Kellner, such an articulation would more adequately be able to investigate

> a wide range of artefacts interrogating relationships within the three dimensions of (1) the production and political economy of culture; (2) textual analysis and critique of its artefacts; and (3) study of audience reception and the uses of media/cultural products. (Kellner 2002, 50)

In this way, the analysis can be dynamic enough to recognize and account for moments of resistance to the dominant hegemonic formations even in the most commodified forms of cultural production, and yet be always grounded by a critical (and realistic) consciousness of the tremendous power of advanced authoritarian capitalism to conceal its inherent weaknesses and crisis tendencies embedded in a fundamentally contradictory system. Capitalism conceals these tensions mainly through the standardized, pseudo-individualized, mimetic, stereotypical, and infantilizing products that the culture industry is geared to produce. Just as these texts seem to struggle against the hegemonic system (or their audiences seem to read against the grain), they also knowingly or unknowingly draw from and at the same time reinstate the dominant hegemonic formations of one-dimensional society. In many of the rich analytical moments identified in this book, resistance occurs at the same time as complicity.

Adopting this more fluid mode of analysis also offers a way of critically understanding the social and political liberalization that appears to be accompanying globalization and developments toward more service- and knowledge-oriented economies, and in particular the creative industries that, though described in revolutionary terms, continue to resonate—even articulate—strongly with traditional versions of the culture industry. Crucially, a less constrained reading of the culture industry allows for the recognition of mass cultural products—in the fields of media, design, entertainment, and the arts—that demonstrate originality, innovation, alternative perspectives, and even oppositional ones which, if found by the market to be lucrative, will face the difficult-to-resist pressures of being reincorporated into the established system as a new, exciting, and more profitable commodity. 'Revolutionary' thinking—made possible by the creative industries—might not, therefore, serve to liberate consumers from their (often fully conscious) addiction to mass culture, but to differentiate purposefully the products of this culture, disguise

their enduring sameness, and boost sales through 'innovation' and an 'anti establishment' chic.

The Evolving Arts Community in Singapore

In Singapore, the emergence of new creative industries in the late 1990s—made more urgent by the experience of the 1997 Asian economic crisis—has been accompanied by a more pronounced rhetoric of innovation, imagination, and 'out-of-the-box' thinking most vividly expressed in the arts and cultural policies described in the *Renaissance City Report* (MITA 2000). In the absence of natural resources, Singapore's economy needs entrepreneurship rather than risk aversion, critical thinking rather than conformity, creativity rather than toil, and innovation rather than standardization, in order for Singapore to transcend the competition from the Southeast Asian region where costs and wages are much lower, move to a higher economic stage, and assert its relevance as a global city in the world economy. This rhetoric dovetails neatly with what has uncritically been described as a gradual process of liberalization from the authoritarian socialization and industrialization policies of Lee Kuan Yew (prime minister, 1959-1990); to the kinder, gentler, and more consultative style of Goh Chok Tong (prime minister, 1990-2004); and to the more open and inclusive society that current prime minister Lee Hsien Loong seems to be advocating. However, the more critical observer will sense that the increased freedoms that these developments would suggest have been merely illusory, as the market and state continue to find ever more sophisticated ways to maintain their authoritarian grip.

This book will provide a reading of Singapore films and television programs as texts that shape and are shaped by larger economic, political, ideological, and historical shifts and formations within a country that has struggled to work out and simplify the contradictions of being a postcolonial, Asian, and multiethnic nation-state, as well as a cosmopolitan global city. In particular, these texts will be read in the context of a Singapore that is beginning publicly to debate the value of risk taking, critical thinking, creativity, openness, diversity, and liberalization, as it envisions itself proceeding decisively into the new global economy in which econom-

ic competitiveness will, according to the common sense, depend on the ability to achieve success in the creative enterprises including popular culture and the arts, media, design, and the 'technopreneurial' approach to scientific research. In these complex and contradictory economic, social, and political conjunctures, the cultural studies analyst might discover greater scope for creativity, alternative perspectives, and oppositional maneuvers in the way that cultural texts—including films and television programs—are encoded and decoded in the more open and stimulating climate of the creative economy. However, the critical theorist could just as easily explain these economic, cultural, and political developments as little more than an extension of the traditional culture industry, where talk of openness, diversity, creativity, innovation, and critical thinking serves merely to generate demand for 'new' cultural products that bear the hidden stamp of eternal sameness: products that present audience-consumers with an illusion of novelty, diversity, and choice, and in that way fold them right back into the one-dimensional capitalist society. It is this central tension that really drives the analysis advanced in this book.

By emphasizing the complexity of television and film production and consumption in Singapore, this book aims to dispel the convenient, cynical, and mostly mistaken view that all of the Singapore films and television programs that have survived the brutality of censorship must surely serve only the parochial interests of the authoritarian state and its capitalist partners. The dynamic tension between Frankfurt School critical theory and British cultural studies approaches will help illuminate complex moments of complicity and resistance in Singapore film and television. State repression, market interests, and social conservatism can, in some cases, even bring out more creative and sophisticated ways of doing art, and doing art critically. Indeed, the scars of state censorship might themselves be displayed by filmmakers and television producers as a mark of prestige and as a means of gaining international approval and even critical acclaim: all of which could constitute new capital for commercial success, for both the artist and the economy.

Singapore's evolving arts community—of which filmmakers and television producers are clearly a part—is becoming more self-conscious, self-reflective, and sophisticated in its understanding of the limits of what can be achieved and the possibilities that open up

as artists and creative workers organize their resources and pull together their capabilities (locally, regionally, and internationally) in efforts strategically to expand these limits. This book, in aiming to become part of this increasing self-reflexivity within the Singapore arts community, will be addressed not only to academics in media and cultural studies, but also to practitioners in the film and television industries, arts and cultural policy makers, and Singaporean audiences, who made almost 16 million visits to the cinema in 2006 (Singapore Film Commission n.d.), chalking up among the highest rates of film attendance in the world. Contemporary developments in Singapore's popular culture are relevant to a larger understanding of popular cultural developments in other advanced capitalist cities such as Hong Kong, Sydney, London, and New York, cities that face similar concerns (though certainly for dissimilar reasons) about globalization, multiculturalism, and nationhood. Although these concerns have universal resonance, the peculiarities of the Singapore case—at least where issues of censorship, global capital, liberalization, cultural and creativity policies, and the artist as social and political critic are concerned—will also reveal much about these larger questions that are confronted by global cities in general.

Analyzing Television, Films, and Filmmakers in Singapore

This book will closely analyze television programs (the *Singapore Idol* competition, situation comedies, and drama series) as well as films (by Jack Neo, Eric Khoo, and Royston Tan). Although television and film studies have evolved in separate directions, especially where methodology is concerned, there are some compelling reasons for including in this book an analysis of made-in-Singapore films and television programs. One reason is that the contrast between the two media—for instance, with regard to audience reach, government support and control, and viewing context—would seem to map generally onto the two Frankfurt-School derived theoretical limits that the book will adopt: namely, the principle of complete encapsulation and the principle of pure autonomy. The intuitive view that films afford more possibilities for ideological autonomy and contestation than television programs do will be examined and challenged by referring to moments of resistance found even in the latter. As the book explores these interconnections between the

filmic and televisual forms and texts, it will be sensitive to the separate advances in methodological approaches to film and television studies.

Many of Singapore's mainstream films are 'recirculated' in the popular culture through the medium of television; and in this manner, the thematic concerns and stylistic approaches interact in interesting ways with those of television. Many Singapore filmmakers have at some point or other been involved in production work for television. Eric Khoo produced the television series *Drive* (1998) and also directed one of its episodes. Royston Tan's documentary *48 on AIDS* (2002) was commissioned for television. And Jack Neo's films have often been criticized for not being able to break away from the televisual formats that he started out with (for example, S. F. Ong 2006d). For these reasons, this book brings together both film and television analyses.

Singapore's professional filmmakers range from the commercial, to the artistic and experimental, to the more overtly political, though rarely in a mutually exclusive way. The three directors discussed in this book are chosen mainly because of their successful and contrasting bodies of work: Jack Neo as a Chinese-educated satirist whose commercially viable films are favored by the state; Eric Khoo as a wealthy, English-speaking, overseas-educated, and critically acclaimed director of art-house films about the tragic lives of the working class; and Royston Tan as an internationally acclaimed art-house filmmaker and *enfant terrible* from a working-class background who has, through the use of camp aesthetics and parodic critique in his films, confronted the 'serious' institutions of modernization, urbanization, and censorship. The type and subject of the films, life experiences, and artistic visions associated with each director give rise to the limits and possibilities of resistance to and complicity with the establishment that is bound up with the interests of the state and the market. Chapters in this book are dedicated to each of the three directors not simply to adopt an 'auteur' approach (although each of these directors can be said to demonstrate his own unique, coherent, and exemplary filmmaking vision), but to discuss the role of each director as a Gramscian organic intellectual, performing important hegemonic functions to support and/or loosen the consensus that binds together what American economist Christopher Lingle calls Singapore's "authoritarian capitalist" society (Lingle 1996). It is not the intention to suggest that

only these three (notably Chinese and male) filmmakers are important for the subject of this book, but they have provided large enough, idiosyncratic, and sufficiently contrasting bodies of work that can help to mark out the landscape of filmmaking in Singapore.

Structure of the Book

A Marcusean reading of contemporary Singapore as a one-dimensional society is really an 'ideal-typical' reading that serves as an analytical limit to allow for an exploration of the logical conclusions of any analysis that takes seriously global capitalism's ability to stabilize itself in spite of its inherent contradictions and crisis tendencies. Such an analysis, as Chapter 1 suggests, would present Singapore as a "totally administered state": where direct coercion has evolved into "new forms of social control"; where military conscription, industrial relations, the grassroots network, public housing, the mass media, the education system, and policies on national culture and values have, over the decades, come to constitute what Marcuse theorized as a "warfare" and "welfare" state; where fear and need are thoroughly industrialized (Marcuse 1964/2002). Although the decisive move toward becoming a global city with a creative economy (especially after the economic crisis of 1985) has opened up new opportunities for alternative and even critical thinking, such a seemingly 'revolutionary' turn has really been limited to economic purposes alone. Critical thinking that negates the necessary and exploitative relations of capitalist society—of the kind that Marcuse would have advocated—remains outlawed by the repressive and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 1971) in Singapore society's growing one-dimensionality.

The political economy of cultural and artistic production in Singapore, increasingly gaining the serious attention of policy makers, has found an important place within the larger economy of the global city. In Chapter 2, Singapore's film and television industries are given a Marcusean reading to highlight just how susceptible art and popular culture are to being subsumed by the logic of capitalism, thereby yielding cultural products that are standardized, pseudo-individualized, and mimetic. The culture industry, responsible for producing a preponderance of racial, class, gender, and sexual

stereotypes, has developed to cater to the needs of an evolving social landscape simplified by the ideological categories of 'heartlanders' and 'cosmopolitans.' Although it would seem as if culture and the arts have become an integral—and integrating—part of Singapore's advanced industrial society, this chapter presents the limited but real possibility of resistance and opposition in Singapore's popular culture, preparing the way for subsequent chapters to analyze closely key televisual and filmic texts produced in Singapore as sites of ideological negotiations and struggle where both resistance and complicity might be observed to exist in complex and shifting tension. This book will resist the view that audiences are cultural dupes and that the cultural power of dominant interests has—through the culture industry—completely disorganized authentic popular culture and reorganized it into products of mass culture. However, this book will continue to ground the analysis of cultural struggle in a political economy approach that takes very seriously the immense and sustained power of capitalism in partnership with the state to contain moments of resistance. What results is a more fluid reading of Singapore's culture industry and the ideological work that it does in winning and re-winning consensus.

The *Singapore Idol* competition is a spectacular example of the kind of standardized, mimetic, and stereotypical mass cultural product theorized by the Frankfurt School, both in terms of the ideological work that it performs as well as in terms of its integral place within the global culture industry. Chapter 3 analyzes the first season, broadcast in 2004, of this local version of the globally successful *American Idol*, itself a franchise of the 'original' UK *Pop Idol*. The *Idol* franchise promoted not only the commercial interests of the recording industry and a web of other product sponsors, but also the values associated with capitalist liberal democracy, albeit in distorted form. So *Singapore Idol* became a simulacrum of democratic activity, disguising the absence of a basic democratic reality and giving audiences a false sense of empowerment at being able to exercise rational judgment in the selection of talent within a larger meritocratic society that allows anyone with talent regardless of class and social background to succeed and be handsomely rewarded. These universal and universalizing values of global capitalism were localized through the superficial substitution of global/American personalities and sensibilities with Singaporean ones. The show also relied on and reproduced infantilized audiences

yearning for formulaic cultural products to provide an escape into fantasy, present an illusion of democratic efficacy, simulate nationhood, and insert into mundane lives dramatic moments of moral crisis and injustice destined every week to be the dominant topic of everyday conversation.

Made-in-Singapore English-language sitcoms and dramas are typical products of the culture industry. In being formulaic, predictable, and regressive, these shows are designed not to offer 'aesthetic challenges' but to provide light entertainment. As mimetic products, the sitcoms and dramas perform the ideological work necessary for maintaining the one-dimensional capitalist society, propagating the system-supporting values of nation, family, neighborliness, and multiracialism over the contradictions and tensions that threaten to disrupt it. As Chapter 4 illustrates, these shows thrive on stereotypical representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class that a majority of their audiences finds gratifying. Negative stereotypes of the racial minority groups, for example, are employed to appeal to the privileged audiences consisting of Chinese Singaporeans, who are in the majority. Minority audiences, as they laugh at themselves, also come to accept these negative portrayals as true, perpetuating dominant interpretations of Singapore's 'multiethnic' reality, and maintaining 'multiracialism' as a superficial ideological expression of racial harmony that disguises latent beliefs about racial superiority/inferiority and practices of racial discrimination. More critical audiences, and in particular those from the racial minority groups, might not in fact accept these mimetic portrayals of race; they might instead cast an oppositional gaze or at least give a negotiated reading of these portrayals, thereby problematizing simplistic assertions about multiracialism. Although comedy can be a deeply subversive form, Singapore's sitcoms have slavishly adhered to formats that demand a simple resolution of every episode's central problem calculated to end on a conservative note. Their resistance to bureaucratic authority and a hypocritical society has therefore been quite limited.

Jack Neo is a great example of commercial success in Singapore's film industry and, probably as a result of this demonstrated success, he has been able to negotiate a role within the government's 'creative industries' policies. A large part of this success, as Chapter 5 argues, is built on the appeal that his films enjoy among so-called 'heartlanders' and more specifically perhaps the Chinese-speaking mass

audience. This appeal is secured mainly through the gratifyingly
realistic use of Mandarin and Hokkien as primary languages in his
scripts; the comic use of racial, class, gender, and sexual stereotypes;
satirical modes of social and political criticism; and simple, mor-
alistic storylines that end happily. As an organic intellectual emerg-
ing from and speaking on behalf of the Chinese-educated com-
munity, Neo criticizes the way Singaporeans seem to have forgotten
their Chinese roots and values, opting instead to embrace indis-
criminately the language, values, and lifestyles of the West. In this
way, these films provide cultural resources for interpellating Chinese
Singaporeans as members of an imagined Chinese-educated com-
munity that, although in the majority, has been devalued by a
privileged English-speaking and Westernized middle class, and is
therefore a community under siege. The boundaries of this imag-
ined community are intensified by the stereotypical 'othering' of
Westernized Chinese and non-Chinese Singaporean characters as
undeveloped, decorative, non-essential, emasculated, puerile, buf-
foonish, ridiculous, immoral, or even criminal. Neo also criticizes
in his films government policies and the authoritarian culture in
Singapore. However, these mostly superficial criticisms calculated
to draw quick laughs do not, by and large, amount to any deep,
comprehensive, or complex critique of political and socioeconom-
ic conditions in Singapore. Much of Neo's critical sting has been
attenuated by his brand of comedy consisting of stereotypes, puns,
slapstick, and irreverent slurs; an overly commercialized approach
to filmmaking as evidenced by the inordinately large number of
products advertised by the films; and the government's largely suc-
cessful efforts to co-opt him as a model citizen for the creative
economy. Neo has won the favor of two prime ministers—Goh
Chok Tong, then Lee Hsien Loong—not only because of his ex-
emplary success as a commercial filmmaker, but also for the hege-
monic, ultimately pro-establishment function of his films.

   In stark contrast to the commercial output of Jack Neo have
been the festival-bound art-house films of Eric Khoo, discussed in
Chapter 6. Most of Khoo's short and feature films focus on the
working-class lives of Singaporeans who dwell in the public hous-
ing heartlands, a place that he portrays as bleak, oppressive, dead-
ening, and ultimately tragic. As an affront to the cheery and cel-
ebratory official images of public housing estates touted as going
beyond First World standards, these films make audiences look more

closely at these living environments to locate highly controlled one-dimensional spaces in which little human tragedies play out unnoticed amid the loud and proud proclamation of Singapore's affluence, efficiency, cleanliness, and Asian values. Khoo's hard-hitting thematic preoccupations include alienation in contemporary Singapore, nostalgia for a more humane past, and the dangers of repressed human sexuality. Khoo often features complex antiheroes as the protagonists of his films, dysfunctional individuals struggling to cope in a rigid and yet fast-paced society administered by harsh norms, rules, and regulations. He has been criticized for, among other things, exploitatively portraying the heartlands as an utterly miserable place and aestheticizing the suffering of the working class for the marvelous consumption of a voyeuristic bourgeois art-house audience. The criticism is heightened by the fact that Khoo—a wealthy English-speaking intellectual who received his formal film education in Australia—has an outsider's vision of the heartlanders. But perhaps it is because he has not emerged from that class that he is able to offer audiences uncomfortable and difficult films that challenge their own taken-for-granted knowledge of their world, films that deal with oppression and repression, and the tragic consequences of these conditions for individuals in society.

Royston Tan has won more than fifty awards internationally but is regarded by censorious authorities in Singapore as an *enfant terrible* at best, and at worst a potential menace to society. Much of this criticism has emerged as a reaction to *15*, a feature film about youth gangs that foregrounds the darker side of a postcolonial society intent on showcasing itself as a safe, sanitized, and prosperous cosmopolitan nation built on happy Asian families. These official images aim to promote an inflow of tourists, investors, and foreign talent, but also to strengthen the government's political legitimacy since this depends on the people's perception of their government's ability to maintain First World living standards. Tan's mission is to preserve through art those places in Singapore that have deep meaning for him. As Singapore transforms into a global city clone, indiscriminate urbanization threatens to demolish these places and replace them with contextless buildings that lack character and historical depth. Tan also explores the way human relationships—in this often alienating landscape—can suffer from estrangement. To the state, Tan's notoriety in Singapore is also the source of his celebrity overseas, which ironically helps to make Singapore more

exciting and attractive to tourists, investors, and the creative class. This international celebrity also helps to advance an international 'Singapore brand' that could generate international demand for the products of Singapore's nascent creative industries. But this same notoriety stems also from Tan's creative opposition to a secure, sanitized, and successful image of Singapore that the government relies on as the basis of its political authority. As far as this authority is concerned, therefore, Tan's films serve as both opportunity and threat. Tan's international reputation, also, has benefited from the government's attempt to censor his work; this censorship has allowed him to be noticed as a talented artist with a social conscience and the political will to resist the banal and unjust. But behind the hype, as Chapter 7 argues, Tan is an intuitive filmmaker with a wonderful eye for visual beauty, an acute sensitivity to music, a flamboyant sense of humor, a deep empathy for his human subjects, and most of all a talent for putting together films that are simple yet challenging on so many levels.

A Note on Translations

Most of the films selected for analysis in this book are in Mandarin or Hokkien, mixed sometimes with Singlish and a smattering of standard English. In this book, all quotations from these films are presented in English, exactly as translated in their subtitles. Spelling and grammatical errors as well as colloquial expressions have not been corrected or adjusted, in order to retain as accurately as possible the filmmakers' intended meaning.

ONE-DIMENSIONAL SINGAPORE

> They lead ultimately very miserable lives which they enliven by spending money. They don't have time, they have only money, so they buy themselves a nice car or whatever, but in the end they don't have the time to enjoy these things—or life. (Singaporean lawyer and writer Philip Jeyaretnam, quoted in Tom 2006)

Economically at its peak in 1997, even at the onset of the Asian economic crisis, Singapore ranked as the fourth-richest country in the world in terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (C. N. Seah 2005); and today, its per capita GDP is equal to those of the leading countries of Western Europe (Central Intelligence Agency 2005). In this conspicuously affluent and proudly consumerist global city state, accelerated national development has brought freedom from basic want for nearly every citizen. Singaporeans are constantly warned by their government about the fragility of these material achievements and many believe that they can only preserve these achievements through their ability to be productivity-driven in the workplace, willingness to make personal sacrifices when the national economy calls for it, and openness to the demands of foreign capital and talent, both considered necessary for economic growth and development. In Singapore, survival anxieties and material gratification have converged in the national psyche in ways that seem to have sustained an authoritarian and repressive culture poised toward overcoming vulnerabilities and achieving success, but often at the cost of human autonomy, individual creativity, and higher-order freedoms, ideals that are summarily dismissed as quixotic or culturally inauthentic by political and ideological leaders who proudly—and in a doubly ironic way—declare a dogmatic allegiance to pragmatism.

The national psyche has been saturated with paranoia about whether Singapore can cope with the vulnerability of being a country with an ethnic Chinese majority and a significant minority of Malay-Muslims, complicated by its location in a Malay-Muslim region dominated by periodically hostile neighboring giants Malay-

sia and Indonesia (Leifer 2000). Foreign investors and global businesses, forming a view of Singapore as an expensive, culturally bland, and bureaucratically rigid location, have already turned to regional competitors such as China, India, Thailand, and Malaysia. Acutely aware of these developments, the Singapore government has been trying to 'remake' Singapore into a "vibrant global city" (H. L. Lee 2005b) with a "creative and entrepreneurial" people behind a globalized and diversified economy that aims to be a key node linked to all major economies in the risky but profitable global networks of capital and power (Economic Review Committee 2003). A dynamic component of this remade economy is expected to be the creative cluster that comprises the arts, design, and media, predicted to contribute up to 6 per cent of GDP by 2012 (Economic Review Committee Services Subcommittee 2002). And two important components of Singapore's remade media industry are film and television.

German social philosopher Herbert Marcuse's critical analysis of 'one-dimensional' America in the 1950s (Marcuse 1964/2002) continues, in spite of its historical specificity and the fierce criticisms that have been leveled at it, to present theoretical possibilities for gaining a critical and historically sensitive understanding of the culture, society, and politics of contemporary Singapore. As 'new critical theorists' William Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris have argued, "No theory oriented to liberation can proceed without careful and historically grounded analysis, regarding which there remains much to learn from Marcuse," whose "revolutionary fervor, … intellectual rigor, and … sensitivity to new possibilities for social change and theorizing make him an ideal figure for a critical theory after postmodernism" (Wilkerson and Paris 2001, 2). Together with the 'critical theory' tradition of the Frankfurt School, and the culture industry analysis of its leading proponents Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944/2002) in particular, Marcuse's approach tended to lament the nearly inescapable integration of marginal, critical, and resistant forces into the affirmative universe of advanced industrial society. According to Marcuse,

> the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification … Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend

> the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or
> reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality
> of the given system and of its quantitative extension. (Marcuse
> 1964/2002, 13-14)

Films and television programs, although capable of bearing critical
and transcendent ideas, aspirations, and objectives, are nearly always
eventually reduced to the terms of this one-dimensional society in
which they are produced, distributed, and consumed. As products
of the culture industry, they bear the hallmarks of mass production,
standardization, and pseudo-individualization; and in turn produce
retrogressive and infantilized audiences hungry for light entertain-
ment to prepare them for the next day's labor.

   This chapter will provide a Marcusean reading of contemporary
Singapore. This one-dimensional society analysis serves as a theo-
retical limit—an 'ideal-typical' reading—that explores the heuristi-
cally-driven logical conclusions of any analysis that takes seriously
the remarkable ability of global capitalism to stabilize itself in spite
of its inherent contradictions and crisis tendencies.

New Forms of Social Control

The most basic source of Singapore's authoritarian culture since
the state gained independence in 1965 has been fear. Over the
decades, fear—or, more accurately, paranoia—has been at the cen-
ter of evolving public discourse concerning questions of national
as well as personal survival within the confines of an unfavorable
environment and an uncertain future. Circulating within this dis-
course has been the concept of 'enemies' that threaten the nation's
stability, safety, and spectacular but fragile achievements in eco-
nomic and social development. One such enemy is 'nature,' which
has not endowed Singapore with resources such as land space and
drinking water, and now threatens the global spread of disease and
disasters, and the terrible economic consequences of these. A sec-
ond enemy is the 'foreign aggressors' who have included Malaysia
and Indonesia as well as Western liberals and human rights activ-
ists campaigning against Singapore's conservatively communitarian
and security-centered institutions and practices. A third enemy is
the 'extremists' and 'terrorists' who have advanced a campaign of
violence and hatred in multiethnic and multireligious, but secular

and pro-America Singapore. And a fourth enemy is the 'economic competitors' whose lower cost structures are attracting foreign investors away from Singapore.

To ensure survival and success in spite of these enemies, the People's Action Party (PAP) government has since 1959 wielded in increasingly sophisticated ways authoritarian powers that reach into the most private spaces of Singaporeans' lives. Through the Internal Security Act (Cap. 143), a colonial inheritance, the government is able to detain indefinitely and without recourse to trial or judicial review anyone suspected of acting in a way that threatens Singapore's security and the maintenance of public order and essential services. Through the Sedition Act (Cap. 290), the government can charge anyone who, it deems, intends to raise hatred, contempt, discontent, or disaffection among Singapore citizens and residents against the government and the justice system, or to promote ill-will and hostility among the different races and classes. Through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Cap. 167A), the government can place a restraining order on religious authorities who, under the guise of practicing or propagating religious beliefs, act in ways that raise "enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility" among the various religious groups, promote political causes, carry out subversive activities, or raise disaffection against the government. Through the Societies Act (Cap. 311), the government can refuse to register societies that it deems to be contrary to the national interest or a threat to "public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore." Political associations, in particular, must restrict their membership only to Singapore citizens and must not be affiliated with foreign organizations.

While the government has used the Internal Security Act to detain foreign spies and Jemaah Islamiah terrorist suspects in post-9/11 circumstances, it has not in more recent years exercised these explicit powers against political opposition. Nevertheless, just the thought that these laws exist can prevent well-meaning Singaporeans from wanting to come forward to make a positive difference in their society, since terms such as "public order," "national interest," "subversive," and "disaffection" are so ambiguous as to render any particular action not favored by the government susceptible to being interpreted as contravening these laws. Yet, within the dominant discourse of vulnerability, survival, and success, it has not been difficult for the government to justify these coercive powers to risk-

averse, pragmatic, and materialistic Singaporeans who only desire to live in peace, safety, comfort, and affluence, preferring to believe that support for the incumbent government, with its consistently stellar record, remains the best guarantee of a safe and comfortable life. In a markedly Hobbesian scenario, Singaporeans have 'rationally' agreed to suppress their individual freedoms and gratifications, collectively yielding these to a state powerful enough to ensure widespread security and protection of property; otherwise, "poor, nasty, brutish" conditions would prevail (Hobbes 1651/1991).

The political 'out-of-bound' markers have never been clearly defined in Singapore; and even on occasions when the boundaries were tested and their position became mildly discernible, these delineations have not prevented them from shifting. In some cases, the penalties for upsetting the government have been disproportionately severe, even for people who might appear to be quite harmless. In some other cases, though, the government has shown an uncharacteristic tolerance, even for actions that might seem to be rather bold politically. The effect on ordinary Singaporeans of this unpredictability in the government's response is self-censorship and the censorship of others (see for example Gomez 2000). In this regard, the sustained use of coercive instruments has been mostly unnecessary since widespread knowledge of their existence alone— and perhaps the occasional demonstration of their power—has been sufficient to generate a climate of apprehension in which Singaporeans will regulate their own behavior and practice modes of self-censorship, making restrained calculations about what they can or should say and do in a panoptical society that, like the prison architecture analyzed by French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, induces

> a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Foucault 1995, 201)

But it could also be argued that apprehension is merely an excuse for inaction by Singaporeans who would prefer to give up their public rights and duties in order to enjoy the pleasures of the pri-

vate sphere, where they can make money and spend it (relatively) freely. Contrary to theories that link democratization with the rise of the middle class, the majority of embourgeoised Singaporeans would appear to regard public or political participation not as a right to be reclaimed from an anachronistically developmentalist government, but as an imposition on their 'real' freedom, which is their right to an undisturbed private life, to live in a 'shoppers' paradise' where hard work is rewarded with the capacity to buy 'happiness' by choosing from among the latest range of products. Here is a clear preference for consumer choice over the democratic choice valued by citizens. Middle-class technocrats and the intelligentsia—mostly employed by the state as bureaucrats, teachers, and managers of state enterprises, and indirectly as journalists in the state-directed mainstream media—are likely to align their personal well-being with the fate of the incumbent government and the dominant interests that it protects, so they are unlikely to oppose it in any fundamental ways.

Central to the one-dimensional man thesis are these newer forms of social control, less directly coercive yet more compelling as larger numbers of workers gain admission to middle-class lifestyles, or at least the semblance of such lifestyles. As workers become pacified even as they continue to labor under more outwardly muted conditions of surplus repression, critically oriented intellectuals also buy into a system that co-opts their intellectual powers, rewards them for their affirmative ideological leadership, and anchors their personal fates firmly to the fate of the establishment. If everyone appears to be contented with the system, then, it might be argued, the status quo should be preserved.

Critical theory attempts to uncover and foreground the oppressive and repressive practices that are often obscured in advanced industrial societies where alienated workers, simultaneously obsessive consumers, are falsely gratified by a range of consumption opportunities, the very same opportunities that lock them firmly into the cycle of increasingly excessive repression. Critical theory adopts an emancipatory mode of reasoning to generate consciousness of the kind of domination obscured by the "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom [that] prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 3). In these repressive consumer societies, individuals are overwhelmed by efficiency, comfort, and the gratification of needs that

are in no way essential to human well-being and therefore false. Interpreting Marcuse, critical theorist Douglas Kellner explains how

> 'one-dimensional man' has lost, or is losing, individuality, freedom and the ability to dissent and to control one's own destiny. The 'private space,' the dimension of negation and individuality, in which one may become and remain a self, is being whittled away by a society which shapes aspirations, hopes, fears and values, even manipulating vital needs … the price that one-dimensional man pays for its satisfactions is surrender of its freedom and individuality. (Kellner 1984, 236)

In contrast to 'true needs' that are essential for human survival, false needs are "those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 7). A consumer society sets up false needs and then presents the possibility of satisfying them with a range of commodities and lifestyle options, on the condition that the individuals remain bound to the cycle of repressive wage-labor that enables the workers to afford them. And when the workers can afford these commodities and options, and their needs are satisfied, they experience what Marcuse described as "euphoria in unhappiness" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 7). Kellner describes how

> the satisfactions of the consumer society are 'repressive' and the needs are 'false' because they bind individuals to a social order which actually restricts their freedom and possibilities for happiness, fulfillment and community, while providing commodities and a way of life that impedes development of a more rational social order. (Kellner 1984, 244)

One-dimensional people therefore are alienated from their true needs and, blinded by the opulence of the consumer society, forgo their human potential for self-fulfillment, freedom, happiness, and the achievement of a genuine community.

Singapore's government leaders have regularly declared that the majority of Singaporeans are 'middle-class' (Rodan 1996), even though the cost of living has become a major worry, especially for the 82 per cent of them who live in public housing estates (Housing and Development Board 2006, 79). The '5 Cs'—career, cash, credit card, car, and condo—have informally come to define the materialistic values of *kiasu* (Hokkien for 'afraid to lose') Singaporeans who are mainly oriented toward middle-class consumption

patterns and lifestyle aspirations. In believing that they have arrived as middle-class consumers, the majority of Singaporeans have lost sight of the conditions of work—high stress levels, long hours, unequal wage structure, obsession with productivity, and so on—that they have consented to, just so they can afford the lifestyles that they have adopted or that they aspire to achieve. Instead, their faith in the chances of upward mobility sustains the kind of affirmative values that attenuate the capacity for critical thinking that could collectively rationalize the social order.

In theory, as middle-class Singaporeans find that their more basic needs are being met, they will move up the Maslovian hierarchy of needs to a stage where concerns such as recognition, self-mastery, and self-actualization as individuals, assume greater importance. But a one-dimensional society circumvents the more critical aspects of this development by proliferating a multitude of false needs at the most consumerist level (Jones and Brown 1994), while also imbuing middle-class Singaporeans with a false sense of individualism and self-worth. Global brands are marketed in Singapore, as they are in other consumer-oriented societies around the world, with taglines such as "Because I'm worth it" (L'Oréal), "Think different" (Apple Computer), "Just do it" (Nike), "Your fragrance. Your rules" (Hugo Boss), "Where do you want to go today?" (Microsoft), and "Engineered to move the human spirit" (Mercedes-Benz). Consumers labor to purchase a mere sensation of self-actualization manufactured by large corporations, advertisers, and the mass media. Through the branding industry, the same products present themselves as an infinite variety of choices, allowing individuals to invent and reinvent themselves through the products they choose. The capacity to choose, simulated by the availability of a wide range of marginally differentiated commodities, sustains the illusion of liberal autonomy, which is, in actual fact, a state of 'pseudo-freedom' that compels consumers to work in and for a system that, as Kellner explains, "circumscribes their range of choices to the choice between Ford or General Motors, Wheaties or Cheerios, Tweedledum or Tweedledumber" (Kellner 1984, 248). In actuality, the products have done the 'choosing' for the consumer.

But the middle class is, of course, not uniform. The higher strata might consist of Singaporeans who are more highly educated, professionally and technically qualified, affluent, information

technology-savvy, and well-traveled. These are Singaporeans who can command internationally competitive salaries, and are able and willing to live and work in any of the global cities around the world. Their outlook is decidedly more open and cosmopolitan, and their mobility frees them from the shackles of national ideological dogmas. Some of them left Singapore in the 1980s for 'greener pastures' where they could enjoy more physical, intellectual, and political space. This sparked off nationwide concern over the economic consequences of a 'brain drain.' And so, as more cosmopolitan Singaporeans began publicly to articulate criticisms of the authoritarian and patriarchal system, the government's response has been to take these criticisms into account by promising tentatively a more 'consultative,' 'open,' and 'inclusive' society. A more liberal—and perhaps even exciting—society could also serve to attract the foreign talent that was desperately needed to supplement a limited domestic talent pool.

But the legalization of tabletop dancing in Singapore bars, the introduction of reverse bungee-jumping facilities, the non-discriminatory hiring policy for openly homosexual people in the civil service, the opening of the Crazy Horse nude cabaret, the decision to build two casinos—all spectacles of change in prudishly neo-Confucian Singapore—can hardly qualify as real liberalization, since political practices clearly remain illiberal. This is perhaps 'pseudo-liberalization': harmless concessions made to appease cosmopolitans and foreign talent by meeting their lifestyle needs; to give them stimulating reasons to come, stay, and contribute to Singapore's economy; and to divert their attention further away from the real targets of critique. Ironically, the conservative, moralistic, and parochial tendencies that were widely engineered by the government, especially in the earlier part of the 1980s (discussed in the following section) have become an obstacle to the same government's current attempts to turn Singapore into a fun-filled global city: The casino proposal (favored by the government) met with vociferous opposition from significant quarters of the Singaporean electorate, and Crazy Horse closed down as a failed business partly because of regulations that curtailed its public advertising campaigns.

A Totally Administered Society

Ambassador to the US and political scientist Chan Heng Chee once described Singapore as an "administrative state" that had displaced politics with a bureaucratic logic (Chan 1975). Opposition politicians have minimal prospects of electoral success not only because of the systematic advantages that the incumbent PAP government enjoys, but also because of the way many materially oriented and risk-averse Singaporeans seem to reject the need for real alternatives to the status quo. As a result, opposition parties tend to court the middle ground by offering political options that are not fundamentally dissimilar to those in the PAP's manifesto. Of politics in 1950s America, Marcuse observed how "the programs of the big parties become ever more indistinguishable, even in the degree of hypocrisy and in the odor of the clichés" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 22). But even on this middle ground, opposition parties in Singapore have found it virtually impossible to defeat the PAP government, whose record of successful governance seems to trounce any arguments for political alternatives, theoretical or concrete.

Today, rising standards of living and the continual fear of enemies that threaten to destroy the system are the bases of a totally administered life in Singapore. Marcuse referred to 1950s America as a "welfare and warfare state." In this post-Cold War era, the description is still useful for thinking about contemporary Singapore, a country whose official history still refers to the painful birth pangs that resulted in its political independence in 1965, its separation from Malaysia, as a "moment of anguish" (Lau 1998). The trauma of becoming independent without first securing the means for self-defense, social stability, and economic growth has forged a key moment in the collective memory of Singaporeans today, even those who had yet to be born at the time and who now enjoy the material comforts and security of the present: the popularly called "post-65 generation" (Ghani et al. 2006). The trauma, heightened by accounts of racial riots and terrorist activity by foreign aggressors, presents a legacy of paranoia to contemporary Singaporeans as they make sense of their place in the modern world in these same terms. The 'enemies' might have new names and faces—Jemaah Islamiah; SARS; Asian economic contagion; economic competition from China, India, even Malaysia and Thailand—but their impact is at least as worrying for Singaporeans.

In the early years of independence, the beginnings of Singapore as a 'warfare state,' the PAP government responded to the announcement of an early withdrawal of British defense forces by quickly organizing an indigenous regular armed forces with a reserve army consisting of every able-bodied male Singaporean. Like Israel, from whose military specialists it received training and advice on defense matters, the predominantly Chinese-populated Singapore saw—and perhaps continues to see—itself as a vulnerable nation surrounded precariously by a potentially hostile Muslim world. This 'siege mentality' has come to define not only Singapore's attitudes to defense, but also its own sense of its place in the world. This siege mentality unites the people, and gives them both an imaginary and a concrete sense of national purpose. Today, military service—called National Service—is compulsory for all male Singaporeans, who must undergo full-time military training for up to two years before they statutorily turn into adults at twenty-one years of age. For most of their adult life, they can be called up annually for military training for up to forty days each year.

One of the most basic organizing principles of any society is war, or more accurately perhaps, the mobilization of its people and resources for the imagined possibility of war. In this warfare state, Singapore's wider resources and productive capabilities have been directed toward a military industry that produces and upgrades military hardware mainly for its own defense purposes. A nation's survival needs are constantly linked to military capabilities, generating demand for the products of defense industries and their various transnational configurations. The prospects of war serve as effective advertisement for the lucrative products of these industries. In Singapore, it is widely believed that only a well-defended—and therefore stable—nation can continue to attract the foreign capital and talent that are necessary for the economy to develop and grow.

Compulsory military service in Singapore mobilizes its citizens for the possibility of war, and it serves as a political instrument to discipline and control the male population by diverting their aggressive energies away from political expression and into military regimentation, refocusing these energies on a perceived external enemy (K. P. Tan 2001, 98-99). Adopting the euphemistic term National Service—instead of 'military conscription'—helps to disassociate the institution from any moral ambiguity that might sur-

round the idea of coercive socialization for organized violence, linking it instead to generally favorable notions of patriotic duty, selfless heroism, adventure, character building, and even social leveling through the forging of common experiences among Singaporeans of all class and ethnic backgrounds. Through these discursive maneuvers, contradictions are plastered over; one result is the way regimentation has become understood widely as a means of promoting social equality and manly discipline instead of a system that instills a hierarchical and patriarchal culture of obedience to authority based on rank and brutality rather than reason and respect. Marcuse described the "language of one-dimensional thought"—of which this is clearly an example—as the "unification of opposites which … is one of the many ways in which discourse and communication make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 93).

Women, formally excluded from National Service, are also disciplined by the patriarchal warfare state that rests on the gendered national roles of man as protector-provider and woman as reproducer-nurturer, the former held in much higher regard than the latter. By this logic, women are expected to supplement a male-dominated workforce at relatively lower wages, while continuing to provide 'unpaid' labor within the households that men continue to head. With record-low birth rates in Singapore—a situation that confronts most advanced countries in the world, and that raises tremendous anxiety over the future manpower needs of national defense and the economy—women are increasingly expected to perform the biological work of reproduction for the nation while sustaining their labor contributions within the workforce at comparatively lower wages.

Today, by focusing on striking a healthy work-life balance through which Singaporeans can experience the joys of parenting and family life without losing their productivity, the government's procreation policies have become less offensive than the policies formulated and justified in the early 1980s, when then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (informed by popular ideas about eugenics) singled out graduate women for not wanting to get married and graduate mothers for not wanting to have more children (K. Y. Lee 1983). The government's attempts, at the time, to reward graduate mothers who bore more children, and less educated mothers for choosing to be sterilized, led to the resurrection of feminism in Singapore and, it

is commonly believed, electoral losses for the PAP government, which had won all parliamentary seats in the four general elections that were conducted between 1968 and 1980. Singaporean women were presented as selfish, and the opportunities for self-advancement that had been opening up to them since the 1970s, no more than a necessary evil that accompanied modernization.

The changing economic circumstances through which women have found opportunities to perform as well as their male counterparts—and even to outperform them (there is, for example, a slightly larger number of females than males attending university in Singapore)—have led to a resurgence of chauvinism as Singaporean men are regularly quoted in the media making comparisons between materialistic and arrogant Singaporean women and their much more subservient and domesticated counterparts in less developed Asian countries. The prevalence of this thinking has created a demand among many Singaporean men for brides from China, Vietnam, and Indonesia: a demand that the market has quickly taken advantage of. For instance, at an (ironically) family-oriented carnival held in 2005, a matchmaking company set up a booth to put Vietnamese 'ready brides' on display. Singaporean feminist Braema Mathiaparanam reacted strongly by asserting that

> putting women from any country up like this, almost advertising themselves as brides, is repugnant. It's a public display that presents the women in a one-dimensional way, that she's only good as a bride. (Quoted in Yap 2005)

Similarly, many commercial 'maid agencies' in Singapore continue to 'window display' their female foreign domestic helpers as products for the inspection of prospective employers. The capacity to exploit more vulnerable women from less developed countries might have a 'remasculating' effect on Singaporean men and might perhaps even offer an emotional outlet for female employers who violently take out their frustrations with the patriarchal system on their helpless maids.

Today, informal statistics show Singaporeans having among the lowest rates of sexual activity in the world (for example, Durex 2005), thanks perhaps to a 'lifestyle impotency' that comes from stressful work lives, long work hours, bodily fatigue, prickly relationships, and concerns about the prohibitive costs of raising a family

(Soh 2002), all arising from living one-dimensional lives. Since sexual inactivity relates almost directly with the record-low birth rates, the government has attempted to make it more conducive for Singaporeans to marry and procreate. The introduction of a five-day work week in the civil service—resisted for decades as a threat to productivity—has finally been approved as a way of freeing up quality time for relationships and family life. A Romancing Singapore campaign has been introduced to mobilize commercial interests in the retail, tourism, hospitality, and entertainment sectors to advance romantic opportunities for Singaporeans (and foreign tourists) who might not on their own be able to find or make them. In November 2005, a three-day sex and sexuality exhibition called SEXPO was organized with the government's blessing, giving Singaporeans an unexpected opportunity to participate in seminars, view exhibitions, purchase adult toys, and learn intimate dancing. Romancing Singapore and SEXPO—both annual events—are attempts to marry commercial interests with population policy objectives. They are just two of several seemingly 'liberal' attempts to 'sex up Singapore' through deliberate and often grotesque efforts to shape a funkier and more open-minded society. These new mechanisms, wholly compatible with economic interests, are also ways by which the patriarchal state continues to exercise control over women's wombs, channeling erotic energies for the legitimate purposes of genital sex for procreation within the family unit (K. P. Tan 2003b).

The warfare state also pivots on the idea of an enemy within, such as threats to social stability and economic growth. In order to attract the multinational corporations (MNCs) believed to be crucial for Singapore's economic growth and development, the government has had to control tightly the many trade unions that were once militant representatives of the working class. In order to destroy its rivals and control the trade unions, the PAP made strategic use of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), a peak labor organization whose leadership has been dominated by top members of the PAP as well as the ministerial cabinet. In the late 1960s, the government enacted tough industrial relations legislation that would attenuate the power of trade unions. Established in 1972, the National Wages Council, an annual tripartite mechanism, enabled the government to balance the interests of labor (represented solely by the NTUC) and capital (including foreign managers

of MNCs) by formally working out non-mandatory, mostly pro-business recommendations for setting national wage levels. Through these arrangements, the government has been able to create a business environment conducive to foreign investors looking for low-cost locations without having to deal with difficult labor relations issues. In the hegemonic struggle between labor and business interests, the PAP has generally been successful in getting workers to subordinate their self-interests to the national interest. Former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, widely acknowledged as the 'architect' of Singapore's economy, was able to declare that

> the labour movement took an enlightened long-term view of their group interests [and] were willing to give the growth policy a chance to succeed. (Quoted in Mauzy and Milne 2002, 31)

Other than participating in institutionalized wage negotiations, the NTUC has since the 1970s diversified into 'businesses' that operate insurance schemes, supermarkets, taxi services, and recreation centers aimed at improving the quality of life of its members and workers in general. This is where the warfare state is also very clearly a 'welfare state,' not so much in the socialist sense of a welfare system that provides its needy citizens with comprehensive benefits paid for by a heavy system of taxation, but one that aims to manufacture and also satisfy the more general needs of people through a totally administered society where control is intertwined with questions of comfort. Another example is the Central Provident Fund (CPF) scheme, which is a compulsory and centralized mechanism managed by the government that makes individuals put aside a significant portion of their monthly wages for their old age. This forces Singaporeans to take responsibility for their own post-retirement living and medical expenses, and so lifts the burden of welfare provision from the shoulders of the government. The considerable sums accumulated from these private savings also contribute to the funds available to the government for investing within and outside Singapore, which it does through powerful government-linked corporations like the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), an organization that is not required to report to Parliament and is chaired by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew (Rodan 2004, 54).

Singaporean workers, disciplined by regular military regimentation and lifestyle-oriented trade unionism, are mostly also constitu-

ents of public housing estates where the grassroots sector functions as a mass-based network of surveillance and control. Formed by élite, English-speaking, Western-educated members of the nationalist bourgeoisie in the final years of colonial rule in Singapore, the PAP learnt the importance of mass organization from the Malayan communists, who were outstanding organizers, the PAP's onetime partners, and the link to the massive Chinese-speaking support base accessed through a tightly networked and well-developed grassroots sector. Today, the PAP's grassroots sector consists of overlapping networks of party-based and state-based organizations that try to connect ordinary Singaporeans with a government made up of technocrats, professionals, and intelligentsia. Traditional community leaders have been co-opted into these networks as useful links in what are often informal systems of patronage. At weekly 'meet the people' sessions that the PAP conducts at each constituency, grassroots volunteers assist their member of parliament in the work of listening to the particular problems of citizens and helping to negotiate suitable solutions for them. Apart from giving a human face to the technocratic business of government, these regular meetings with the people present opportunities for obtaining direct feedback from the people and explaining to them new policies, especially unpopular ones. In this way also, the grassroots sector serves as a mechanism of surveillance to keep a watchful eye on oppositional tendencies and forces in mass society (K. P. Tan 2003a).

Public housing itself has been a major component of the totally administered society in Singapore, making a direct impact on the lives and aspirations of the 82 per cent of Singaporeans who live in these estates carved out into constituencies that are each served by networks of grassroots organizations with the PAP government at the center. These massive estates and their tower blocks consisting of differently sized units (serving also as markers of class and upward mobility) are described by political scientist Christopher Tremewan as resembling military barracks that enable not only the regimentation of the population but also the surveillance and panoptical control of their movements (Tremewan 1994). In the early decades of independence, the PAP government resettled urban and rural villagers living in unsanitary ethnic enclaves into these estates (Chua 1995, 79-100, 124-46), which offer a clean, convenient, and multiethnic living environment that has come to be conceived romantically as Singapore's geographical heartlands. Maintained and

upgraded to considerably high standards, these estates now serve symbolically and ideologically as monuments to the PAP government's successful postcolonial modernization efforts. They are an important source of the government's political legitimacy (Chua 1997). A strategy of prioritizing electoral constituencies for various renovation schemes to 'upgrade' older estates has even been used to disincentivize Singaporeans from voting for opposition politicians as members of parliament representing their constituencies. In this 'welfare state,' democracy is often traded in for material comforts, benefits, and upgrades, fostering a petitionary, materialistic, and apathetic political culture.

The public housing estates are also used to manage social divisions of ethnicity and class. An ethnic quota system ensures that each block and each neighborhood contain an ethnic mix of residents that is in line with national percentages. While the official rationale for this quota is the promotion of ethnic interaction and integration, the unofficial reason might have something to do with the need to disaggregate critical masses of minority voters whose concentrated votes for the opposition could, in a first-past-the-post electoral system, lead to the loss for the PAP of a critical number of parliamentary seats. Class distinctions, too, are politically managed by suggesting to residents the possibility and desirability of 'upgrading' from smaller flats (one- to three-room) to bigger ones (four- to five-room), and even to 'executive condominiums' built as a top-end public housing type for those who can only 'nearly afford' private housing, the ultimate prize in a society weaned on the principle of meritocracy and the promise of upward mobility.

Singapore's mass media, like public housing, the grassroots network, industrial relations, and national service, is regarded by the PAP government as a nation-building instrument. The brand of 'development journalism' favored by the government eschews the confrontational, editorialized, investigative, and satirical approaches that have enabled the media in freer countries to perform its role as 'watchdog' (Birch 1993, 19-20; Berry et al. 1996, 203-4). Historian Mary Turnbull points out that the "pro-Singapore" editorial policy of the daily broadsheet *The Straits Times* can actually be traced to the 1940s, when it declared itself a "national" newspaper (Turnbull 1995). Since 'pro-Singapore' has for many Singaporeans come to mean 'pro-PAP,' the media has become in many ways a mouthpiece for the PAP government. Former Chief Min-

ister David Marshall referred to *The Straits Times* as the government's
"running dogs" and "poor prostitutes" (quoted in Chee 1994, 109).
Foreign journalists Terry McCarthy and Eric Ellis insist that the
paper "still addresses its readers in the tones of the commissar,
reproducing reams of ministerial utterances, no matter how forget-
table" (McCarthy and Ellis 1999). And T. S. Selvan, critical biog-
rapher of Lee Kuan Yew, describes it as "acres of moving wallpa-
per … applied propaganda; private industry; and government service"
(Selvan 1990, 105). Although *Straits Times* editor Han Fook Kwang
protests that the "Singapore electorate … held no romantic illusions
about the so-called unfettered rights of a free press" (Han 1995),
a study has found that newspaper credibility has been weak, par-
ticularly among older, better-educated, Chinese Singaporeans (Kau
et al. 1998).

Singapore news often reads like policy announcements crafted
in the bureaucratic tones of a press release; authority figures as-
sociated with the PAP government are always portrayed with the
deepest reverence; and oppositional figures and points of view are
rarely given positive or even neutral coverage, if any coverage is
given in the first place. With the exception of a few younger jour-
nalists who seem subtly to be pushing boundaries (see for example
Ghani et al. 2006), the mainstream media operates clearly within
professional practices of self-censorship. Senior Minister Goh Chok
Tong has, however, said that the Singapore model of journalism
should lie between government mouthpiece and adversarial watch-
dog so as to help perpetuate the country's "virtuous cycle of pros-
perity" (quoted in Thio 1996). And more recently, Vivian Balakrish-
nan, the Second Minister for Information, Communications, and
the Arts, responding to a question posed at a Foreign Correspon-
dents Association event, remarked that

> If there is something wrong in Singapore, if there is a problem, it must
> be reported. If a minister is corrupt or incompetent, he must be ex-
> posed … I expect the press to whistleblow. (Quoted in C. K. Loh 2007)

Interestingly, *Today* journalist Loh Chee Kong (2007), responding
to the minister's surprising remarks, could not overcome his skep-
ticism about the prospect of any meaningful change in Singapore's
restrictive media policy.

The Press Freedom Index 2006, published by Reporters Without
Borders (2006), ranked Singapore 146th out of 168 countries; it

was outranked by, among others, Malaysia, placed 92nd, and even Zimbabwe, placed 140th. Ruthless in its efforts to clamp down on antagonistic journalism, the PAP government has, over the decades, shut down newspaper houses, blacklisted journalists, and restricted local news production to a duopoly consisting of Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and MediaCorp News, both of which are effectively under the influence of the government (Selvan 1990, 105-26; Y. S. Tan and Y. P. Soh 1994, 1-56; Birch 1993, 15-24). SPH, for instance, while technically a publicly listed company and therefore formally independent of the government, is controlled by the holders of special 'management' shares whose owners only the PAP government can determine (Thio 1996). Singaporeans, among the most highly wired people in the world, enjoy access to a wide range of foreign publications, global broadcasts through cable networks, and informal and alternative online news sources (including the 'blogging' activities of 'citizen journalists'). And yet, the government continues to prosecute foreign journalists who 'meddle in domestic affairs,' using the law to restrict the circulation of publications that dare to criticize without giving the government a right of reply. The government also tries to regulate with a 'light touch' the online activities of what media scholar Cherian George calls the "contentious journalism" of Internet-based alternative media, journalism that "[challenges] the consensus that powerful interests try to shape and sustain through the mainstream media" (George 2006, 3). Rejecting simple arguments that link the prospects of democracy with the nature of cyberspace, George refuses to go as far as to argue—as many more hopeful activists have—that

> the persistence of contentious media has persuaded [Singapore's] leaders to accept that the ideological landscape has become more diverse, and that they have no choice but to adapt to a new world where the state's dominance will never be total, even at the center. (George 2006, 224)

The government can always find creative ways of frightening, blocking, competing with, or co-opting resistance in cyberspace.

Educating the Youth

The school system has been an important socializing institution in a society where both parents in most households are wage-earners,

and where many of these households transfer the immediate responsibility of raising children to lowly-paid female domestic helpers from countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. The schools in general are highly disciplined spaces, as they tend to be in many parts of the world, where the virtue of conformity is impressed on students who are expected to wear standardized uniforms, maintain only approved hairstyles, and stand at attention in neat rows very early every morning to sing the national anthem and recite the national pledge fist-to-heart in front of the state flag. As part of co-curricular activities, students are mostly required to participate in at least one sporting activity or to join a student uniformed group; both kinds of activities are meant to instill self-control and discipline, and in the case of the latter to socialize young people into a hierarchical structure of giving and obeying orders according to rank. Not only is this calculated to be good preparation for compulsory military service once they leave school, but also, it is a means of preparing young people to become obedient workers and citizens in their adulthood.

Singapore's developmentalist orientation has produced an education system that is, in so many respects, biased toward the sciences and more technological subjects. The social sciences seem to be viewed favorably only when they—in their more functionalist and positivist manifestations—prove to have some kind of 'market value' or usefulness as a tool of social engineering or policy justification. The humanities subjects seem to be viewed favorably only when they provide cultural resources for nation building, or when they help to train workers for the culture industry needed to stimulate the economy, or when they provide peripheral 'enrichment' opportunities for the important technocrats trained by the system. For decades, the dominant pedagogical mode—tied to the function of training individuals for specific roles in the system—has been to drill students to perform well in examinations, a method that seems to have produced students with impressive abilities and grades. In every one of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Surveys (TIMSS), carried out in 1995, 1999, and 2003, for instance, Singaporean students have been ranked as the top performers in the world, with the highest average achievements in both mathematics and science (IEA 1995, 1999, 2005). Maintaining good examination results has also been important to individual schools

as this determines their position in the highly competitive annual national school ranking system.

Although many educators are themselves quite aware of the weaknesses of this overly utilitarian approach to education, institutional and bureaucratic constraints make it extremely difficult in practice to evolve to a more progressive learning environment less obsessed with industry-relevant training, tangible outcomes, and narrow success indicators. Many educators know that students need resources, freedom, guidance, and encouragement to be self-reflective about and actively responsible for their own learning, and that any progressive approach needs to take into account a range of less traditional talents and needs that tend to be demolished by an obsession with the immediate demands of the market, its employers, and various ranking exercises that bestow the much-coveted symbols of quality. Since the late 1970s, the government has tried to prevent students from 'dropping out' of school by channeling those who did not make the grade out of the mainstream system and into less academically rigorous 'streams' where, as an unintended consequence, they have been labeled as failures by a highly competitive, class-conscious, and too often narrow-minded society.

As Singapore began to face higher levels of economic competition from countries in the surrounding region, the government became more acutely concerned about the apparently widespread lack of entrepreneurship, risk-taking, innovation, and creativity among its citizens, qualities that were deemed to be important in the new knowledge-based economy through which Singapore hoped to regain its competitive edge. Ironically, the lack of these necessary qualities has been the result of living for several decades under a strong and paternalistic government that dominated the economy (through partnerships between the state, government-linked companies, and MNCs) and society (through punitive regulations, social campaigns, and various depoliticization measures) in the name of progress and development. This lack is also likely to bring about a new crisis in the Singaporean capitalist system that the government might not be able to control. Thus, this lack constitutes a real reason for the government to initiate a radical remaking of the education system, with special regard to autonomy and diversity. Giving more autonomy to the schools and universities, and providing for a more diverse range of educational opportunities, including privately administered ones, the government's vision has been

remarkably bold and progressive in the light of the need to move toward a higher-order economy (see for example Shanmugaratnam 2004). However, coming only after several decades of a conformist, technologically oriented, narrowly competitive, and unforgiving system run along restrictive bureaucratic lines, the rhetoric will probably take a long time to transform fully into practice.

Concerns about the education system relate more generally also to concerns that government leaders and ordinary Singaporeans regularly articulate in public about the younger generation. Youths who are foulmouthed members of violent gangs, who drop out of school, who attempt and commit suicide, or who are completely alienated from the competitive and unforgiving system of meritocracy, are not often raised in public discourse as their visible presence would vandalize the image of safe, respectful, resilient, happy, and 'Asian' Singaporeans carefully cultivated by the government. More commonly raised in public discourse are the youths who do not know the history of their own country, have not experienced hardship in their comfortable lives, and are not 'hungry' enough to search out new paths to success. This generation of non-delinquent but ignorant, pampered, and selfish youths has also been described as too apathetic, not taking an interest in larger issues, and not wanting to come forward and serve the community and nation. Levels of voluntarism are, for example, nowhere near those in the US or the UK, although the government has been working on increasing opportunities for community service through the school system, the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, as well as the Singapore International Foundation, which supports youth teams that go on community service projects overseas. Youths— singled out as ignorant, selfish, and apathetic—are presented in public discourse as a threat to Singapore's hard-earned success, which previous generations made great sacrifices to achieve.

In 1996, following the results of a national survey of students, government leaders lamented how ignorant Singaporean students appeared to be about matters relating to their country's history, even though they had undergone a compulsory two-year course on the history of Singapore at lower secondary school level. The younger generation of Singaporeans, so accustomed to peace, affluence, and success, were—they thought—neither sufficiently aware of nor interested in the story of Singapore's development and progress, the vulnerabilities and crises that the country has survived, the

fragility of its success, and the future scenarios that Singapore must identify and negotiate (H. L. Lee 1997, C. H. Teo 1997). This 'panic' prompted the introduction of National Education (NE), a school-based program built around six 'messages' that essentially promoted a proper regard for Singapore as the homeland with a valuable heritage and way of life, of which racial and religious harmony, meritocracy, and freedom from corruption were cornerstones. The messages also described the country's survival, success, and security as the responsibility of Singaporeans themselves, and this must involve a healthy self-confidence in the future built upon cohesion, determination, and preparedness.

Recognizing the school community as the primary setting for cultivating emotional bonding to the nation, the NE program aimed to infuse these messages into the very substance of the curriculum, giving schools the autonomy within general guidelines to draw up specific programs that would incorporate National Education in formal lessons as well as informal activities such as school assembly programs, excursions, and co-curricular activities. All teachers would be involved in this endeavor and expected to incorporate NE messages into history, language, and civics and moral education (CME) lessons, as well as all other subjects where practicable. The messages must appeal to students' reason as well as emotions, and must be realistically tailored according to the needs and abilities of students and Singapore's expectations of them. In short, the overall purpose of National Education has been

> to develop national instincts for survival and confidence in the future, by stirring a sense of pride and self-respect as Singaporeans; through an understanding of how Singapore succeeded against the odds in the past; with an appreciation of the challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities that Singapore faces; and by fostering a consensus on what we must uphold to ensure Singapore's continuing success and well-being. (Ministry of Education n.d.)

Clearly, historical awareness would play a crucial role in National Education, and indeed most of the NE programs since have been predominantly focused on presenting an official history of Singapore through a variety of media. Since NE programs can be successful only with the cooperation of parents, the media, the local community, and society at large, most of these programs have also targeted Singaporeans as a whole. The month-long National Edu-

cation Exhibition in July and August 1998 titled "The Singapore Story: Overcoming the Odds" is one example.

While most Singaporeans would not generally dispute the broad outline of The Singapore Story or question the nation-building objectives of NE, many are quietly skeptical about the 'propagandistic' nature of the project. School teacher and historian Loh Kah Seng (1998, 6) wrote a journal article that described The Singapore Story as a "tactical selection of facts: those that can be taken to support the party line are highlighted while others are either marginalised or silenced." The PAP, he argued, was "jealous of their monopolistic version of history and hostile to the idea of an alternative one" (K. S. Loh 1998, 17). The more harshly critical among Singaporeans might believe that the government, motivated by the pursuit of power, prestige, and wealth, skillfully fabricates a baseless sensation of vulnerability and prosperity. By focusing on a few instances of ethnic riots and presenting them in a manner completely out of proportion to present circumstances, The Singapore Story manufactures fear and uncertainty for the present, a siege mentality that mobilizes support for the government. The Singapore Story also exaggerates the historical progress from crisis to success by an acutely selective rewriting of history as a glorified record of PAP accomplishments. Statistical proof of the PAP's record of prosperity, more critical Singaporeans would argue, can never be precise, comprehensive, and objective, and is therefore easily subjected to manipulation and, through manipulation, this record becomes an instrument of propaganda, giving the PAP full credit for Singapore's widely-documented success. An official history of vulnerability, survival, and success is used to explain and justify the heroic and farsighted PAP government's 'natural' right to rule as a matter of expediency on the one hand, and of well-earned gratitude on the other. Both translate into a mandate to rule relatively free from the public's scrutiny, allowing the government to effectively monopolize collective decision-making to the exclusion of alternative or oppositional views. Here is an example of what Marcuse called the "closing of the universe of discourse." National Education suppresses the "subversive contents of memory" and serves instead as anti-history, an example of

> ritualized invocations which do not allow development of the content recalled; frequently, the mere invocation serves to block such develop-

ment, which would show its historical impropriety. (Marcuse 1964/2002, 101)

In fact, lamenting the inadequacies of this generation's youths is itself an act of historical amnesia. The adult generation forgets how it was once the object of worry and disappointment for an earlier generation. Every generation in the modern world discusses its youths as an object of knowledge that helps it make sense of its world and its prospects. More specifically, the category of 'youth' functions as a convenient explanation that adults automatically give for most of the things that go wrong in their lifetimes and the things that they believe will go wrong in the future. By focusing on youths as the problem, the state diverts attention away from the real crises inherent in global capitalism, thereby preserving the status quo and providing an even stronger basis for political authority (K. P. Tan 2007b). And so, when government and community leaders in Singapore lament that today's youths are indifferent and lack idealism and drive, when they urge these youths to come forward with new ideas and helping hands in the spirit of voluntarism and civic consciousness, they are really not encouraging these youths to challenge the status quo, much less organize the kind of student demonstrations that were common in Singapore from the 1950s to the 1970s, or that remain common in other Asian countries such as South Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Student demonstrations, or political activism more generally, are not allowed in public discourse to be regarded as a desirable expression of youthful idealism and efficacy driven by a sense of justice (the very reverse of the youthful apathy so criticized by Singaporeans). Instead, politically challenging activism of this kind is treated as a threat to Singapore's stability and economic well-being. In startlingly hypocritical moments, it has even been discredited as not being in line with the Asian values of consensus, respect for authority, and filial piety.

Building a National Culture

The political and intellectual élite in Singapore—including the nationalist bourgeoisie that founded the PAP—have been mostly ambivalent about the place of 'Asian' culture and values in a modern society oriented toward technology and commerce. Even the anglophile 'King's Chinese' toward the end of the nineteenth cen-

tury, having received scholarships to study at prestigious universities in the metropolitan center of the British Empire, struggled upon their return to transform their 'backward' society into a rational, progressive, and industrious people. These political and intellectual élites continued to act according to the hegemonic colonial ideology of race and progress, but also sought to reject the hypocrisy and degenerate practices of their colonial masters by inventing and promoting a moralistic Asian high culture out of selectively imagined fragments from the cultural past and, in the process, identified and rejected elements considered to be regressive (for instance, see *Straits Chinese Magazine* 1897).

Similarly, the PAP regarded 'Asian values' as a key resource in Singapore's postcolonial efforts to build up a national culture for a newly independent nation-state; but with the onset of rapid industrialization in the 1970s, Singaporeans were asked to be rugged individuals—diligent, thrifty, and able to take care of themselves and their families without direct welfare aid from the government. The 'rugged individual' on which these ideals were based was in fact an American notion appropriated for Singapore's purposes, as were the so-called Western values of administrative rationality, science, technology, commerce, and progress, believed to be conducive to the capitalist aspirations of a modernizing and industrializing Third World nation.

For very similar reasons, the English language was adopted as Singapore's 'first language' alongside Malay as its symbolic 'national language' (in order to appease the Malay-speaking countries in the surrounding region and the Malay minority in Singapore). Mandarin and Tamil were the two other official languages. Mastering the English language—the language of the colonizer—was justified as a pragmatic move essential for Singapore's progress since it effectively was, and continues to be, the international language of science, commerce, academia, diplomacy, and so on. For Singapore to be fully plugged into the global network, the government has emphasized the importance of English as a first language—strongly backing the annual Speak Good English campaigns that aim to discourage the use of Singlish, spoken informally in Singapore. This local version of English has incorporated words from Malay and various Chinese dialects, and it mimics these languages in terms of pronunciation, intonation, and sentence structure. Many better-educated Singaporeans who are able to code-switch

between Singlish and standard English tend to value Singlish as one of the few authentic markers of Singaporean identity and culture (Woo and Goh 2007). Then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, on the other hand, argued in his National Day Rally speech in 1999 that Singaporeans needed to discard Singlish so that they can master standard English, and be properly understood by the British, Americans, Australians, and the rest of the English-speaking world, particularly if Singapore wants to become an "education hub" (C. T. Goh 1999).

To a degree, the modernization drive in earlier decades following independence could be thought of as a kind of Westernization, embraced without too much ideological discomfort by a self-defined pragmatic government with no patience for the socialist and nationalist dogmas of the time that, it thought, were stifling the growth of many newly independent countries. Singapore's, according to the PAP ideologues at the time, was a "socialism that works … the Singapore way" (Nair 1976), by which they really meant a pragmatic approach to nation building that would avoid the 'regressive' retrieval of a 'golden age' culture of the past as well as the 'progressive' development of utopian fantasies based on socialist and communist ideologies (Chan and Evers 1978). Insofar as the pragmatic approach was conducive to the needs of an industrialized capitalist economy, it was, and still remains of course, just as ideological as the regressive and progressive options that had been dismissed by the government (Chua 1995). The 'lazy native' that figured strongly in the colonial imagination needed to be reimagined into a modern capitalist worker—time-conscious, wage-seeking, disciplined, resilient, and driven by the call to productivity. For several years, Singapore has been rated as having the 'best workforce in the world' by US-based Business Environment Risk Intelligence (BERI), whose Labor Force Evaluation Measure covers "relative productivity," "worker attitude," "technical skills," and "legal framework" (SPRING Singapore 2002).

The Singapore economy has been dominated by foreign MNCs and domestic government-linked companies, as productive workers are kept in place by labor laws, a government-controlled trade union federation, and the (increasingly illusory) promise of upward mobility through which an ever-expanding universe of consumption opportunities will be made available to them. As Singapore's economy proceeded up the technological ladder during the 1980s, when

it experienced 'miraculously' high average growth rates, the capital-intensive and export-oriented country became one of the four Asian Tigers, serving as an exemplary development model for less-developed countries (Margolin 1993, 93-95). Even today, as growth rates have become more muted, Singapore's Economic Development Board continues to proclaim that "Singapore consistently scores high marks in global and regional rankings of the factors that matter to businesses," offering an impressive sample of international ranking achievements on its website (Singapore Economic Development Board 2004-2006).

But even as early as the late 1970s, the PAP government began to worry about how a national emphasis on economics, statistics, and materialistic values could lead to a disenchanted citizenry consisting of *homo œconomicus*, motivated entirely by personal economic benefit. Singaporeans would understand that their loyalty and support—whether to country or government—were commodities to be exchanged for personal material gain, and so the government's authority was really based on a 'transactional' model of leadership (Burns 1978), aside of course from the more coercive forces that it would exercise at the last resort. Without the more 'transformational' elements of leadership—including the spiritual and charismatic ability to inspire and motivate the people—the government understood its basis of authority to be quite fragile: Economic downturns, such as the recession of 1985 that was largely beyond the immediate control of the government, could quickly erode much of this authority. To re-enchant the citizenry, as well as to mollify the Chinese-educated élite who were alarmed by what they understood to be indiscriminate moves toward Westernization and the consequent diminution of their prospects in society, the government had to focus not just on delivering the material benefits, but also on developing the less tangible matters of identity, belonging, and values. The main resource for this would be 'Asian' culture and values.

The project of building a national identity has been complicated by Singapore's multiethnic circumstances. Singapore is 704 square kilometers of land occupied by a total population of 4.48 million, of which 3.60 million are Singapore residents. Of these, 75.2 per cent are Chinese, 13.6 per cent are Malays, 8.8 per cent are Indians, and 2.4 per cent are made up of Eurasians and other minorities (Department of Statistics 2007). Although the Chinese

have made up an overwhelming majority, the Malays have been more than just a numerically significant minority. After all, Singapore lies in the middle of a Malay-Muslim region dominated by Malaysia and Indonesia, neighboring countries that have not always been friendly toward Singapore. The smaller minority groups in Singapore, particularly the Indians and Eurasians, do not usually figure very much in public discourse, except to demonstrate an idealized "four races" model of society, celebrated as CMIO or "Chinese-Malays-Indians-Others" (Sharon Siddique 1989). CMIO assumes that ethnic (or 'racial') identities are primordial, authentic, and prior to other identities, and so cannot be eliminated through national integration or assimilation: Repression of ethnicity would eventually lead to its violent return. Instead, nation building could engage the ethnic dimension in order to add historical, cultural, and moral depth to a synthetic overarching national identity.

Since the 1970s, but less frequently in recent years, a community-oriented concert would typically showcase a succession of stylized performances from each of the four ethnic communities that would all culminate in a combined song-and-dance finale involving the characteristic styles and participation of each ethnic group, all fused together harmoniously. The annual National Day Parade has been the most spectacular example of this format (Kong and Yeoh 1997). These kinds of attempts to denote 'multiracialism' as unity and harmony in diversity, though unavoidably crude, have become the dominant mental template for thinking about ethnicity in Singapore. As a model of Singapore's multiethnic society, CMIO is simplistic and rigid. The very real differences between Chinese Singaporeans who are 'Chinese-educated' and those who are 'English-educated' are a case in point. The differences among Indians who are Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian are another. However, CMIO has been so entrenched in ethnicity-related legislation, policies, institutions, national discourse, and national celebrations that thinking about each of the four ethnic groups as monoliths to which religion, class, and other significant sources of identity have been conflated has become common sense, powerfully shaping questions of identity and difference, community, values, and nationhood. Transforming ethnic identity—hybrid, nomadic, ephemeral, and dependent on context and situation—into neat categories makes it more easily containable, politically, through administrative and co-

ercive mechanisms and procedures available to Singapore's strong
and pervasive state.

At the national level, the collective memory of interethnic riots
during the colonial period and the early decades of independence
serves, in turn, to resuscitate fears that, without strong and wide-
spread political authority to maintain order and peace, the fragile
multiethnic nation-state will quickly give way to ethnic violence.
Such Hobbesian justifications for a secular authoritarian govern-
ment, of the kind to which Singaporeans have become quite ac-
customed, are not incompatible with earlier colonial strategies of
'divide and rule' through the enforcement of an ethnically plural
society segregated into clearly demarcated residential zones and
interacting only in commercial spaces (Furnivall 1948). As a prac-
tice that aims to contain the permanent vulnerability believed to
characterize Singapore's multiethnic society, CMIO multiracialism
has turned into a restrictive, divisive, unimaginative, and sterile way
of life, driven by underlying fear, suspicion, and the urge to ste-
reotype, but celebrated on the surface through platitudes and su-
perficial expressions of harmony and mutual tolerance (K. P. Tan
2004).

CMIO multiracialism exaggerates commonalities within the four
ethnically defined groups and the differences between these groups,
mostly in the form of stereotypes that not only circulate in the
private sphere and the workplace, but also seep into public discourse,
structuring the way that even the government formulates, imple-
ments, and justifies its national policies. For example, an implicit
'cultural deficit thesis' has been the underlying principle that informs
the stereotype of lazy, underachieving Malays who are prone to
drug abuse, unable to manage their personal finances, and unable
to control sexual urges (and who thus have to deal with problems
of premarital sex, as well as large and broken families). These ste-
reotypes form the popular 'theoretical' basis for a new form of
colonialism where Chinese-driven modernity and progress—benefi-
cial for Singapore's advancement—are threatened by the 'lazy na-
tive.' To become a "community of excellence" (Ibrahim 2004),
Malays are socialized to accept their shortcomings as true facts, to
believe that their failures are due entirely to these shortcomings
(and therefore that they alone are responsible and to blame for
failure), and to acknowledge that they need help in order to over-
come these deficiencies and become more like the Chinese. Politi-

cal scientist and historian Lily Zubaidah Rahim has controversial-
ly argued that Malay 'marginality,' an affront to Singapore's claims
about meritocracy, has been sustained by the socioeconomic condi-
tions created and explained by the cultural deficit thesis, which
deflects attention away from the need for fundamental structural
reforms (Rahim 1998).

The perpetuation of a widespread belief that interethnic conflict
remains a permanent threat is a barrier that prevents Singapore
from becoming a 'real' nation. Politically, though, this belief has
been useful to the government as it convinces Singaporeans that
they should not be complacent about nation building, that they
need to give up some of the democratic freedoms that citizens of
other advanced countries enjoy, and that the PAP needs to con-
tinue in government and to wield enough power to police inter-
ethnic violence, protect and assist the minority groups, and advance
the work of nation building. Demands for political liberalization
are typically answered by the claim that multiethnic and multire-
ligious Singapore is 'not yet ready.' Ironically, fear and suspicion
of one another are what really bring Singaporeans together as a
nation helmed by the PAP government.

A multiracial national identity, while viewed as a source of vul-
nerability on the one hand, can on the other hand also be seen as
a cultural resource for re-enchanting a lifeless citizenry that has
been socialized too rigidly into an industrial workforce motivated
only by personal material gain. Out of the 'primordial' fragments
of the Chinese, Malay, and Indian 'civilizations' forged together in
the CMIO formulation, the outlines of a contemporary Asian high
culture could be drawn to reconstruct a substantive set of nation-
al values that would be compatible with the needs of capitalism.
The Asian values debates, for instance, drew a defining boundary
between this high culture and its Western Other, depicted as a cor-
rupting influence that threatened the Asian values of hard work,
thrift, deference to authority, moral conservatism, and the family.
The West was once again useful, not as a model of progress, but
this time as an anti-model of degeneracy for a postcolonial nation
whose confidence was boosted tremendously by the economic mir-
acle that it was said to have performed in the 1980s.

Recognizing the difficulty of installing moral and cultural 'bal-
lasts' to keep a synthetic national identity afloat, the government
opted to tap on 'primordial' sources such as religious traditions in

order to transform the Singaporean industrial worker into a moral subject and loyal citizen. In the early 1980s, the government introduced 'religious knowledge' into Singapore's secondary school curriculum as a compulsory and examinable set of subjects. Of the six 'religions' that students could choose to study—Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, or Confucianism—the last was unofficially regarded as the most important, partly because of the tendency in the 1980s to explain the East Asian economic 'miracle' as having something to do with Confucian values, and partly because Confucianism appears to be conducive to authoritarian politics. Several world-renowned experts on Confucianism (some of whom, ironically, worked in American academic institutions) were invited by the government to help conceptualize a Confucianization program in Singapore; and the Institute of East Asian Philosophies was set up in 1983 for the study of Confucianism.

However, by the second half of the 1980s, the government had revealed data that showed an 'alarming' rise in levels of religiosity, particularly among evangelical Christians (*Maintenance of Religious Harmony* 1989). One would naturally expect modern citizens alienated by their industrialized living circumstances to turn to spiritual sources such as religion for some 'higher' meaning. To the government, this development was seen as a threat to the delicately secularized multiethnic and multireligious social order, and a possible threat to the moral authority that it had striven to wield without competition from other leaders, including religious ones. In 1987, the government arrested 22 social workers and activists who were accused of being 'Marxist conspirators' plotting to turn Singapore into a communist state. Several of them belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and were alleged to have been influenced by the radical teaching of liberation theology in their efforts to look after the welfare of migrant workers in Singapore. The arrests heightened public sensitivity to religion and reaffirmed the government's commitment to a secularism more clearly defined as the separation of religion and politics.

Religious knowledge classes were no longer compulsory and the subject soon withered away from the curriculum. In its place emerged a national ideology, akin to Indonesia's *Pancasila* (Five Principles) and Malaysia's *Rukunegara* (National Principles). In 1991, Singapore's Shared Values were instituted in Parliament and their five precepts were:

- Nation before community and society before self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

Although they would seem to be ethnically and religiously neutral, the Shared Values were thought to be a way of sneaking in the politically integrating aspects of Confucianism under the cover of a 'civil religion' that appeared to be acceptable to all in the secular, multiethnic, and multireligious society. Although the Shared Values—arid and bureaucratically encoded—enjoy limited popularity in the everyday lives of Singaporeans, they nevertheless help to describe Singaporean society as communitarian and its practice of democracy as a communitarian or Asian alternative to Western liberal democracy. Critics have, however, described this as simply an ill-fitting disguise for an authoritarian government and society.

A constant theme that runs through all these social and political experiments with national values has been the importance of the family as a normative unit of society. The family has been viewed as a central value of Asian cultures and religions, regardless of the historical accuracy of such a view. The popularity of Christianity, too, has helped to enshrine the family as a central national value. The discourse on the patriarchal, monogamous, and heterosexual family imposes a restriction on the erotic possibilities of Singaporeans, legitimizing heterosexual unions, their genital supremacy, and reproductive function; while delegitimizing (condemning and repressing) other more polymorphous erotic expressions such as homosexuality, 'free love,' extramarital sex, premarital sex, intrafamilial sex, masturbation, and so on. The intense aversion to these social taboos as threats to civilization itself has prepared the ground for moral entrepreneurs to stir up moral panics around moralized issues that they raise, eliciting strongly worded responses from the people and simulating a 'moral majority' that is conservative and politically influential (K. P. Tan with Lee 2007). Moral panics are a feature of Singapore's public life; and while they do, sometimes, present moments of resistance to the one-dimensional (or 'immoral') advances of capitalism (for example, the debates surrounding proposals to build casinos in Singapore), they also more often cre-

ate moralized spectacles in the form of folk devils (gays, pedophiles, apathetic youths, and so on), which distract Singaporeans from the real contradictions and crises of capitalism and, in so doing, are complicit with the one-dimensional system.

Critical Thinking in Singapore

Marcuse's one-dimensional society thesis helps to make sense of many aspects of authoritarian politics and society in contemporary Singapore, explaining most of these phenomena in terms of their relation to a capitalist system that is able to overcome its crisis tendencies through new forms of social control, particularly through the totally administered society.

Ironically, one outcome of the totally administered society has been a significant lack of entrepreneurial qualities as well as the kind of creativity and 'critical thinking' necessary for developing new comparative advantages in the creative and knowledge-based economy calculated to help Singapore regain its competitive edge against rising economic forces such as China and India, even Malaysia and Thailand. However, this kind of 'critical thinking' that is being promoted by the government, mainly through the education system, is not quite the same as the 'critical thinking' that a critical theorist such as Marcuse might have advanced. The government's idea of critical thinking probably goes beyond mere 'problem-solving' capabilities and extends to finding newer creative solutions and even questioning the terms of reference and assumptions behind each problem as long as this does not destabilize the system. However, the government's idea of critical thinking almost certainly does not involve a questioning of the more fundamental and entrenched rules of the capitalist system or the bases of the PAP government's extensive powers.

Marcuse's critical thinking, formalized in critical theory, demanded a negative practical philosophy based on a dialectical relationship between abstract thought and concrete realities, between the 'ought' and the 'is,' the potential and the actual. Negative thinking transcends the existing circumstances, and identifies a more rational order as a possibility of liberation from existing conditions of mindlessness, toil, and brutality. As a result, critical theory's transformative and emancipatory potential is distinguished from the conserva-

tive and stabilizing tendencies of positivist social sciences. Marcuse upheld the torch of critical thinking and the Great Refusal of conformity, domination, and oppression; his account of one-dimensional America was a warning about the formidable forces of unrestrained advanced capitalism that threatened to extinguish the human capacity to imagine and hope for something better. In that system, the 'performance principle'—the eternal quest for productivity—prevailed, as repressed worker-citizens became increasingly alienated from their basic human potentialities, true needs, freedom, happiness, and creativity; their erotic impulses—the most explosively subversive—frustrated and repressed. As Marcuse argued,

> labor time, which is the largest part of the individual's life time, is painful time, for alienated labor is absence of gratification, negation of the pleasure principle. Libido is diverted for socially useful performances in which the individual works for himself only in so far as he works for the apparatus, engaged in activities that mostly do not coincide with his own faculties and desires. (Marcuse 1955/1966, 45)

In an interview for a Discovery Channel documentary on Singapore's history, Lee Kuan Yew remarked that

> at the end of the day, we are all so many digits in the machine. The point is, are these digits stronger digits than the competitors' digits? (Quoted in *History of Singapore* 2006).

Today's Singapore—with its technological advancements, warfare and welfare state, middle-class affluence, culture of conformity, culture industry, and excessively repressive and competitive drives toward productivity and being 'number one'—bears an analytically significant resemblance to America in the 1950s.

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY IN RENAISSANCE-CITY SINGAPORE

The products of Singapore's culture industry—whether they are television sitcoms and dramas, 'reality TV' shows such as the *Singapore Idol* competition, or commercially successful films by Jack Neo—are all intimately linked to the larger capitalist economy through which they are circulated for profit and for which they provide ideological support through the messages conveyed. Even the art-house variety of films by Eric Khoo and Royston Tan are ultimately susceptible to being drawn into the logic of advanced capitalist-industrial society. In one-dimensional society, any thought, action, or cultural product that purports to critique the system is either exiled as dangerous or transformed and rechanneled into forms that ultimately support the system, even if they remain ostensibly critical of it. In one-dimensional Singapore, instances of real critical thinking can be quickly neutered, absorbed into the system, and transformed profitably into docile commodities that serve that system. This account of Singapore's culture industry corresponds to this book's first Marcusean analytical limit, based on the principle of complete encapsulation.

This chapter discusses the political economy of cultural and artistic production in Singapore, its evolving place within the larger economy of a 'global city,' and the policy developments that have had an impact on it. While the Marcusean analytical limit will serve to highlight just how susceptible art and popular culture are to being subsumed by the logic of capitalism, the Gramscian cultural studies approach will allow for a more dynamic exploration of ideological negotiations within art and popular culture, where texts are encoded and decoded in a continuous struggle to articulate, disarticulate, and rearticulate ideological, economic, and political aspects and fragments that conjunctively form historically significant moments and shifts.

Culture and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Development

Culture and the arts have been important in post-independence Singapore for their role in socializing Singaporeans for the PAP government's nation-building project. Racial harmony, for instance, continues to be simulated through spectacular 'ethnic' dance routines performed at public events to showcase the four racial groups, choreographed to perform separately and then together in a harmonious finale. In the earlier decades of post-independence development, government policy focused on strengthening Singapore's economic base, which in turn needed to be fully supported by a limited cultural and artistic superstructure that Singapore's national budget could 'afford.' According to professor of English literature Koh Tai Ann, "the arts have never been seen as a basic 'need'." Only after the basic material needs—the "primary concerns" of "Singapore's mostly immigrant community" (Koh 1989, 736)—had been met through economic growth and development, could the arts really take off and become an integral part of more widely bourgeois lifestyles. In these early decades of independence, artistically talented Singaporeans—such as internationally renowned pianists Seow Yit-Kin and Melvyn Tan—had to leave the country for better career prospects overseas. Singapore artist Ho Ho Ying, writing in the 1960s about the Singapore arts scene then, observed that

> the sand and stones in this cultural desert simply do not respond to [the artists'] screaming … No wonder many artists who have studied art overseas choose not to return and work here. Despite this appalling condition there are still many artists here who refuse to retreat, hoping that one day the situation will improve. (H. Y. Ho 1964/2005, 64)

Today, the arts often continue to be viewed as higher-order needs—sometimes as superficial luxuries—that Singapore would be able properly to afford only at the end of its developmentalist lap. Similarly, government restrictions on the arts—largely in the form of censorship and the withholding of specific licenses and grants—continue even today to be explained in terms of national priorities and the typical claim that Singaporeans are mostly conservative and therefore not ready for more progressive (especially if politically critical) works of art.

   In the 1960s and 1970s, cultural questions were also emerging in the public discourse as a reaction to the perceived problems of a disenchanted citizenry made up of *homo œconomicus* motivated only

by material gain. Ho, for instance, complained about the way the public measured the "worth of everything according to its monetary value" (H. Y. Ho 1964/2005, 64). In the 1970s, he condemned the way artists were being "led by the masses" instead of taking the lead. "If money is your ultimate aim," he declared, "it would be more fitting to go into business" (H. Y. Ho 1970s/2005, 43). Similarly, Singaporean painter Liu Kang observed how Singapore society in the 1960s,

> perhaps because it is so business-oriented, and also with such a very short history, [is] culturally unsophisticated. We have many artists, but we have very few writers who are able to express their views thoughtfully and critically. (Liu 1969/2005, 21)

Liu asserted that the artist and critic should be like the intellectual who criticizes society and opposes the status quo.

The PAP government itself eventually realized that a richer culture and the artistic expressions of this culture would be a means of animating a mechanical and 'demoralized' nation-state obsessed with economics and basic survival, and overdependent on the government to provide them. The PAP's loss of its parliamentary monopoly in 1981 and a severe economic recession in 1985 motivated the government to introduce very cautiously a more liberal climate of openness and popular consultation in the form of several new institutions and mechanisms through which Singaporeans could 'perform' their citizenship and develop an emotional bond to the nation and even to their government. One of these mechanisms was a National Agenda that aimed to tap on the ideas of talented Singaporeans at the forefront of their fields. Also important at the time was the evolving notion that the arts would play an important part in Singapore's move toward becoming a service economy. In line with the goal of nurturing the local arts scene, efforts were made to develop the island's museums, galleries, and festivals. In 1988, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) were established. In 1991 and 1993, as recommended by ACCA, the National Arts Council (NAC) and the National Heritage Board (NHB) were set up respectively, both under the auspices of MITA. At this stage, the government's rhetoric became decidedly more visionary and grandiose, as illustrated in this typical speech by Singapore's first Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo:

> For the next lap of Singapore's development, we have to give more attention to the arts … As we become more advanced, the arts become more important. We know from empirical and historical observation that the higher a civilization, the greater is its artistic achievement. There is something about the arts which refreshes the human spirit and unlocks its potential. (Yeo 1991a)

In 1996, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong complained that "some Singaporeans still behave as if they were in the Stone Age" and he expressed his desire to "make Singapore more three-dimensional, a more rounded society" (quoted in Tesoro and Oorjitham 1996). *Asiaweek* journalists Jose Manuel Tesoro and Santha Oorjitham interpret Goh's statement as a desire to cultivate the arts and social graces.

But cultural geographers Chang Tou Chuang and Lee Wai Kin observe how Singapore's arts policies have been infrastructure-heavy, focusing on providing physical spaces to house arts groups and events, in order to find "economic justifications for the preservation of historic buildings," to enhance tourism, and to spin off other economic opportunities (Chang and Lee 2003, 134). More attention, they argue, needs to be paid to developing "a social environment conducive to the flourishing of the arts and a creative milieu that liberates artistic talents," an intangible environment that includes "societal acceptance of artists, political ideology condoning creative freedom and sensitive provision of spaces to meet the needs of artistic expressions" (Chang and Lee 2003, 128-29). Sociologist Kwok Kian-Woon describes the arts in Singapore as a carefully cultivated "bonsai garden" whose plants are constantly pruned to limit their natural growth. Kwok, arguing that the arts should become more like a diverse and self-sustainable "rainforest," asks:

> Can creative industries thrive without the flourishing of a whole range of arts from the traditional to the experimental? Can Singapore be a cultural 'hub' or a 'showcase' without developing as a cultural 'crucible' and a 'test bed'? In the longer term, harnessing 'the multidimensional creativity of our people' and developing 'a vibrant and sustainable creative cluster' require, in addition to arts infrastructure, our people finding and making use of many opportunities to make and appreciate what [much-revered theatre practitioner] Kuo [Pao Kun] called 'Primary and Original' contributions in the arts. (Kwok 2004, 12)

In his "A Censorship Manifesto," poet and playwright Alfian Bin Sa'at observes that Singapore's "garden city was created not so

much by planting seeds but by weeding," noting that the then-executive director of the NAC "was once a high-ranking civil servant in the National Parks Board" (Alfian Bin Sa'at 2001, 221).

Since the late 1980s, the state's monomaniacal emphasis on physical infrastructure, censorship, and control nevertheless provided theater companies with the material and cultural resources to critique a clear object: an authoritarian state in tune with the culturally numbing imperatives of capitalism. The authoritarian-capitalist state as an object of critique unleashed the critical energies of artists who were then able to push the boundaries through controversial and challenging art work; but it has also, ironically, become an obsession from which many artists have found it difficult to free themselves for deeper practices of critical thinking. Tan Chong Kee, the chairman of theater company The Necessary Stage, describes how his company has over the decades evolved an aesthetic of "empowerment," of "bourgeois vandalism," and then of "humanistic reconciliation," producing works that struggled to position themselves in relation to the state and the market (C. K. Tan 2004).

In the 1990s, a new wave of filmmaking emerged with commercially viable prospects. The government became increasingly sensitive to the commercial importance of the arts as a viable product in the newly conceived knowledge and creative economies that provided in turn a promising new basis for competitiveness. Industrializing the arts could have positive economic spin-offs for the retail, tourism, and entertainment sectors. A stimulating arts scene could be conducive to creative and innovative work more generally and, if it managed to transform Singapore from an unattractive cultural desert into a vibrant global city, could also draw the world-class talent desperately required for an economy that was fast losing its luster. Sociologist Terence Chong argues that, after the economic recession of 1985, the local arts scene became more "driven by an economic rationale," and arts and cultural policies were transformed from a parochial concern into a decidedly global preoccupation in line with the global city rhetoric (T. Chong 2005). And so, even during the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the government's rhetoric continued—often against popular sentiment—to 'look ahead' toward a higher stage of economic development where knowledge, creativity, and cosmopolitan openness could allow

Singapore's economy to transcend Old Economy competition from the region.

Of course, this too straightforwardly linear account of progress in Singapore's culture and the arts hides a much more complex, organic, and conflicted historical development. Filmmaker and scholar Sophia Siddique, for instance, criticizes standard historical accounts of Singapore's film industry, offered for example by Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, in which the industry begins with the 'golden age' of mostly Malay-language filmmaking by the Shaw and Cathay-Keris studios in the 1940s to 1960s, moves into the 'dark ages' when nothing of significance was produced in a newly independent nation obsessed with economic achievement, and then enters a government-induced rebirth in the 1990s (Uhde and Uhde 2000). Siddique argues that such a history ignores, among other things, the rich grassroots 'filmmaking' activities of the 1980s that were facilitated by developments in video technology (Sophia Siddique 2001). More generally, arts policy researcher Ruth Bereson disputes the notion that there has been a renaissance of artistic innovation in 1990s Singapore, identifying a similar state rhetoric articulated regularly since Singapore's independence by government ministries not traditionally associated with the arts. This rhetoric has arisen from an underlying interest in social (nation-building) and economic policies, which often have very little to do with art itself (Bereson 2003).

In 1995, the government published a prospectus outlining its vision of Singapore as a Global City for the Arts.

> Singapore aims to nurture the cultural renaissance that is being sparked off by the Asia Pacific's economic growth. Indepth intercultural understanding of the East and the West will allow Singapore to act as a cultural and artistic bridge to the world. The city is in the ideal position to harness the region's creative energies and channel them to the rest of the world. It will open the world's window of opportunity to the Asia Pacific and the Asia Pacific's window to the world.
>
> Singapore's global outlook has set the stage for it to become a Global City for the Arts. A cosmopolitan city plugged into the international network where the world's talents and ideas can converge and multiply. An artistic hub for the region, where the arts are valued for their intrinsic and economic worth. (MITA and STPB 1995)

Already discernible here were the terms that would feature prominently in the 'arts' discourse in Singapore: renaissance, creative,

global city, cosmopolitan, and economic worth. A rearticulation of these terms can be found in MITA's *Renaissance City Report*, first published in 2000.

> Renaissance Singapore will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics. Our industries are supported with a creative culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. The Renaissance Singaporean has an adventurous spirit, an inquiring and creative mind and a strong passion for life. Culture and the arts animate our city and our society consists of active citizens who build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through expressing their Singapore stories in culture and the arts. (MITA 2000)

These latest manifestations of Singapore's arts policy continue fundamentally to express a nation-building function that the arts can perform, punctuated with terms such as Asian heritage, Singapore Heartbeat, Singapore stories, and active citizens. Secondly, they unabashedly express an overriding economic rationale. Almost a decade earlier, then-Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo had already stated that the "relationship between the arts and economics is inescapable in the long term for any society." While he acknowledged how the arts could help Singapore become a major hub city that attracted talent and produced better goods and services for the world market, Yeo also accepted that Singapore with its finite resources had to specialize in developing the commercially viable sectors of the arts, noting that "public funding of the arts should always incorporate a market test" so that "success is rewarded with more resources which in turn makes further success possible" (Yeo 1991b). In his welcome address at the Second World Summit on the Arts and Culture, Lee Suan Hiang, the chief executive (CEO) of the NAC, described how the council,

> having spent many of [its] nascent years developing arts talents, [is now] developing new strategies to deploy out cultural capital to create new value for our economy and society. (S. H. Lee 2003)

In a second welcome speech at the same event, Lee Boon Yang, the Minister for Information, Communications, and the Arts, declared that

> [i]n order to grow the creative industry cluster, we need a growing community of creative people who are fully connected to the world of arts and who can use their artistry and innovations as important competitive tools to tap new business opportunities. (B. Y. Lee 2003)

Cultural geographer Lily Kong points out that in Singapore, the "major motivation behind cultural policy is economic; indeed, often, the economic works through the sociocultural" (Kong 2000, 410). Similarly, media scholars Petrina Leo and Terence Lee observe how

> [a]midst this broad effort to fundamentally review Singapore's strategies for survival as a nation was an attempt to 'pragmatize' and foreground the industrial-cum-economic aspects of culture … by extracting useful skills and value out of otherwise unproductive individuals or groups. (Leo and Lee 2004).

At least two somewhat contradictory implications arise from these readings of the *Global City for the Arts* document and the *Renaissance City Report*, a fundamental tension that will inform the analysis of films and television programs in subsequent chapters of this book. Firstly, as culture and the arts are recognized by the government to be a more integral and 'valuable' part of the economy, there should be more room to maneuver for artists with a liberal or critical agenda, more room for advancing the arts as a liberating and critical space. Terence Chong, for instance, observes how the government's desire for Singapore to become a Global City for the Arts "demands some compliance or 'reconciliation' with international norms and standards," which could account for the less frequent use of direct modes of censorship in favor of instruments such as funding withdrawals and pressure on artists to practice self-censorship (Chong 2004, 242). Chua Beng-Huat, also a sociologist, describes how

> [m]any of the bureaucrats who are placed in charge of these institutions, and who have long operated under the illiberal regime, are still learning to negotiate their way through the new interest of the state in the arts and the disruption of the conventional by artistic work that the new interest necessarily unleashes. At the same time, practitioners in theatre and other arts have to deal with the new conditions of relative freedom, enabled by the state's interest in appropriating their financial value. They have to decide when to compromise and when to stand firm, as well as when and how to expose the repressiveness of the state apparatus, hopefully without losing the battle to unwitting self-interests … (Chua 2004, 322)

Secondly, as culture and the arts become more greatly enmeshed in the socioeconomic reality, the Marcusean one-dimensional society thesis would suggest that the seemingly liberating categories of

creativity, vibrancy, and aesthetics will themselves become absorbed and integrated into the closed and established universe of meaning that supports and stabilizes an essentially capitalist system facing newer contradictions and crisis tendencies. The Renaissance City vision is but the latest manifestation of an advanced capitalist society transforming to stabilize itself as it negotiates the constructive and destructive forces of globalization. In an essay "Art as a Form of Reality," Marcuse identified (true) creativity as possible *only after*

> all have been freed from the horrors of commercial exploitation and beautification, so that Art can no longer serve as a stimulus of business. Evidently, the very possibility of creating such an environment depends on the total transformation of the existing society: a new mode and new goals of production, a new type of human being as producer, the end of role-playing, of the established division of labour, of work and pleasure. (Quoted in Kellner 1984, 362)

The Culture Industry in One-Dimensional Singapore

The changes in Singapore's arts policies, according to a one-dimensional society reading, are systemic adjustments to cope with shifting economic circumstances and needs. The culture industry involves the production of 'art' (including its mechanical reproduction) as popular commodities according to profit-maximizing principles, their circulation and exchange according to prices set by market forces of demand and supply, and their consumption by pleasure-seeking individuals for whom the commodities provide easy and affordable gratification. These arts commodities also raise complementary demand for other commodities that might not be strictly 'artistic' in nature, such as merchandise and lifestyle services. This, and other system-supporting behavior, is often achieved through the widespread consumption of ideological messages conveyed by such cultural products. In this way, art and culture are integrated into capitalism itself, through processes, mechanisms, and forms that are compatible with the preservation of the capitalist system. They therefore ensure the reproduction not only of the culture industry, but also of capitalism itself. This book is concerned with the television broadcasting and film industries, and how they ensure the reproduction of the culture industry and an authoritarian form of capitalism in Singapore.

Singapore's Television Industry

Television transmission in Singapore began modestly in 1963, the year that the self-governing island merged with Malaya to form Malaysia, and two years before it separated from Malaysia to become a sovereign and independent state. Twenty-five years after that, then-Minister for Communications and Information Yeo Ning Hong described television in the 1960s as a medium

> to inform, educate, and entertain our people and in the process help to bring our people closer together, and forge a nation out of our multi-racial population. (Yeo Ning Hong, foreword to K. T. Lim 1988)

By the 1980s, this role would be expanded "to help create a culturally vibrant and modern society" (Yeo Ning Hong, foreword to K. T. Lim 1988).

Singaporean actor Lim Kay Tong, in a commissioned book to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of television in Singapore, wrote about how documentaries and public education programs produced by Radio Television Singapore in the earlier years of independence sought to explain issues and policies surrounding compulsory National Service, the industrialization program and the need for tough labor laws, the export promotion scheme, and the resettlement of rural dwellers into a high-rise urban environment. There were, for example, programs—including dramas—that conveyed ideas for adjusting to the new living environment and smoothing the "everyday friction" to be expected in a multicultural society. Other programs dealt with the question of modernization and traditional values (K. T. Lim 1988, 17-18, 26-27). Media scholar Erhard U. Heidt, in a study of television programs during a week in 1982, concluded counterintuitively that the programs

> present a picture of reality which, in particular as far as the question of cultural value orientations is concerned, differs considerably from the one presented by Singapore's politicians. Compared to the emphasis placed on these topics in public statements, neither nation-building nor cultural heritage are particularly noticeable issues in the actual telecasts. In particular the potential of television to contribute to the sustenance of cultural traditions and to the development of an integrated culture does not seem to be utilized in any systematic way. (Heidt 1987, 242)

While the bulk of television programs at the time might not have been overtly or systematically designed to communicate straightforward nation-building messages, they would nevertheless have

established a sizable audience-consumer base for the products of the capitalist culture industry (a good proportion of which were popular imported programs). The programs would also have circulated ideas and images that were in more subtle ways supportive of the aspirations of the middle class, involving a consumerist lifestyle, the promise of upward mobility, and a possessive individualism that belied an artificial and often hypocritical preoccupation with family and community.

Lim Kay Tong also observes that Singapore's young television station "drew a line where commercialism should stop," keeping magazine, information, and educational programs advertisement-free (K. T. Lim 1988, 17). In 1980, through an Act of Parliament, the responsibility for broadcasting was transferred to the newly formed Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). Up to 1984, there were two channels: Channel 5, which featured English- and Malay-language programs, and Channel 8, which featured Chinese and Tamil programs. In the 1980s, the commercial potential of Mandarin dramas and comedies was starting to be realized as SBC began to develop local talent and entertainment programs. And especially where the Mandarin campaigns were concerned, television proved to be an important instrument of language policy. Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that he could

> create that environment by … making sure that at peak hours … over TV, they are speaking Mandarin. And I hope by social pressure, slowly, to get it spoken among the young in the shops, on the buses, in the cinemas and in the hawker centres. (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in K. T. Lim 1988, 53)

In a society where ethnic Chinese make up three-quarters of the population, it is the Mandarin dramas and comedies that continue till today to produce the highest ratings. Some of the characteristic styles of Mandarin comedies, such as slapstick humor, have even crossed over to many of the English-language sitcoms, which—because of this low-brow humor that appeals to the mass audience—have enjoyed relatively higher ratings. Channel 12, launched in 1984, was a high-brow channel that appealed only to a niche audience.

In 1994, SBC was privatized and restructured as Singapore International Media (SIM), the holding company for Television Corporation of Singapore. By the end of the millennium, SIM had

been restructured again as the Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp Singapore), which also launched Channel NewsAsia, an international news network whose strength has been to provide news about and analysis of events in Asia from, as it claims, "an Asian perspective." At the same time, liberalization of the media industry broke MediaCorp's broadcast monopoly and a new company, MediaWorks, received a license to broadcast Chinese-language content on Channel U and English-language content on TVWorks, which was later renamed Channel i (Keshishoglou and Aquilia 2003, 55-64). However, in spite of what seemed like healthy competition, an increase in the variety of programs, and more innovative productions by MediaWorks, it was eventually decided that Singapore was too small for two major broadcasters. By 2005, MediaCorp and MediaWorks had undergone a merger to prevent further losses. Today, MediaCorp is a leading broadcaster in Asia consisting of units that deal with, among other things, television, radio, news, press, publishing, and filmmaking (in the form of Raintree Pictures).

Television critic Jeanine Tan points out that MediaCorp is now, above all, a business and so it needs to broadcast programs that will produce ratings that are high enough to enable the network to earn revenue from advertisements and sponsorships. At the same time, MediaCorp remains a national broadcaster—in line with the government's vision of the media as an instrument of nation building—and so it has an obligation not only to entertain, but also to educate the mass audience (Jeanine Tan 2005c). As a result, MediaCorp tends to produce and broadcast light entertainment—sometimes with propagandistic messages—for large audiences that it can then sell to advertisers.

Singapore's Film Industry

Formed in 1998, Raintree Pictures is a fully-owned subsidiary of Singapore's premier media and broadcasting company, MediaCorp, and is its filmmaking arm. According to film critic Ong Sor Fern, Raintree is "the closest thing Singapore has to a movie studio," with its film products subjected to test screenings with focus groups and the bad temper of CEO Daniel Yun, who is compared often with Miramax's Harvey Weinstein (Ong 2005b). Film critic Raphaël Millet (2006) identifies five prongs in Raintree's strategy since 1998.

- Firstly, the studio has produced an average of one commercial film by Jack Neo every year (mainly during the Chinese New Year season), targeted at the local audience.
- Secondly, it has produced basically commercial films with an art-house complexion, also targeted at a local audience.
- Thirdly, it has co-produced films with regional, mostly Hong Kong-based, production companies, in which foreign and local talent can collaborate.
- Fourthly, it has co-produced films with regional companies, providing financial support but not requiring the participation of local talent.
- Fifthly, it has produced films that draw upon Western talent.

Though lucrative, the "Raintree-Neo formula is a dead-end street" (Ong 2007b). In an interview, Yun explained how Raintree "can't do the same thing over and over again," although he reassured Neo's fans that Raintree has not "walked away from Jack Neo. We just walked away from movies that are too local to travel" (quoted in Ong 2007b). It is really the last three prongs, representing the studio's regional and global ambitions, that have inspired confidence in Singapore's commercial-filmmaking future. In a 2005 conference on Asian cinema, Yun highlighted his strategy of co-production with other Asian talents and funding sources. He claimed that on its own, Singapore does not "have the heritage here, we don't have the expertise" (a claim that practically erases from collective memory the vast and commercially successful output of local studio filmmaking during the 1940s to 1960s). Other than Jack Neo, notable Singaporean filmmakers such as Eric Khoo, Kelvin Tong, and Royston Tan have collaborated with Raintree, collaborations that in some cases have yielded opportunities to work on bigger-budget, mostly commercial, projects with other production companies and talents in the region. Raintree is described on its website as:

> [working] with Asian and Western filmmakers to produce 'borderless' movies for the international viewer.
>
> Singapore is an English-speaking cosmopolitan society. Unlike other Asian countries, it is in a unique position to produce movies with a sensibility that is truly universal for the viewer who speaks any language. (MediaCorp Raintree Pictures 2007)

In his talk at the 2005 conference, Yun reiterated several times his unwavering focus on commercial success:

> At the end of the day, it's really about how market-driven we are going to be … When we talk about modern art, it is like a panacea of modern ills, and yet most of us buy a piece to match the couch. If we make a film and it is not on exhibition, then we have trouble … for us it is about being very market-driven … I'm not doing it for artistic purposes, I'll be honest with you, I'm doing it for commercial reasons. (Yun 2005)

But Yun also attempted to make a distinction between commercial work that compromises the product (citing some products of the ailing Hong Kong film industry in the 1990s as an example) and commercial work that still manages to remain "honest" in its storytelling and "real to the setting." In making films with Asia as its primary "domestic market," Raintree wants to achieve a "borderless" and cosmopolitan quality in its films, but retain a sense of place and context that aims for honesty and a satisfying sense of realism. In the 2007 interview, Yun asserted, "If we are local, we are not necessarily international. But if we are international, we are definitely local" (quoted in Ong 2007b).

But these fine distinctions might seem contrived in practice, where the pressure to delocalize and dehistoricize content and styles in order to market films profitably at an international level is tremendous. Can filmmakers, faced with the dilemma of producing 'local' works that aim at a certain kind of indigenous authenticity or producing internationally appealing works that can speak to a greatly expanded market, reasonably be expected to maintain in their films a unique 'national' quality that speaks with nuances and sophistication especially to local audiences? In any case, Singapore's mass audience, whose tastes have been weaned on Hollywood and the slick Broadway/West End-type musicals and theater productions that are regularly staged at Singapore's expensive arts venues, continues to regard local art as 'second-rate' (A. Tan 2007). It might not be so easy for Raintree to live up to its ideals of producing uncompromised commercial films as it becomes increasingly plugged into a global network of taste and capitalist interests from which Hollywood has yet to be decentered. And yet, competing at this level might not be wise either. Singapore Film Society chairman Kenneth Tan (not this book's author) believes that

> distributors and buyers are searching for content which can be produced only by that country. If a movie can be done in another country, why should they get it? (S. Y. Lee 2006, 5).

In other words, why would distributors pick up Singapore films made according to Hollywood templates when they can get the 'originals'?

As Raintree Pictures exerts its monopolistic influence over the various filmmaking activities and talents in Singapore, and finds itself torn between a tendency toward bland placeless-ness at one end of the spectrum and vulgar self-exoticism at the other, Singapore films might tragically be unable to attract audiences at either the local or global level, and be judged unfavorably according to both commercial and critical criteria. Plugged into the global network of capital, popular cultural forms, and lucrative audiences, Raintree Pictures might not be able to resist the temptation to mimic globally successful formulas, reproducing yet more versions of the standard Hollywood fare, for example. Singapore films, therefore, could become instances of the kind of 'depthless' postmodern pastiche that cultural critic Fredric Jameson (1991) lamentably contrasts with parody and the critical distance that parody affords.

Over the decades, Hollywood has developed a range of genre films including westerns, gangster films, musicals, melodramas, and social comedies. As critical theorist Douglas Kellner explains,

> Hollywood genre films … tended to promote the American dream and dominant American myths and ideologies … that money and success were important values; that heterosexual romance, marriage, and family were the proper social forms; that the state, police, and legal system were legitimate sources of power and authority; that violence was justified to destroy any threats to the system; and that American values and institutions were basically sound, benevolent, and beneficial to society as a whole. In this way, Hollywood film, supported by other forms of media culture, helped establish a certain hegemony or cultural dominance of existing institutions and values to the exclusion of others. (Kellner 1998, 358-59)

Singapore might eventually develop its own genres—though not entirely dissimilar to the Hollywood variety—that, in their popularity, will perform a similar ideological role to support the global capitalist worldview and value system. In this way, regardless of whether one thinks of Hollywood as a form of globalization, of cultural imperialism, of straightforward Americanization, of a new

international division of cultural labor, or of complex cultural and ideological exchange (not necessarily unidirectional) (Miller 1998), the underlying logic is really the spread and promotion of capitalism on a global scale.

As the arts—and the creative economy more generally—begin to assume a more important position in Singapore's economic development policies, the government will gradually give more support to them since Singapore's economic performance has been so vitally linked to the government's own political legitimacy and therefore the PAP's prospects for staying convincingly in power. A part of the Media Development Authority since 2003, the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), a government agency set up in 1998, administers several generous funding programs to support short- and feature-filmmaking and participation in overseas film festivals. The SFC's objectives, as listed on its website, are

> to provide funding for productions, training and film-related travel; to encourage, upgrade and develop Singapore filmmaking talent through training activities; to raise the standards of filmmaking in the industry; to provide a one-stop facilitation centre; and to create greater awareness and appreciation of the art form of film. (Singapore Film Commission n.d.)

As former Arts Minister George Yeo has declared, the government will be more likely to back the potentially lucrative aspects of the arts. Ultimately, the government will support the arts and cultural sector as long as it can produce commodities that will sell globally, that will have a multiplier effect on the rest of the local economy, that will entertain a cosmopolitan workforce featuring a large segment of expatriates, and that will give Singapore's economy a new competitive edge. However, a serious deficiency, as observed in Chang and Lee (2003) earlier, has been the government's enthusiasm for investing in 'hardware' instead of managing a socially conducive environment that can stimulate—indeed tolerate—creativity, experimentation, and originality.

Standardized Works and Pseudo-Individualization

Frankfurt School critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno observed how culture is

infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together. Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002, 94)

Philip Cheah, the director of the uncompromisingly non-commercial Singapore International Film Festival, laments how culture is pitched in Singapore:

> People are taught to link the idea of culture to being hip and trendy, when the point of culture is to be curious and interested in what's around you. (Quoted in Jeanine Tan 2006, 39)

But being "hip and trendy" is just packaging that serves to disguise the underlying monotony of products in the culture industry, whose mode of production is a logical extension, into the artistic and cultural realms, of the scientific management of large-scale production through an intensified and specialized division of labor and highly mechanized assembly-line techniques that yield a steady, rapid, and therefore efficient flow of identical products. This Taylorist-Fordist vision of industrialization would, when applied to artistic and cultural work, similarly yield a steady and rapid flow of identical products cut according to set patterns and formats that have proven themselves as formulas for commercial success: cheaper to produce and appealing to the lowest common denominator of taste. At the height of the Model T automobile's commercial popularity in the 1920s, its manufacturer, Henry Ford, was said to have declared, "You can paint it any color so long as it's black," since black paint took the shortest time to dry.

However, the mass production that standardization makes possible can lead to overproduction; and in the context of increased competition, producers find it harder to secure a viable market share. In order to generate greater demand for what are after all the same products manufactured by different producers, the basic product is given superficial additional features, individualized through product branding and loyalty, and differentiated through advertising practices. In this way, false needs are generated and satisfied by an illusion that modern consumers can rationally choose from a wide range of products that they really need. These marginal product differentiations feed into the ideology of liberal democracy and capitalism, sustaining the belief that industrialization, possessive

individualism, and private property laws have made possible widespread affluence, and that the rational individual can in this bourgeois society exercise autonomy in being able to choose freely from such an expanded range of product and political options. By being able to choose between a Republican or Democrat, a Nokia or a Sony-Ericsson, Coca-Cola or Pepsi, *Seinfeld* or *Friends*, Christina or Britney, *Singapore Idol* finalists Taufik Batisah or Sylvester Sim, the consumer is led to believe that he or she is a rational and autonomous individual capable of making real choices. In Marcuse's one-dimensional society, these choices are "pseudo-choices" and these individualized products are merely the result of "pseudo-individualization" (Marcuse 1964/2002).

The same tension shapes production in the film and television industries. The culture industry seeks to be an efficient producer through economies of scale and standardization according to success formulas; but the threat of overproduction calls for continuous demand based on the manufacture of false needs for products that, for all their superficial variety, remain fundamentally the same. Film and television products must then become branded (which studio? which director? which star?), differentiated through false advertising ('this year's must-see blockbuster'), and disposable (quickly out of date so that it can be replaced with something new but actually identical). Ironically, some of the most innovative and creative energies have gone into the continuous task of marginally differentiating works that essentially lack originality, because 'original' works are commercially risky and more difficult to produce within tight budgets controlled bureaucratically. Raintree CEO Daniel Yun acknowledges that his company has "to differentiate to survive, we cannot make another Korean horror or Hong Kong horror or a Japanese horror" (Yun 2005). But what is the real nature of this differentiation? Can universal commercial appeal really be reconciled with sensitivity to place, as he intends, or attentiveness to creativity and uniqueness?

Horkheimer and Adorno were critical of how "the outcome [of films] can invariably be predicted at the start—who will be rewarded, punished, forgotten" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002, 98-99). Formulaic works aimed at reproducing successful commercial outcomes do not only copy the themes, concepts, characters, storylines, jokes, special effects, and so on, of their predecessors. Rigid formats are also filled up with content that is repetitive, su-

perfluous, unessential, arbitrary, ornamental, and disengaged from the logic of the whole. The *Singapore Idol* program, for example, closely mimics the *American Idol* competition—down to the choice of judges—in the hopes of securing at least some of the latter's commercial success. And its weekly episodes are repetitive enactments of mostly forgettable, typical/stereotypical, or else spectacularly bad contestants who are rewarded and punished 'democratically' for their ability to fit into the popular music industry. In television sitcoms and dramas, underdeveloped characters playing typical/stereotypical parts drive storylines and comedy gags that audiences have seen and heard many times before, but have been numbed into forgetting by a culture industry geared toward creating marginal differentiations and short-term memories.

The illusion of variety and choice that constitutes what Marcuse calls "the happy consciousness"—"the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 87)—obscures the less tolerable truth that individuals living and working in contemporary advanced industrial society have been reduced to underpaid cogs— or, in Lee Kuan Yew's words, "digits" (quoted in *History of Singapore* 2006)—in the enormous production machine and at the same time consumer dupes who crave overvalued trinkets that they themselves have played a part in producing and are now working tirelessly to afford. As the tedium of work structures the workers' bodies, their lives, and human relationships, the capitalist system realizes the need regularly to refresh its workers in order to sustain their daily capacities for wage-labor, much like oiling parts of the machine for the next workday. Weekends and evenings after work are not private time when autonomous individuals might be free to formulate, pursue, and revise their notions of the good life, but are instead 'managed leisure time' during which the capitalist system supplies entertainment, diversion, distraction, and amusement, sold to workers as an escape from tedium and concentrated efforts in exchange for a good part of their hard-earned wages, but mainly to prepare them physically and psychologically for the next workday. Leisure studies researchers Neil Ravenscroft, Steven Chua, and Lynda Wee argue that cinemas in Singapore, where attendance rates are among the highest in the world, provide audiences with access to "deviant space" and "a temporary escape from the regulation of social life" through the

same consumerism that brings them right back to the dominant ideology of capitalism (Ravenscroft, Chua, and Wee 2001).

Part of this structured, momentary, and periodic escape from tedium can be seen in the predominance of fantasy in mass culture, whether in the form of soap operas that feature endless cycles of the loves and lives of beautiful, rich, and powerful people; lifestyle documentaries that profile the lives, homes, and travels of the fabulously rich and famous; 'reality' programs that tantalize the viewer with phenomenal prizes won by ordinary people doing seemingly extraordinary things; or sitcoms that feature happy families living in either a culturally homogeneous or multiculturally harmonious world of stereotypes. The fantasy not only promotes escapism but also often conveys messages that are compatible with the values and myths of capitalism and industrial society, such as materialism, meritocracy, and upward mobility.

More debased forms of comedy are also an integral part of this structured, momentary, and periodic escape from tedium, employing unsophisticated slapstick humor, dialogues that string together old gags for quick laughs, and canned laughter not only to instruct the audience when to laugh but also to simulate habitual laughter when there is really nothing funny to engage with. Sometimes, comedy can take the more critical form of satire and parody, effecting social and political critique through the clever use of irony. The culture industry, recognizing the mental work that is needed to appreciate irony, prefers to soothe the critical impulse of audiences with kitsch and 'cheap shots' that only pretend to be critical but in their superficiality are really quite reactionary. This kind of 'cathartic' laughter—instead of casting a new light on familiar things, or enabling an exploration of taboo subjects, or leading to an emancipatory enlightenment—serves to place a comfortable limit on the will to action. The comedic films of Jack Neo, often described both as highly commercial and yet socially and politically critical, will be analyzed in Chapter 5 in accordance with these parameters.

Patterned and predigested, the products of the culture industry call for standardized responses from infantilized and retrogressive worker-audiences who only need to sit back and relax, without concentration or imagination: The thinking has already been done for them (Held 1980, 92-96). The appeal of mindless entertainment and the soporific effect that it induces after a long and hard day at work create a dependency on such products, much like a nar-

cotic that makes people happy or helps them forget. For critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, these leisure activities are but "pseudo-activities" and the responses that they generate are essentially irrational (Held 1980, 106).

Mimetic Works and the Role of Stereotypes

Standardized products of the film and television industries are likely also to be mimetic or, as political sociologist David Held explains, "an extension of the 'outside world' … [that] reproduces, reinforces and strengthens dominant interpretations of reality" (Held 1980, 94). Horkheimer and Adorno argued that the

> more densely and completely [filmmaking] techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema … life is to be made indistinguishable from the sound film. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002, 99)

These dominant interpretations of reality, secured by mimetic works, are ideological in that they conceal the particular interests that they serve by proffering a seemingly universal account of reality, one that even the disadvantaged are likely to buy into. Mimetic works mimic the most superficial aspects of real life, drawing attention away from what might be repressed beneath these surface realities, such as aggressiveness, erotic energies, domination, exploitation, and complexity. As these mimetic works do not exist merely at the level of ideas but actually take on material forms, they add to the superficial realities of the material world that further obscure the hidden structures and conditions, preventing critical thinking and the ability to imagine alternative realms of freedom. Mimetic works, therefore, are a vital part of the affirmative culture that sustains one-dimensional advanced industrial societies. Such works are generally geared toward supporting the reproduction of capitalism, its values, logic, mechanism, institutions, and practices.

Product advertising is one example of how mimetic works reproduce capitalism through the manufacture of false needs. Television journalist Les Brown famously described television as

> not so much interested in the business of communications but in the business of delivering audiences to advertisers. People are the merchan-

dise, not the shows. The shows are merely the bait. (Brown 1971, 15-16)

The line between television programming and advertisements has become increasingly blurred, to the point that programs have themselves effectively become extended advertisements, mainly through the widespread practice of product placements in return for sponsorship. This is also true of filmmakers who, in return for sponsorship, are willing to insert and even 'showcase' products not just in the film's *mise en scène* but also as pivotal entities in its narrative and characterization, a lucrative means of 'selling' their audiences to advertisers. Filmmakers and celebrity actors will also often endorse products in advertisements and at commercial events, mostly through the 'intertextual' association of these endorsed products with the films or television programs for which they are famous. Also profitable has been the merchandizing of products that represent characters or sets in films and programs (such as dolls and action figures), or that are simply inspired by them. In this symbiotic relationship, there is a strong commercial motivation for filmmakers, television producers, and celebrity actors to allow their work to revolve around—even be dictated by—the needs of the capitalist corporations and their state partners as they strive to manufacture demand for their products and services, as well as cultural and political authority.

The film and television industries also ensure the reproduction of capitalism by producing and broadcasting works whose themes, morals, narratives, characterization, styles, and tropes are conducive to and supportive of capitalist practices and values. For instance, a film or program might enact the devastating consequences of being too lax about questions of personal and national survival and success; or it might reveal the nasty consequences of stepping outside one's traditional role; or it might highlight the rewards of hard work as an increase in consumption opportunities and other material pleasures; or it might demonstrate the value of meritocracy, through which anyone regardless of social background can enjoy upward mobility with talent, perseverance, discipline, thrift, the right attitude and values, and faith in the system. All these serve to socialize audiences into a worldview that is at the very least conducive to capitalism, rendering invisible its contradictions or any alternative to the status quo. If the works do portray contradictory and

alternative positions, these will inevitably result in tragic, painful, or ridiculous outcomes, confirming their unfeasible nature. As a result, films and television programs of this kind could be thought of as mimetic.

Stereotypes—a commonly occurring feature of mimetic works—are efficient, useful, user-friendly, resilient, even necessary, and yet grossly inadequate "generalities, patternings and 'typifications'" for making sense of and speaking about a world that journalist and author Walter Lippmann described as a "great booming, buzzing confusion of reality" (quoted in Dyer 2002, 11). Writing about American television in the 1950s, Adorno argued that the

> more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set-up of cultural industry, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable. Thus people may not only lose true insight into reality, but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled. (Adorno 2001, 171)

In television programs and films, stereotypical images and the invariably identical plot functions that they perform help to bring order to a complex social world, simplifying, generalizing, and explaining it through representations that draw clear and rigid distinctions between different groups, exaggerating the commonality within each group, and separating them by "sharp boundary definitions … where in reality there are none" (Dyer 2002, 16). Appropriating Lippmann's sociological conceptualization of stereotypes for his own aesthetic concerns in film analysis, film studies professor Richard Dyer observes that

> [t]he role of stereotypes is to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares; and to make fast, firm and separate what is in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value system cares to admit. (Dyer 2002, 16)

Philosopher and political theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah identifies three distinct ideas in the term 'stereotype.' Firstly, 'statistical stereotypes' involve the ascription to an individual of a property that is believed to be

> characteristic of some social group to which she belongs, where there is indeed a statistical correlation between that property and being a member of that group, but where, in fact, she does not have that property. (Appiah 2001, 63-64)

Secondly, 'false stereotypes' simply involve "just a false belief about a group." And thirdly, 'normative stereotypes' are "grounded in a social consensus about how they *ought* to behave to conform appropriately to the norms associated with membership in their group" (Appiah 2001, 63-64, emphasis as in original). While false stereotypes (whether based on a mistake or a lie) might not be so easy to justify, statistical and normative stereotypes (which at least present some of the 'truth,' even if it is too general or conventional) could be justified as necessary to create basic order, an intersubjective framework of meaning and values, and a basis for policy-making and legislation. The problem with this, as Dyer warns, is the propensity for stereotypes to become "absolute and rigid" (Dyer 2002, 12).

Dyer also argues that the knowledge and social order supported by stereotypes are themselves motivated by considerations of power, that the

> consensus invoked by [normative] stereotypes is more apparent than real; rather, stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society. (Dyer 2002, 14)

Adapting a useful distinction between 'social types' and 'stereotypes' for analyzing film, Dyer describes the former as representations of those who belong to the mainstream and are therefore in relatively more powerful groups able to define themselves as residing at the center; the latter he describes as representations of outsiders, those who do not belong, and in their Otherness are feared and yet much less powerful.

Dyer's conceptualization of stereotypes in film and, in particular, his concerns about their rigidity and relationship with the underlying patterns of power and interest, might be extended to a more general analysis of the role of stereotypes in the culture industry where audiences are able to connect more readily with characters and situations that are familiar and recognizable, creating a kind of informational redundancy that makes films and television programs easy to follow and enjoyable to watch as light, sometimes mindless, entertainment. A form of standardization, stereotypical characters and their identical (or at least predictable) plot functions are easy to mass-produce and they offer immediate gratification to passive consumers who do not expect their cultural products to

demand any kind of 'mental' effort. In eliminating complexity, stereotypes—as a "shortcut" to order (Walter Lippmann, quoted in Dyer 2002, 11)—help to constitute cultural products that bear what Horkheimer and Adorno described as an "unending sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002, 106).

Other than serving as important constituents of light commercial entertainment, stereotypes are also appealing for the way they provide psychic gratification to those who are prejudiced against or fearful of Others. Adorno warned about how stereotyping

> not only distracts from any real social issues but also enforces the psychologically extremely dangerous division of the world into black (the out-group) and white (we, the in-group). (Adorno 2001, 173)

Artist and cultural studies scholar Lola Young describes how

> the racists will deny or disavow her or his own fears and disposition, repressing them into the unconscious and projecting these intolerable feelings on to the despised racial group. (Young 1996, 31)

Young, explaining how these racists exaggerate their Otherness by looking for differences in their anatomy, especially skin color, gives the example of black people who "come to embody the threat to the illusion of order and control and represent the polar opposite to the white group" (Young 1996, 31). She also goes on to explain how people who destabilize these "distinct categorizations which assist in the production and maintenance of an illusory order in a chaotic and fragmented world," such as people of mixed parentage and homosexuals, could reactivate anxieties and provoke mainstream society's desire to repress them (Young 1996, 32).

These kinds of psychological comfort and gratification are translated into market forces of demand for film and television entertainment in which the Other is completely absent, or underrepresented, or simplistically represented, or negatively represented. Films and television programs made in Singapore that thrive on racial and gender stereotypes, for example, also provide visual pleasures for the privileged audience—in most cases, male, heterosexual, and Chinese—looking to be gratified by fantasies of racial and gender superiority, where the fear and mistrust of the racialized and gendered Other are contained by marginalization, ridicule, and revenge in the make-belief world of film and television. Drawn loosely from the basic structure of filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey's seminal work that links psychoanalysis, feminism, and film theory and

practice (Mulvey 1975/2004), the privileged spectator can be said to occupy a male subject position by (mis)identifying 'himself' narcissistically with the protagonist—'his' ego-ideal—and deriving pleasure from the capacity to control, reform, and even punish the Other—the source of castration anxiety—by objectifying, fetishizing, eroticizing, and deforming it. Many commercially successful comedies, for example, are very dependent upon stereotypes that present the ethnic minority (Malays, Indians, or Eurasians) or the homosexual figure as the grotesque butt of the joke, neutralizing through laughter any threat that he or she might pose to their illusion of order. Particularly common also are films and programs that present ethnically homogeneous worlds uncorrupted by ethnic difference and the threats that difference is believed to present. Such films and programs might provide viewers with a sense of comfort, security, and the visual pleasures that arise from fantasies of racial homogeneity.

On the supply side, the production of such films and programs could also have something to do with the lack of resources, creativity, technical competence, (multi)cultural literacy, experience, or self-confidence to produce films and programs that are intellectually challenging, less dependent on rigid stereotypes, and yet pleasurable to watch, accessible, and convincingly realistic. Often, though, filmmakers and television producers, writers, and directors try self-consciously to include ethnic variety, but end up grossly simplifying ethnic identity and relations, glossing over the more threatening, because they are less containable, complexities of the real world. Token inclusions of minority characters often relegate minority actors to minor, secondary, or background roles of little consequence. Lacking character development and complexity, these token roles are peripheral to the protagonists and antagonists who drive the narrative. Minority characters are usually also associated with negative and unflattering images that recirculate into fantasies of racial superiority and inferiority. These superficial representations of the ethnic Other might be instantly gratifying for 'privileged' audiences who belong to the majority group, particularly if these representations 'confirm' the kinds of personal prejudices and frustrations that inform and are reinforced by people's daily encounters with the ethnic Other in school, at work, or in the neighborhood.

In turn, a passive and gratifying relationship between audience and light entertainment that thrives on the use of rigid stereotypes can foster a passive and uncritical attitude to social understanding. Culturally embedded prejudices get buried deeper under the taken-for-granted realms of consciousness, so that disrespectful, discriminatory, and exploitative ways of thinking and acting become normalized and accepted by all, including the disrespected, the discriminated against, and the exploited. And where these practices accord with the exploitative and dominating relationships that are integral to a one-dimensional advanced industrial society, stereotypical images in the culture industry perform the role of normalizing, even disguising, the asymmetrical power relationships that underlie capitalism—mimicking and materially reproducing the taken-for-granted discriminatory, prejudiced, oppressive, and repressive practices of everyday life in order to protect them from critical reflection. Stereotyping, in this way, is a strategy of capitalism employed through the culture industry.

Autonomous Art, Heartlanders, and Cosmopolitans

The second analytical limit, based on the principle of pure autonomy and derived from Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, identifies art as a kind of alienation with the "magic power" of negation to protect and expose the contradictions engulfed by the happy consciousness. Art is a "rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality" (Marcuse 1964/2002, 64) largely, as he explained in his *Eros and Civilization*, through the "surplus repression" brought on by adherence to the "performance principle" that stratifies contemporary capitalist society "according to the competitive economic performances of its members" (Marcuse 1955/1966, 44). In *Eros and Civilization* and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), Marcuse discussed the theoretical possibility of an authentic and critical art that, in contrast to mass culture, contains in its form, style, and technique an expression of autonomy, the capacity to liberate "sensuousness from the repressive domination of reason" (Marcuse 1955/1966, 181), and the potential to transcend the status quo from which it emerges, and imagine alternative states and utopias of freedom and human

flourishing. Great art, according to Kellner's account of the Marcusean view of art's "radical-emancipatory" potential,

> indicts and protests against the existing society and its ideology, values and reality-principle. Authentic art … contains a vision of liberation that preserves images of freedom and happiness denied in the everyday world. Furthermore, in a world in which language, philosophy and the sciences are incorporated into an apparatus of domination, in which one-dimensional thought prevails, art remains a refuge of critical truths. That is, by its very nature, art pertains to another world and can thus speak truths other than the conventional wisdom. Furthermore, although the dominant intellectual mentality may be obsessed with facts and may scorn emotions and cultural values, art can cultivate a consciousness and subjectivity which requires liberation and radical social change. (Kellner 1984, 348)

Elsewhere, Kellner describes how art "practices the 'Great Refusal,' incarnating the emancipatory contents of memory, phantasy, and the imagination through producing images of happiness and a life without anxiety" (Kellner 2001, 89).

Peter Bürger, a professor of literature, explained how "autonomy of art" is an "ideological category" that at once links an element of truth in "the apartness of art from the praxis of life" to an element of untruth in the masking of its historical development, specifically as a "category of bourgeois society" (Bürger 1974/1992, 56-57). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed of the French bourgeoisie in the 1960s that 'taste' is defined by those in power and that its expression in everyday life functions to reinforce social distinctions.

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (Bourdieu 1984, 6)

The more privileged in society are equipped with cultural capital to decode, for instance, more challenging art work that is often impenetrable for the less privileged working class. The ability to interpret difficult art and to make erudite pronouncements about what one likes or dislikes in a particular art work signals a social subject's station in life—in this way, the cultural nobility distinguishes itself from the philistines; and the appreciation of autonomous art often ends up serving as a marker of social position instead

of offering a glimpse of freedom from the domination of economics, politics, and morality.

Bourdieu observed that the working class found greater pleasure in facile art than in experimental art; and took greater interest in function than in form, in matter than in manner, and in what was being represented than in the way it was represented. Working-class audiences sought immediate gratification from works that were 'agreeable' and 'moral,' rather than those that were deliberately contrary and provocative with regard to traditional notions of truth, goodness, and beauty. Working-class audiences were not able to interpret art with Kantian disinterest, and so regularly protested against art work that they believed to be false, immoral, or ugly according to their own limited epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic horizons. Even if these working-class horizons were to be viewed not as limited, but different and equally valid, they remain horizons that are subordinated to and judged in terms of the values of the dominant (bourgeois) class.

Adorno regarded high art as one of two "torn halves of an integral freedom" and it is, as philosopher J. M. Bernstein explains, "bought at the price of the exclusion of the lower classes" (Bernstein 1991/2001, 2, 7). The culture industry—whose products constitute the other torn half of this integral freedom—seeks to manufacture profitable products that will keep working-class audiences locked into the working-class cycle, products that, as Bernstein explains, "no longer even [promise] happiness but only [provide] easy amusement as relief from labour … in the name of the degraded utopia of the present" (Bernstein 1991/2001, 7-9). The popular tastes that Bourdieu identified will govern what gets produced by the market—art that is standardized, literal, realistic, and easy to understand; that serves to bring order to society and elevate it according to mainstream moral and aesthetic values; that tells unambiguously uplifting stories with characters who do good and are therefore exemplary; and that is affordable, entertaining, and disposable. These standardized and mimetic works help to reinforce an authoritarian tendency and provide the confidence to demand the censorship of art and the proscription of artists whose works do not appeal to working-class audiences, or seem to assault their intellectual, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities and capabilities.

Even bourgeois intellectuals often make, in the name of 'common sense,' the easy populist arguments against experimental, difficult,

and *avant-garde* art, describing it as sterile, alienating, elitist, and a misuse of public funding. In his speech to an international gathering of arts policy makers, funders, and practitioners, Ho Kwon Ping, the chairman of MediaCorp, the Singapore Management University, and the Banyan Tree chain of luxury resorts, described the "most ridiculous art installations" and performance art in European modern art museums, which "intimidated into grudging silence … the community which it purports to engage with." In the speech, he also lamented the way globalization facilitates the "aping [of] Western artistic trends" in a way that is "not just undiscriminating but silly," contrasting this with the Banyan Tree's policies of commercializing indigenous artists and their works into "lifestyle arts" to create a sense of place (which is, ironically, really a playground for the rich) (K. P. Ho 2003). Ultimately, it is as much the populist posturing of the bourgeoisie and the profit motive of the culture industry, as it is the exclusiveness of high art, that withholds from the working class the possibility of critical thinking, enlightenment, and emancipation.

Thinking about audiences as working-class or bourgeois corresponds in an interesting way with the imaginary division of Singapore society into 'heartlanders' and 'cosmopolitans,' binary terms that came into widespread usage after then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong introduced them in his National Day Rally speech in August 1999 (Goh 1999). This 'cosmopolitan/heartlander' distinction, provoked by the tensions involved in Singapore's embrace of globalization, was a new way of referring to shifts in the traditional bourgeois and proletarian class formation. The categories themselves are ideological in the way they hail, position, and mobilize Singaporeans to think and respond in the desired or 'correct' ways according to where they stand in the social system. In other words, some Singaporeans in particular circumstances are ideologically interpellated as cosmopolitan subjects; while other Singaporeans in other circumstances are ideologically interpellated as heartlander subjects. As poet and playwright Alfian Bin Sa'at observes,

> [t]he 'heartlander' is an unstable category, whose characteristics are modified: subsumed or exaggerated as a matter of political expediency. The same goes for that other creature, the 'cosmopolitan' … each constituency swells its ranks depending on the kinds of policies the State wishes to pursue. The cosmopolitan comes to the forefront when there

is rhetoric on globalisation and a knowledge-based economy … But on issues such as censorship, the idea of the heartlander, this silent majority of conservatives, is summoned, and their reservations will be appropriated to extinguish any tentative sparks towards liberalisation. (Alfian Bin Sa'at 2002, 259)

This ideological division of Singaporeans into cosmopolitans and heartlanders has been a useful means of sustaining the status quo: By dividing them, the state can benefit from each party's strength, balance one party against the other, and rule over both through a logic of mutual suspicion.

Ideal-typical heartlanders live in mature public housing estates. Their horizons are coterminous with the boundaries of the nation-state. Their values are conservative, communitarian, 'Asian,' ethnic, and sometimes religious in character; and their primary languages are Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese), Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, with Singlish serving as a common language across the ethnic groups. At a time when Singaporeans have become more sensitive to the effects of globalization, heartlanders are valued as the 'keepers' or 'protectors' of national values, culture, identity, and a sense of belonging. They respond to the government's moral authority to rule. Conceived as being in the 'majority,' they can be called up to serve as an important source of electoral support.

Ideal-typical cosmopolitans, equipped with world-class skills and talent, are comfortable living and working anywhere in the world, and can command internationally competitive salaries. They fit into Singapore's global city rhetoric as individuals who raise the country's international profile, exporting the 'Singapore brand' as it were. In doing so, they help to drive the economy into more advanced stages, which is necessary for Singapore to retain its competitiveness in relation to lower-cost countries in the Southeast Asian region, a goal that is especially significant in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Cosmopolitans are code-switchers: moving seamlessly between Singlish and Standard English (with American, Australian, and British accents, or more usually an inconsistent mix of all three), as appropriate to the circumstances. While cosmopolitans are regarded as being at the forefront of Singapore's economic development, their mobility and amoral global outlook might erode the idea of Singapore as home and source of values and identity, and the government's political legitimacy, which comes from its

moral authority. Singapore, according to government scenario planners, could become a hotel instead of a home, and its citizens, transients who are economically successful but feel no responsibility to the country (Scenario Planning Office 1997).

The interdependence of cosmopolitans and heartlanders adds another dimension to the ideological strategy of divide and rule: Heartlanders can benefit from the material gains brought by the economic activities of cosmopolitans; and heartlanders can serve as national, cultural, and even moral signposts for the global city. The government often justifies the limits it places on openness and liberalization—as demanded by the more cosmopolitan Singaporeans—by reference to a conservative majority that will not tolerate such changes. This conservative majority—conflated with a romanticized vision of the heartlanders as culturally authentic—serves as an ideological strategy for preserving the authoritarianism of a system that needs to be plugged into the global network of capitalism. As evidenced by their response to the government's rhetoric, the heartlanders (often Chinese-educated Chinese) do not generally have a positive view of the cosmopolitans (often the English-educated Chinese), and might in fact feel severely disadvantaged and out of place in the 'renaissance city' vision of Singapore. Likewise, the cosmopolitans might consider the heartlanders to be too narrow-minded, parochial, paternalistic, and censorious. Many of these prejudices have given rise to stereotypes in local films (most notably in several of Jack Neo's films) and television programs, stereotypes that reflect real-life struggles and provide the psychological means of coping with them.

The popular culture—or more accurately, mass culture—of the heartlanders is not a spontaneous, authentic, and organic feature of heartlander life; but is instead an integral product of a culture industry that manufactures kitsch. The ideologically strategic formation of the heartlanders as reactionary, uncritical, closed-minded, authoritarian, and censorious is highly compatible with the culture industry, which also serves to conceal the inherent contradictions of capitalism. For instance, art work that is experimental, socially challenging, or politically critical—and that remains commercially non-viable—could be censored by appealing to the sensibilities of ideologically mobilized conservative and moralistic heartlanders imagined to be in the majority. By presenting challenging art as a violation of the integrity and sincerity of 'simple' heartlanders, a

kind of righteous indignation can be raised that calls for the re-tributive and moralistic violence of censorship as the appropriate policy instrument.

Often, the government has censored works that it thinks the heartlanders would consider to be a threat to public and social order, to the vulnerable in a multicultural society, and to the fabric of moral norms and standards believed to hold society together (K. P. Tan 2007a). However, as visual artist and art writer Lucy Davis argues,

> censorship manufactures its own consent. If you are told every day right through school that you are a conservative, immature and volatile popu-lace, you might be inclined to believe it. This makes the practice of sur-veys to ascertain the views of Singapore 'heartlanders' on censorship an almost self-fulfilling activity. (L. Davis 2004, 298)

As a result, censorship "is always an arbitrary exercise of power" (L. Davis 2004, 296). Similarly, Alfian Bin Sa'at describes the act of censorship as "implacably random; its operations are not the product of enforceable criteria but whims and winds … " (Alfian Bin Sa'at 2004, 313). To counter Singapore's "trigger-happy cen-sorship," he recommends that the artist has

> to be an exhibitionist, to expose the battle wounds and the exact sites of damage. Only by revealing the mutilation and framing the discourse into the body-politic can the audience understand how censorship is an act of violence—and eyes can thus be directed away from the artwork, away from the artist, to the perpetrators of this violence. When the art-ist removes her bandages and parades her sores, she also unsheathes the censor's instruments and at the same time, unmasks the censor. (Alfian Bin Sa'at 2001, 215)

Royston Tan's short film *Cut* (2004), discussed in Chapter 7, dem-onstrates the effectiveness of exposing the battle wounds of his heavily censored feature film *15* (2003) and of unmasking the cen-sor.

While it might at first glance seem as if the more open-minded and amoral cosmopolitans would facilitate the development of an experimental, challenging, and critical popular culture, in reality, they demand a bland and easily gratifying form of culture that ap-peals to a characterless, recreationally oriented, and uniformly in-ternational taste, the kind of culture that all global cities provide for the consumption of the placeless expatriate class, which they must all attract. Global cities, of the kind that Singapore aspires

to be, try to differentiate marginally their spaces for living, working, and playing, but in fact can only offer an 'unending sameness'—the same types of nightlife, restaurant concepts, coffee places, bookstore and magazine concepts, Broadway/West End entertainment, clothing range, and residential options. As global capitalism ideologically divides Singapore society into heartlanders and cosmopolitans according to its inherent contradictions, the culture industry evolves to serve the (false) needs of both in ways that continue to marginalize the transcendent and emancipative possibilities of a more autonomous and critical art, and thereby strengthens the overall system.

Subsequent chapters will consider the extent to which some of the filmic and televisual works produced in Singapore have demonstrated the autonomous, alternative, critical, and more challenging qualities of art, bearing the promise of freedom through their aesthetic transformation of objects—and the objectified—in everyday life. As Chua Beng-Huat argues,

> [i]n Singapore, where the PAP has a near monopoly in defining 'social reality' assisted by a constrained media, artistic practices have emerged as important sites for generating and articulating alternative realities, which not only provide different imaginaries but also often simultaneously expose the dark side of social phenomenon glossed over or veiled by the simplifications and reductions effected in official definitions of an increasingly complex social reality. (Chua 2004, 321)

The critical possibilities of film and television in Singapore are to be found in the dialectic between commodified mass culture and autonomous art: Between these two analytical limits lies a space in which ideology is dismantled and its fragments reassembled and rearticulated in a dynamic struggle for hegemony.

Hegemony and Resistance in Popular Culture

Bernstein explains how Adorno's theory treats audiences of the culture industry as "dupes of mass deception," whereas the culture industry

> is no longer the purveyor of a monolithic ideology but, however unwittingly or unintentionally, includes moments of conflict, rebellion, opposition and the drive for emancipation and utopia … What is required, then, is a more complex and sensitive model of cultural interpretation. (Bernstein 1991/2001, 21)

Accounts of popular culture as sites of ideological struggle—inspired by post-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and developed by British cultural studies—present more dynamic and complex possibilities of change than what is suggested by the Marcusean theoretical limits of 'complete encapsulation' (defined by the one-dimensional man thesis) and 'purely autonomous art.' Stuart Hall, the leading voice in British cultural studies, in fact argues that popular culture is neither "total encapsulation" nor "pure autonomy," but is instead a "constant battlefield" where there are "always strategic positions to be won and lost" and where "complex contradictions" surrounding resistance and complicity play out in a dialectic of cultural struggle (Hall 1994, 460). By situating cultural texts within complex ideological articulations that nearly always involve both elements of complicity and resistance, new transformative possibilities might be located, led in many cases by the practical work of organic intellectuals, specifically the critical thinkers and artists who arise out of marginalized classes. Subsequent chapters will consider the extent to which filmmakers Jack Neo, Eric Khoo, and Royston Tan are organic intellectuals of this kind.

Hall identified in the 1950s a "sense of classlessness" in the UK, where the working class was becoming atomized through individual preoccupation with consumption, personal advancement, and one-upmanship through conspicuous consumption. Cultural studies scholar Helen Davis observes of Hall's analysis

> Affordable television sets and motor cars will not lead to a dismantling of the social and economic conditions that keep working-class men and women in their subordinated places. It just makes social injustice a bit more comfortable. (H. Davis 2004, 13).

Hall, at this time, referred to a "false consciousness" in which a rigid class-bound society was able to give the "distinct impression that it is growing more classless" (quoted in H. Davis 2004, 32). This is a description that relates well with Marcuse's one-dimensional man thesis, and therefore with contemporary Singapore as an advanced industrial society, where it is widely believed that more than 80 per cent of the people are middle-class. But although Marcuse certainly did write about the importance and prospects of opposition (though not substantially in *One-Dimensional Man*), it is Hall who actually worked out more concrete approaches to analyzing ideological resistance and negotiation within a Gramscian under-

standing of hegemony as an unstable equilibrium. As sociologist Chris Rojek argues, "Gramsci undoubtedly provided Hall with a cogent formulation of a non-teleological, dynamic, historical, antireductionist way of doing cultural analysis" (Rojek 2003, 38).

Communications and cultural studies professor Jennifer Slack defines Gramsci's notion of hegemony as the "struggle to construct (articulate and re-articulate) common sense out of an ensemble of interests, beliefs and practices," drawing attention in this way to relations of domination and subordination (Slack 1996, 117-18). Common sense, according to Hall, is the

> residue of absolutely basic and commonly-agreed, consensual wisdoms—[which] helps us to classify out the world in simple but meaningful terms. Precisely common sense does not require reasoning, argument, logic, thought: it is spontaneously available, thoroughly recognisable, widely shared. It feels indeed, as if it has always been there, the sedimented, bedrock of wisdom of 'the race', a form of 'natural' wisdom, the content of which has hardly changed at all with time. However common sense does have a content, and a history. (Quoted in H. Davis 2004, 81)

Helen Davis adds that within this common sense are "the clusters of networks of meanings functioning as 'domains of meaning' within which we can see the whole class structure reproduced." And where these domains correspond with the dominant ideology, the dominant and subordinate classes all understand their world according to these "ruling ideas" (H. Davis 2004, 83). Rojek describes this view of culture and knowledge as one in which "identity, history, agency and practice are not fixed entities but parts of a system of representation which is permanently *in process*" (Rojek 2003, 2; emphasis as in original).

Hegemony therefore involves the constant struggle to articulate the common sense according to the ideas of the dominant classes and to rearticulate this in the face of challenges from oppositional or even simply alternative forces. Gramsci's emphasis on struggle is borne out in the analogy of a war of position in civil society, where consent is fought for, won, and re-won in the mass media, trade unions, education system, religious institutions, and family, in order for the dominant classes to maintain relations of power, the residual classes to recapture power, and the emergent classes to gain it. This means that the dominant classes must constantly take into account the needs and interests of the subordinate (residual and

emergent) classes, shifting and adjusting the ideologically articulated common sense so that the latter's consent can be willingly renewed. Helen Davis describes hegemony as "negotiated power whereby members of a class are able to persuade other classes that they share the same class interests" (H. Davis 2004, 46-47). In Gramscian hegemony, therefore, resistance is engaged with—not crushed by—force. Hall adapts Gramsci's concept of 'articulation,' which Rojek explains as

> not just a thing (not just a connection) but a process of creating connections, much in the same way that hegemony is not domination but the process of creating and maintaining consensus or of co-ordinating interests. (Slack 1996, 144)

Post-Marxist Louis Althusser's work on ideology was another important influence on Hall's thinking. As sociologist Jorge Larrain explains, for Althusser,

> it is not the subject that produces ideology as ideas but it is ideology, conceived as a material instance of practices and rituals, that constitutes the subject. (Larrain 1996, 48)

All ideology, according to Althusser, constructs concrete individuals as subjects through an act of interpellation—hailing, addressing, calling out to, or recruiting individuals who, in misrecognizing themselves as the subject being hailed, are positioned in a way that makes them more likely to produce the 'correct' response. Although it might seem as if the subjectivity constructed by ideology is inevitable, Rojek argues that

> Althusser always assumed that ideological interpellation is not necessarily successful. Moreover, to the extent that he recognized that we are all interpellated by different ideologies, 'interruptions' are always and already implicit in his approach. (Rojek 2003, 36)

This Althusserian conceptualization of ideology can be, and indeed has been, used to understand the way audiences are interpellated by films and television programs (the mass media as ideological state apparatuses), to which they individually respond as subjects, misrecognizing themselves in the ideological mirror that is the screen. But Althusser acknowledged that ideological interpellation was not always successful and that there could be interruptions in this process. To theorize these levels of success and variations in the audience's reading of the text and its dominant codes, Hall suggests

that audiences decoding films and programs might be seen to per-
form three ideal-types of reading.

• First is a dominant or hegemonic reading, in which the audi-
  ence—perfectly 'hailed' by the text—completely shares the mean-
  ings and values of the dominant ideology embedded in the text's
  code, viewing this 'preferred reading' as completely natural, ob-
  jective, and transparent. In misrecognizing themselves as the
  subject of this code, audiences accept it and reproduce it in their
  everyday lives.
• Second is a negotiated reading, in which the audiences accept
  most of the preferred reading, but contradictory evidence from
  their everyday life experiences and understanding of their inter-
  ests come into some conflict with the dominant code. To resolve
  the contradictions, audiences adjust their interpretation of the
  code in such a way as to better reflect their own position, failing
  which they simply resist the components of the code that are
  not compatible.
• Third is an oppositional reading, in which audiences advance a
  counter-hegemonic interpretation of the dominant code to which
  they find themselves in a directly oppositional relationship and
  which they must therefore reject entirely. For instance, African-
  American intellectual bell hooks, when considering black female
  spectatorship of films that portray people of color in a negative,
  peripheral, or completely absent fashion, advocates casting an
  "oppositional gaze" (hooks 1992/2004).

While it is possible to identify 'ideological failures' in terms of au-
dience reception, it is also necessary to look at the production of
codes. Although television and film are marked by their close prox-
imity to power in the form of the state (for example, the PAP gov-
ernment) and the market (for example, MediaCorp's Raintree Pic-
tures), and therefore operate within a 'professional code' that is
aligned to the preferred code, it is nevertheless conceivable that
television producers and filmmakers might actually intend to ad-
vance negotiated and counter-hegemonic codes opposed to the
dominant ideology. For instance, filmmakers such as Jack Neo, Eric
Khoo, and Royston Tan might in some moments be seen as or-
ganic intellectuals whose works critique aspects of culture, society,

and politics. And yet, in other moments, their works might be seen to fold their audiences right back into the dominant ideology, in line with the culture industry thesis. These two types of moments correspond with the two Marcusean analytical limits of pure autonomy and complete encapsulation; but the Gramscian approach allows for a more dynamic analysis of the maneuvers and negotiations that take place within these limits.

In the chapters that follow, television programs and films will be analyzed in terms of their ideological function—the way they interpellate audiences to become subjects of Singapore's advanced industrial capitalism—as well as in terms of the interruptions and variations that allow for negotiated and oppositional readings. The chapters will also analyze the way these texts might themselves be performing a counter-hegemonic function, advancing for example an oppositional code at odds with the dominant code. For Hall, popular culture is a "constant battlefield" of "strategic positions to be won and lost": neither the "total encapsulation" as critiqued by the Marcuse of *One-Dimensional Man* nor the "pure autonomy" that Marcuse advocated elsewhere is acceptable (Hall 1994, 460). But while this book, following Hall, will resist the view that audiences are cultural dupes whose authentic popular culture has been completely disorganized and reorganized by the cultural power of dominant interests through the culture industry, it will nevertheless continue to ground the analysis of cultural struggle in a political economy approach that takes very seriously the immense and sustained power of capitalism to contain moments of resistance. It will also continue to analyze the texts not only for their subversive and revolutionary contents, but also for their capacity to uphold artistic autonomy, abide by the internal laws of the artistic sphere, and enlighten audiences with a glimpse of lost sensuality and freedom from the tyranny of technological reason.

This ideological reading of films and television programs will be understood in terms of their conjunctural relationship with the other spheres. Conjuncture, as Rojek explains,

> refers to the historically specific balance of ideology, class consciousness, class interests and economic contradictions, which either elicits or inhibits social change. The elements that constitute a conjuncture are always 'overdetermined', or condensed, in a 'moment' that is not repeatable, and under conditions which are unique. Thus history is perceived as a

collection of interlinked 'moments' in which decisive shifts in social and
cultural patterns may, or may not, occur. (Rojek 2003, 12-13)

One particularly significant 'moment' in Singapore was the re-
gional economic crisis of 1997. Plummeting growth rates and, per-
haps more importantly, rising unemployment levels signaled to
Singaporeans that their government could not fully guarantee eco-
nomic success, or the sustained well-being of a nation with a very
open economy and no natural resources. As a result, the experience
of the 'man in the street' directly threatened to erode the author-
itarian government's political legitimacy. In such a critical moment,
ideological work was predictably at its busiest. The government,
for example, explained the crisis as an opportunity for fundamen-
tally restructuring the economic system and for laid-off workers to
upgrade their skills so that Singapore would be ready to excel once
again when the economy picked up. In the years following the cri-
sis, the government also staged large-scale public consultation spec-
tacles: The Singapore 21 and Remaking Singapore projects, for
example, served to address the more 'visionary' aspects of nation-
hood and citizenship. The spectacularly forward-looking *Renaissance
City Report* was also launched in 2000; in its rhetoric, Singapore
was envisioned as a world-class global city of excellence. These
optimistic and celebratory gestures aimed to distract Singaporeans
from the millennial gloom of a protracted crisis. Within this criti-
cal moment, too, films and television programs were especially
important as sites of ideological work, as indicated perhaps by the
noticeable increase in filmmaking activity during these years. While
popular culture—controlled by state funding and censorship—could
be enlisted to conceal the crisis of capitalism, it became quite pos-
sible also for residual and emergent voices to attempt a disarticula-
tion and rearticulation of the hegemonic formations—already de-
stabilized by the crisis—with alternative and even oppositional ideas.
It is ideological struggle of this kind that subsequent chapters will
attempt to identify.

SINGAPORE IDOL: CONSUMING NATION AND DEMOCRACY

The *Singapore Idol* competition, a national televised pop singing contest based on the *Pop Idol* format (in fact, franchise) originating from the UK, is a spectacular example of the global culture industry at work. This chapter will begin by locating the popularity of the first season of *Singapore Idol* in 2004 within the genre of 'reality television' and then explaining specifically the commercial advantages of producing a show such as *Singapore Idol*, including the positive spin-offs for the rest of the culture industry and indeed the capitalist economy itself. The chapter will then discuss how the first season of *Singapore Idol* performed ideological work by reflecting and thereby reinforcing dominant ideas about meritocracy, democracy, the nation, multiracialism, and the stereotypes that inform Singaporeans' everyday understanding of their society. As light entertainment, the show relied on and reproduced infantilized audiences that yearned for formulaic cultural products to provide an escape into fantasy, present an illusion of democratic efficacy, simulate nationhood, and insert into mundane lives dramatic moments of moral crisis and injustice destined every week to be the dominant topic of everyday conversation. Finally, the chapter will consider moments and opportunities for ideological resistance and negotiation, concluding that this first season of *Singapore Idol* was the most vivid contemporary example of a product of the culture industry in one-dimensional Singapore.

Reality Television and the Pop Idol *Format*

Singapore Idol belongs to the 'post-documentary' reality television genre, developed in many ways as a response to the looming worldwide economic crisis in the broadcast television industry, which started to face increased competition from other media around the turn of the millennium. Reality television programs usually claim to record actual events (rather than scripted ones) which feature the

lives and endeavors of ordinary people (rather than professional actors) put into situations and environments that are extraordinary, outrageous, exotic, or defined by artificial rules for acting, interacting, and competing. Even though the programs need to be skillfully designed by producers and shrewdly edited to sustain audience interest, they are nevertheless relatively inexpensive to produce, their advertising opportunities are substantial, and their mass appeal potentially enormous.

June Deery, a scholar of popular media, explains why reality television has been so lucrative: Large profits can be earned mainly because production costs are low. Reality television creates an

> unusual labor situation in which participants line up in the thousands in an attempt to work for free, or for very little, with only a slim chance of a substantial monetary reward. (Deery 2004, 3)

Even if the prize money is US$1 million, as it is in the *Survivor* series, this, Deery observes, is "what the network recoups in about 1 minute of advertising." Reality television also dispenses with the cost of paying professional writers and actors, bypassing them for non-unionized and more easily exploitable creative labor. The producers, as sociologist Bernard Beck observes, only have to think up an inventive "variety of grotesque tests and challenges imposed on zealous competitors in contests that involve the greatest aspirations of contemporary life: marriage, prosperity, and fame" (Beck 2004, 35). In the meantime, reality television participants, eager to claim their moments of fame or the minute possibility of winning the top prize, agree (in fact, compete against thousands of others) to work for free. This is the most blatant example of the culture industry exploiting its laborers, even humiliating them to make top-rated shows that bring lucrative profits mainly from advertising.

Deery concludes that producing reality television is a low-risk investment and, if the format succeeds, a rich source of short-term profits (Deery 2004, 3). As such programs are an "international product designed to be easily translated from one culture to another," reality television formats, once perfected, can be exported to and adopted in another country without further creative treatment; in fact, they self-consciously retain and foreground their distinctive reality format as a profitable brand (Deery 2004, 4). As media and culture scholar Alison Hearn puts it,

> [t]he economy of reality television is certainly the reason for its rise to prominence. It is cheap to produce and easy to sell, and the supply of labor is apparently endless. Everybody wants to be on television. (Hearn 2004)

Media student Gabrielle Dann observes how *American Idol*, a spin-off from UK's *Pop Idol*, has since its beginnings in 2002 been "a lesson in how to make money. Its spin-off merchandise and use of synergistic relationships [are] staggering" (Dann 2004, 15). Pointing out the ubiquitous presence in the show of sponsor Coca-Cola's product, logo, and brand image, Deery describes *American Idol* as "a creature of advertising," purchased by the Fox network mainly as an advertising vehicle (Deery 2004, 16). Apart from providing opportunities for merchandising, product placement, and product sponsorship, the show functions also as the first stage in marketing new pop music products surrounding the newly installed Idols, including their records, concert tours, fan memorabilia, and any products that the Idols endorse. The show's audiences are in effect a mega-focus group efficiently brought together every week for half-a-year in front of their television screens in the comfort of their homes to test the commercial appeal of potential pop stars lined up by pop industry experts looking to make low-risk investments. Every week, audiences who follow—and determine—the fortunes of these pop star hopefuls inevitably develop huge emotional attachments to them. The show transforms the focus group into a large fan base ready and waiting, by the end of the series, to purchase the final product—the Idol's records, concert tickets, endorsed products, and so on—which they are given to feel they have had a part in manufacturing.

Reality television's mass appeal is determined by a number of interrelated factors. Recognizing that audiences are not merely consumer dupes, Deery locates their fascination with this seemingly trivial genre in its ability to capitalize on their shock and "deep cultural anxieties" surrounding the extent to which the pursuit of monetary reward will lead (other) individuals to forgo such values as truthfulness, loyalty, trust, and morality in general. As Deery observes,

> [r]eality TV represents … the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone as well as everything has its price and that people will do pretty much anything for money. (Deery 2004, 2)

And so audiences, expecting to be horrified, watch reality programs to determine for themselves the extent to which their idealized moral society has yielded to the corruption of capitalism. This is, in some sense, a way of consuming the pleasures of horror from a safe distance, from a position where one can continue to assume the moral high ground and pass judgment on the demeaning actions of greedy individuals on television ever-willing to forgo their own dignity and social values for material gain.

Secondly, the popularity of reality television might reflect, as Deery suggests, a "longing for the real in the era of the digital and the virtual" (Deery 2004, 5). But the expansion of this 'mediated' access to reality through a proliferation of reality programs—talent shows, game shows, matchmaking shows, makeover shows, fly-on-the-wall shows, talk shows, law-enforcement shows, and so on—transforms 'reality' itself, repackages it for mass consumption according to the laws of the market, and makes it meaningless outside these televisual formats designed to command high ratings and draw substantial advertising revenue.

Thirdly, noting that many reality television formats are sexually charged, Deery explains their mass appeal in terms of voyeuristic and pornographic pleasures. Through an "exaggerated viewing access," reality television "invokes, though it does not fulfill, the fantasy of absolute vision, of having complete access to all that is hidden" (Deery 2004, 9, 6). The peeping tom and television audiences, argues Deery, derive similar pleasure in being able to observe people "going through private and unscripted actions rather than dramatic performances" (Deery 2004, 6). In a panoptical society, where individuals are constantly aware of the audiovisual technologies of discipline and surveillance that permeate their everyday lives, a show that allows the watched subject to become the watching subject can be deeply empowering, even if somewhat perverse (Deery 2004, 9). There is, as Deery argues, something pornographic about this kind of gratification, where the viewing subject enjoys anonymous and exaggerated viewing access to exhibitionistic participants who readily accept the invitation to be "humiliated and depicted in subjugation to entertain." Hearn describes how these reality television formats colonize "the concepts of identity, relationship, [and] meaningful interactivity," and "work to construct and reinforce a system of cultural value, which involves the active production of the self as a saleable image-commodity." She observes

how "reality television produces the image-slave," the individual willing to offer her or his labor for free in return for the chance to create a persona that sells: a "saleable image-commodity" (Hearn 2004). Many contestants, as Deery notes, readily admit their willingness to do anything—even sacrifice their most intimate privacy—for money or fame. "A more naked example of the triumph of the market would be difficult to find" (Deery 2004, 8).

Humiliation and masochism, according to Hearn, are fundamental aspects of reality programs. Through strategies of "corporate seduction," the reality television industry lures loyal participants willing to endure a range of abuses in return for access to the "fast lane" to fame and wealth, through "the active production of the self as a saleable image-commodity" (Hearn 2004). Hearn identifies the central enactment of humiliation in the home and body makeover shows, beauty pageants, hidden camera shows, and the 'voting off' game shows, where participants are praised for being able to withstand the judgments of others, which can range from good-natured to sarcastic to cruel. Beck describes how, in *American Idol*, contestants are chosen—in fact, baited—and the competition designed to structure opportunities for harsh criticism from the professional judges. He argues,

> What would be honesty if the aspirants imposed themselves on the judges becomes cruelty when the aspirants are invited to compete in the expectation that their performances would be so awful that the criticism would be justified. (Beck 2004, 36)

Hearn also argues that "pleasure and humiliation are elided" when audiences watch reality programs. Audiences are repulsed and shocked not only by the inanity of the shows, but also by the fact that they have chosen to watch the programs. And yet, they are drawn to these shows, deriving great pleasure in being able to perceive dispassionately the exploitative mechanisms of the culture industry at work. Beck suggests another way that audiences might assuage their own humiliation at choosing to watch the exploitative *American Idol*, arguing that these shows,

> [r]ather than expanding people's identification with the misfortunes of others … make it possible for us [the audience] to identify with the executioner. Because there is a valuable prize possible, we are freed from the necessity of pity and can take pure delight in the infliction of terror. What a swell party this is. (Beck 2004, 36)

The mass appeal of reality television is reflected directly in the high
levels of audience participation, at least where 'voting off' formats
are adopted, as in the *Idol* and *Big Brother* shows. As a reality talent
search show, for example, the *American Idol* competition gives the
audience an active role in determining the outcome of the show
at regular stages of its progress, by allowing them to eliminate con-
testants through their votes until a single winner is chosen. Liesbet
van Zoonen, a professor of media and popular culture, argues that
these extraordinary levels of audience participation and interven-
tion, made possible through new digital interactive technologies, are
evidence that "audiences are not the passive couch potatoes, the
mindless dupes or the vulnerable victims that television critics often
contend they are" (van Zoonen 2004, 40). Further, van Zoonen
argues that audience activity of this kind—including "discussion,
participation, creativity, intervention, judging and voting"—bears
so many fundamental similarities with idealized models of tradi-
tional civic activity and their associated competencies that it might
be possible and desirable to transpose the mechanisms of television
audience participation to actual spaces of citizen participation in
public affairs, including even the election of political leaders (van
Zoonen 2004, 40).

   Responding to the many analysts of media and politics who are
cynical of the beneficial role of television in politics, van Zoonen
offers a three-part argument to support her thesis that television
entertainment and fandom are not harmful to democracy, but in-
deed necessary and useful for its proper functioning. Firstly, she
argues that the structural relationship between electorates on the
one hand and parties and politicians on the other is analogous to
the structural relationship between fans on the one hand and tele-
vision programs and stars on the other. The relative levels of inter-
est, commitment, and activity among fans can also be found among
electorates (van Zoonen 2004, 45). Secondly, while fan activities
might help to build social capital that is essential for a healthy
civic life, more important is the way the dissemination of informa-
tion, discussion, and activism—essential practices of democratic
politics—might be observed of fans who

> have an intense individual investment in the text … participate in strong
> communal discussions and deliberations about the qualities of the
> text … and propose and discuss alternatives which would be implement-
> ed as well if only the fans could have their way. (van Zoonen 2004, 46)

Van Zoonen believes that this equivalence between fan practices and political practices can facilitate a beneficial exchange of values and motivations between the two domains. Thirdly, she counters dismissive arguments against emotions in politics by drawing from neuroscience-inspired research in order to advance an argument that "affective intelligence" is actually "key to good citizenship because it *enables* the use of reason" and promotes political interest and commitment (van Zoonen 2004, 49; emphasis added). Political communities, just like fan communities, require emotional input and affective investments by their members in order to remain vital.

Media student Simon Cowell (not the judge on *Pop Idol* and *American Idol*) also investigates the way that *American Idol* relates to American democracy. He points out how the national reference in the title of the show mobilizes the audience into the national democratic process, giving them each a right to participate in a reiterative, democratically structured procedure balanced against the élite expertise of a panel of judges to produce meritocratic outcomes. As audiences respond to the television show host's persistent urging every week to vote for their favorite Idols through telephone calls or text messages, they are interpellated as American voting subjects, part of a larger American voting public. They are empowered by a sense of political efficacy: Their voting actions translate, in a direct and instantaneously gratifying way, into democratic outcomes. And yet, as Cowell points out, the audiences also derive pleasure from being able to exert such power to determine the fates of the contestants in a mode that is anonymous and therefore protected from blame (Cowell 2003). For Cowell,

> *American Idol* dramatizes, in a sense, the popular narrative of the American dream, the idea that anyone can make it. Or rather, anyone can attempt to make it, but only the best will. (Cowell 2003)

Just after Taylor Hicks was announced the winner of *American Idol 5*, the eccentric performer declared jubilantly, "I'm living the American dream!"

Unlike van Zoonen, Cowell is sharply critical of *American Idol* for the widely seductive and spectacular "fantasy of a participatory democracy" that it gives rise to (Cowell 2003). He makes reference to social theorist Craig Calhoun, who wrote that

> the public sphere was turned into a sham semblance. The key tendency was to replace the shared critical activity of public discourse by a more

> passive culture of consumption on the one hand and an apolitical sociability on the other. (Quoted in Cowell 2003)

Similarly, *American Idol*, according to Cowell, "attempts to reinscribe its participants as consumers of culture, rather than affording them a productive agency" (Cowell 2003). Its blatant patriotism suggests an ideological function—at a time when the "US engages in questionable military conflict abroad in the name of freedom"—to produce "the fiction of a stronger and more effective democracy at home, to which all citizens have access" (Cowell 2003). Giving a detailed description of a particularly patriotic episode, shown during the US war on Iraq, that involved a rousing performance by the Idol finalists of "I'm Proud to be an American," Dann describes the show as the "selling of a nation" where

> Mom, apple pie, the flag, and *American Idol* [are] all rolled into one. How could any patriotic American not be swayed? This is the building of brand loyalty at its best. Trust in America, trust in *American Idol*, and trust in every product that *American Idol* sells. (Dann 2004, 19)

The *Idol* shows, simulacra of a participatory democracy that is unavailable in real life, present themselves as ideological instruments to hide a regrettable absence. Other reality television shows perform their ideological function by diverting attention, through the spectacular and the grotesque, away from an undesirable presence in real life, such as selfish, cruel, and debased behavior motivated by the monomaniacal pursuit of monetary reward. As Deery explains, this can be performed by "selling an exaggerated version of the viewers' own situation back to them as entertainment, which is diverting because it is displaced onto others" (Deery 2004, 10). The fact that the grotesque scenarios on reality television are not entirely absent from normal life is energetically masked by shows such as *Survivor* that relocate these dynamics in exotic locations. As Deery observes,

> the underlying ethos of most forms of Reality TV, Spartan or hedonistic, is predictably capitalist—which is to say, the promotion of individual and open competition for private, usually monetary, gain. (Deery 2004, 12)

Capitalist values, and the reality television narratives that propagate and legitimatize these values, are reinforced by an army of surplus masochistic reality television participants eager to work for free, to be humiliated, and to be exploited. Reality television programs are,

as Hearn describes, "the ideological sweatshops of techno-capital; their participants are its paradigmatic docile bodies" (Hearn 2004).

The Singapore Idol *Industry*

In Singapore, reality television has also become a very popular genre to produce locally, alongside the mostly US exports that fill many hours of the day, including prime time. Singaporean viewers have access to the 24-hour Reality TV channel, available on digital cable. On terrestrial channels, they have watched local versions of franchised game shows such as *The Pyramid Game*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, and *The Weakest Link* (T. Lim 2003). They have also watched locally made shows that loosely follow, often in hybrid forms, popular reality formats overseas. These have included *Party Guide for an Urbanite* (a version of *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy*), *Eye for a Guy* (a version of *The Bachelorette*), *Gotcha!* (a version of *Candid Camera*), and *All Change* (BBC's *Changing Rooms* and *Style Challenge*, plus a learn-a-new-skill segment, all rolled into one). Other slightly more original formats include *Training Day*, featuring celebrities who have to learn a sport within 24 hours, and *Here's Looking at You, Babe!*, a series that documents a celebrity couple's experiences from the start of pregnancy to the birth of their first child (this was an informal part of comprehensive policies to increase Singapore's low birth rates). Of all these reality television shows, *Singapore Idol* was the most highly-rated. Former MediaCorp CEO Ernest Wong describes it as

> a great success beyond our expectations. It was a phenomenon. It showed Singapore has talent. And it bonded the nation in a very entertaining way. (Quoted in Osborne 2005)

The first weekly episode of Season 1, broadcast on August 9, 2004, immediately after the spectacular National Day Parade coverage on MediaCorp TV Channel 5, drew 1.2 million viewers, making it the most-watched local program debut on the channel (Seah 2004). Over the two months before the show's premiere, approximately 3,000 people responded to audition calls, and the worst among them were featured in a 'rejects' episode whose popularity was demonstrated by the numerous repeat broadcasts. A panel of four judges chose 100 contestants for the preliminary round, and then selected

30 from this group to be semifinalists. From that point onward, the judges' role was reduced to providing criticism and comments to help contestants improve their performance and audiences make informed decisions. Audiences were asked to vote for their favorite contestants through telephone calls or text messages; no limits were placed on the number of votes per viewer. For the next three rounds of elimination, the 30 semifinalists were whittled down to nine finalists, as well as two 'wild card' finalists given a second chance after their elimination in earlier rounds. From that point onward, one contestant was voted off the show every week. The final episode drew 1.8 million viewers and was broadcast live on December 1, 2004, from the Singapore Indoor Stadium, where approximately 8,000 fans witnessed Taufik Batisah beating Sylvester Sim to the title, garnering 62 per cent of the 1.1 million telephone votes cast (K. F. Loh 2004, Thomas 2004i). The winner and runner-up both received one-year contracts with Sony BMG, which holds the option to renew them. Both were also signed to talent management company Artiste Networks, the management arm of Hype Records, whose executive director is competition judge Ken Lim (*Straits Times* 2004a). Both Taufik and Sim have secured relatively lucrative product endorsement deals and public engagements of various kinds. Both have released debut albums: Taufik's *Blessings* achieved double platinum sales by the third week of release. And both, along with three other finalists, have been featured in a television drama series *Shooting Stars*.

Singapore Idol links Singaporeans to a large and complex global network of ownership, in what could readily be regarded as a global culture industry. The rights to produce *Singapore Idol*, as well as other *Idol* spin-offs in almost 30 countries, were purchased from the *Pop Idol* franchise, whose program format had been conceived by UK-based Simon Fuller (former manager of British pop group The Spice Girls), and is owned by 19 Entertainment Ltd (Fuller's company that deals with television, music, film, merchandising, music publishing, talent management, and so on) and Fremantle-Media (a subsidiary of German media conglomerate Bertelsmann AG). Every *Idol* winner around the world, including Taufik, must sign with Bertelsmann's record company BMG (which became Sony BMG after 2004). These symbiotic profit-maximizing relationships between corporate partners in the global culture industry, crystallizing around the *Idol* brand, have not only created an efficient

process for popular music production, but also made every stage in this complex process—talent spotting; talent management; record production, distribution, and promotion; product endorsements; and so on—a potential money-spinner that benefits an ever-growing network of related companies worldwide. In these aggressive inter-media marketing campaigns, nothing is allowed to sit idly without directly supporting the enterprise or turning a large profit: Nothing is wasted.

For the right to air *American Idol*, the Fox network paid Fuller US$1 million per episode (Dann 2004, 17). Fox is owned by News Corporation, headed by Rupert Murdoch, who is known to have radically conservative political views which, as Dann argues, are clearly inscribed in several particularly patriotic *American Idol* episodes shown during the US war on terror (Dann 2004, 17-18). Cultur-ally and ideologically, an argument can be readily made that the *Idol* franchise is one of the latest and most penetrative forms of Anglo-American cultural imperialism. Singapore's MediaCorp TV Channel 5, with much less clout than Fox, admitted to creative conflicts with FremantleMedia, although exactly what was compro-mised in the *Singapore Idol* production remains unknown. But it is just as easy to discount the impact of this cultural imperialism by insisting that winners are, after all, chosen according to collective indigenous (and not necessarily American or British) tastes and in ways that also benefit the local pop industries. More convincing than the claims about how distinctively Anglo-American tastes, val-ues, and ideologies are overwhelming local cultures through the global culture industry, are the arguments that it is actually capital-ism and its colonizing economic imperatives that lead to two con-tradictory cultural tendencies: on the one hand, helping to develop local cultural knowledge and expertise, and on the other hand, debasing the variety and complexity of local (including, in fact, Anglo-American) cultures into a standardized range of cultural products whose national demarcations are but illusory differentia-tions meant merely for purposes of branding. A 'culture industry' reading would tend to emphasize how the cultural and artistic re-sources of different national communities are systematically being repackaged (and thereby depleted) to serve the larger interests of global capital.

Indeed, within Singapore itself, *Singapore Idol* set up complemen-tary demand in several related industries. As audiences spent S$0.50

per call to vote for their favorite contestants every week, the three local telecommunications companies—SingTel, MobileOne (M1), and StarHub—received the bulk of these substantial revenues (which they claimed went mainly toward servicing operating costs), with a "minimal cut" taken by MediaCorp and FremantleMedia (Thomas 2004h). In fact, by placing these votes, audiences were actually paying to serve as a nationwide focus group for Sony BMG, which could then put out an album at the end of the competition based on their response. The emotional attachment to the contestants that grew as audiences turned into fans almost guaranteed profitable sales not only of the solo and compilation albums that the finalists released, but also of their concert tickets. Not long after Taufik was named the first Singapore Idol, he performed in *Idol* judge Dick Lee's *Life. Stories* concert (with runner-up Sim), a charity concert organized by a Muslim organization, a hip-hop festival, and his own solo concert (co-sponsored by Sony BMG and the local postal company) to which his fans would gain entry by purchasing a set of four teddy bears at S$60 each.

Nurturing a fan base also guaranteed profitable sales of *Idol* merchandise as well as products endorsed by the finalists. For example, Taufik was named Swatch's first Singapore ambassador and asked to design a limited-edition Swatch packaging. The trendy watch company also provided its catalog and other Swatch offers and privileges to members of the official Taufik fan club (see the Fiknatic page at http://www.taufikbatisah.net), which was launched simultaneously. Taufik was also invited to judge entries for a competition to design the ideal cover for Samsung's MP3 player; and he has been named ambassador of the Samsung Fan Club. Sim, who had profited from the judges' suggestion to smile during his performances, starred in a television commercial with 50 of his fans for Belgian tooth-whitening product CleverWhite. He later autographed six boxes of the product that were auctioned for the benefit of *tsunami* victims (Thomas 2005c). Both Taufik and Sim have endorsed HSC drinks and are spokesmen for the 7-Eleven chain of stores, with Taufik endorsing its Big Gulp drink and Sim its Slurpee drink. Much more of a spectacle has been second runner-up Olinda Cho, who endorsed Royal BodyPerfect by agreeing to be photographed for media advertisements as a miserable overweight tomboy who transforms through the slimming program into a slender, much lighter, and beautifully groomed lady who looks good in

dresses. The slimming industry in Singapore is estimated to be worth S\$100 million per year, and a celebrity who typically agrees to a one-year endorsement contract can command up to a six-figure fee, of which 30 per cent can go to the management company (H. H. Ng 2005).

At one point, Taufik was rumored to command S\$7,000 for a 30-minute appearance. Aside from private appearances, *Idol* finalists have been asked to front charity projects and social causes. For instance, the finalists performed at the anti-drug *High on Live* concert; Taufik and Sim performed at high-profile charity fundraiser *The President's Challenge*; and Taufik performed at a festival organized by youths to showcase the talents of their peers. Taufik and Sylvester have also been named youth ambassadors of their residential constituencies with the aim of attracting more young Singaporeans to participate in grassroots activities (S. Chia 2005). The Health Promotion Board has also invited former smoker Taufik to be their 'smoke-free' ambassador, with the aim of discouraging young people from smoking.

Exactly one year after *Singapore Idol* first appeared on television, the first episode of *Shooting Stars* was broadcast, immediately following National Day Parade 2005. This was a 10-episode drama serial featuring five *Idol* finalists—including Taufik, Sim, and Cho—acting out semiautobiographical storylines that mimicked their real-life endeavors to become pop stars. In the series, the five characters are naturally talented singers who sign up for voice lessons with George, a successful singer-songwriter. Ideologically, the fatherly, nurturing, and quirky figure of George serves to represent the recording industry as benign, redemptive, and innovative, rather than exploitative and obsessed with the bottom line. Each episode featured one of the characters struggling with personal obstacles and eventually overcoming them. In the final episode, George concludes his singing course with an exercise requiring the characters to cross a bridge blindfolded, which they each do as they reenact in their minds the processes by which they overcame their fears. The series was clearly commercial in its purpose, with a long list of product sponsors and product placements that were not simply incidental to the narrative—for instance, Cho's character, while on a posh dinner date, decides to shed her formal attire for a 'truer,' less pretentious style of clothing, which she and her date are able to do

only because of the availability of 24-hour shopping at Mustafa Centre.

More importantly, the *Shooting Stars* series allowed fans to relive their experience and the excitement of watching *Singapore Idol*. By mimicking the characters, twists, and struggles in the competition, the series was a marginally differentiated product that attempted to revive interest in the *Idol* finalists and the new products that they needed to sell. The final episode concluded with a group performance by the five finalists, who directly address television audiences, asking them to "help us make our dreams come true," a catchphrase that resonates with Artiste Networks' tagline "Will my dreams come true … ?" and that translates no doubt into 'go out and buy our albums.' *Shooting Stars* was an advertisement for a range of products, of which the most important were the *Idol* finalists and their records. A similar strategy of reenacting the excitement for the finalists through mimicry of the *Singapore Idol* competition can be observed in the aborted version of Taufik's first music video, *I Dream*, in which he was supposed to act as a waiter who dreams of becoming a pop star. Several of the songs in Sim's debut album *Take Flight* were publicized as being about a girl who was out of his reach, mimicking the alleged romance between Sim and contestant Maia Lee (Thomas 2004f), rumors of which were widely circulated, as well as their publicity-boosting 'wedding' that, like Britney Spears' Vegas marriage, which was widely seen as a publicity stunt, was annulled even before it started (Thomas 2005a).

The print media and radio shows consistently carried stories about the competition and the contestants themselves; in this way, they sustained interest in the show and advertised the eventual winners and their products. Their own readership and audience figures also probably benefited from their being a primary source of *Idol* information. An inspection of *Singapore Idol*-related articles in *The Straits Times*, Singapore's main broadsheet, over a period of one year reveals seven basic types of articles.

- The first type provided basic information about the competition, including its rules, updates, summaries, and episode reminders.
- The second type provided fan-oriented profiles of the contestants, including the rejects who were presented as odd characters with interesting life stories, to be puzzled over, pitied, despised, or ridiculed. These profiles often took the form of interviews and

pithy quotes from other notable Singaporeans including academics, and were also extended to include stories about other interesting people related to the contestants: Taufik's once-famous singing aunt and Sim's bankrupt mother, for example.

- The third type provided profiles of the judges. These often took the deliberately parodic form of an audience poll on their performance as judges. There were also stories about their shortcomings and fashion mistakes.
- The fourth type included articles that profiled types of viewers and fans. In one article, viewers were classified into teenage fanatics, armchair critics, reality-show addicts, devoted friends or family members, and staunch boycotters.
- The fifth type of article gave readers stories presented as 'controversial.' Somewhat contrived reports about blossoming romance among the finalists, the problem of race-based voting, the suggestion of results manipulation by the producers, and Sim's bankrupt mother, for example, were publicity boosters that gave readers and audiences more to get excited about.
- The sixth type took the form of letters from viewers, often positioned in the layout to suggest debate or reaction to controversy. Once again, these letters created a sense that everyone was talking about *Singapore Idol*.
- Finally, a number of articles were written as more analytical and reflective commentaries, advancing an often hackneyed wisdom behind the didactic attempts to draw larger significance from the events of the competition, from which all, it seems, can learn important lessons in life.

Singapore Idol, derived from an international franchise of proven success, was very clearly an ideal product of the global culture industry to which Singapore's own culture industry desperately wants to connect. For decades, Singapore had its own relatively successful talent search shows—such as *Talentime*, *Rolling Good Times*, and *Asia Bagus*—but the *Idol* format's international appeal has not only buried these earlier efforts as inferior television, but also attempted to deal with the inherent tensions between the international and the local by advancing the rhetorical formula "Singapore's very own … ." A Channel 5 spokesperson declared that the Singapore version of the *Idol* show had "really captured the imagination of Singaporeans" by offering them something 'unique' compared with the *American*

Idol import, a more 'approachable' local context, and an opportunity for direct interaction (quoted in Hong and Thomas 2004). In a letter to *The Straits Times*, reader Joseph Ng argued that

> as Singaporeans, we should entertain in a way unique to ourselves … We should not expect an American Idol in Singapore, but rather, a truly Singaporean Idol. (J. Ng 2004)

But sociologist Habibul Khondker believed that the show's popularity depended on a prior familiarity with the *American Idol* import (quoted in Hong and Thomas 2004). Indeed, apart from the format, nearly every other aspect of the show seemed to mimic the lucrative American import. In responding to viewer criticism of his performance, host Gurmit Singh admitted how difficult it was to "compete with [*American Idol* host] Ryan Seacrest's standard" (Thomas 2004d). As for the judges, even though there were four members on the panel (instead of *American Idol*'s three), it was clear that they tried to mimic—or were presented as mimicking—their American counterparts. *Straits Times* reader Wong Lai Chun wrote in to complain about the judges' rude and scripted performance:

> The judges are presumably out to spot creativity, and yet what we get from their own performance is a stylised act, an unconvincing portrayal of Simon Cowell. (Wong 2004)

The 'rejects' shows, also capitalizing on the popularity of the example set by *American Idol*, tried desperately to showcase Singapore's very own William Hung. The contest format itself has inspired other local copycat talent contest shows in Chinese (*Project Superstar, Star Idol, Campus Superstar*) and Malay (*Anugerah*). The format has even been adopted in a live show to promote volunteerism by asking non-profit organizations to make *Singapore Idol*-style pitches for their causes in an effort to win S$50,000 funding.

Singapore Idol not only copied all essential features of the commercially successful *American Idol* format but also, like the American import, produced standardized, marginally differentiated, low-cost, and high-revenue pop stars through an assembly line of identically structured episodes every week. With regard to *American Idol*, media student Simon Cowell describes the

> endless cover versions of songs that the contestants are compelled to deliver. With virtually no original music in the show, the voice performing is always a performance of another's voice. Through their citation, the subjects are cast as copies of a prior performance. The fact that the

competitors are required each week to sing songs from a particular genre (country this week, disco the next) is a further suggestion of the fetishization of sameness, of abstraction through copy, at work here. (Cowell 2003)

Judges regularly praised contestants who brought originality and uniqueness to their performance of these cover versions—"you made the song your own"—but in actual fact, contestants will succeed only if they can fit into the industry mold. In *Singapore Idol*, Taufik was modeled after American R&B singer Usher; Sim after Taiwanese R&B singer Jay Chou; and Maia Lee after Latin pop singer Shakira but also, because she was a single mother with a very young child, *American Idol* 2004 winner Fantasia Barrino (Thomas 2004g). The outputs—pop stars, their albums, and their endorsed products—were, in this process, shaped by what audiences thought they liked; and the audiences, paying to exercise their pseudo-choice every week, were in turn shaped by the pop music industry, which insidiously dictated to them what they should like. The panel of judges served as gatekeepers of the global culture industry, reminding audiences what they should like and asserting authority and market discipline over the contestants: Olinda Cho must wear a dress, David Yeo must stop dressing like an *ah beng* (a Hokkien term for a typically Chinese ruffian with a garish dress sense), Sylvester Sim must smile, and Taufik Batisah (Malay) must, as judge Ken Lim asserted, be more appealing to a mass audience "in terms of … race" (Chinese)!

Ideological Work

Television audiences are rarely the cultural dupes who believe wholeheartedly that reality television, including the *Singapore Idol* competition, reflects—or even makes any attempt to reflect—the 'real world' truthfully (L. T. Ng 2005). Judge Ken Lim explains how it is

a result of skilled editing so television viewers can enjoy a well-produced programme … Would this be considered a con job of the highest order? Or is it just television? (Quoted in *Straits Times* 2004c)

But reality television is mimetic in the way it imitates the dominant 'commonsense' meanings and values that are taken for granted in the sensible world of everyday life and that, in this way, often con-

ceal practices of domination and exploitation. By reproducing, affirming, and reinforcing these dominant ways of interpreting the world, reality television becomes a material part of this reality that it uncritically represents.

Embedded in *Singapore Idol* were themes, morals, narratives, characterization, styles, and tropes that are conducive to and supportive of capitalist practices and values as they have been understood and internalized in Singapore. For example, the place of 'meritocracy' and prospects of upward social mobility in Singapore's public discourse, key ideas that make austere conditions of work acceptable even to those who will have nothing to gain by them, were affirmed when *Singapore Idol* audiences witnessed how ordinary people could become celebrities and 'national heroes' through hard work and talent. The fact that even competition rejects were given a second chance to display their talent in the popular 'rejects show' was interpreted as a sign that Singapore is a land of opportunity, rather than an example of how the television industry exploits people by presenting and re-presenting them as freaks whose repeated humiliation offers audiences much visual pleasure. Journalist Jaime Ee of *The Business Times* (Singapore) wrote that

> these Singaporeans know exactly what they want and they aim to get it, talented or not. We may have laughed at them, but look a little closer and you'll discern a distinct pattern of entrepreneurial behaviour that, gulp, might be just what our government meant when it said Singaporeans needed to be more creative, more entrepreneurial and less risk-averse. (Ee 2004b)

The fact that a handful of contestants eliminated in earlier rounds could be called back as 'wild card' contestants and even, as in the case of Sim, end up winning second prize, was also interpreted as indicative of a meritocratic system where everyone has a continual shot at success. *The Straits Times* reported Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong giving a speech that outlined

> a vision of PAP-led Singapore as a land of opportunity, with each person treated fairly, rewarded according to his effort and ability, and allowed to realize his full potential. (L. Teo 2004)

To cheers from his audience, Lee drew on the example of finalists Taufik and Sim, whose humble backgrounds did not prevent them from rising "to stardom through talent and hard work" (L. Teo 2004). In a letter to *The Straits Times*, reader Liew Kai Khiun cel-

ebrated how the competition results have "shown us that one does not need privileged social status, excellent educational qualifications or government guidance to capture the public's imagination" (Liew 2004). And *Straits Times* journalist Sumiko Tan reflected on how the

> success of the Bos [*American Idol 4* finalist], Taufiks and Sylvesters of this world gives hope to the rest of us ordinary folk: If a struggling singer who lives in a US$295-a-month apartment can be a role model to millions, maybe I can too, one day.
> And if reality TV results in such feel-good aspirations, is it such a bad thing? (S. Tan 2005)

In Singapore, meritocracy as an ideologically acceptable re-presentation of capitalist hyper-individualism and brutal competitiveness is articulated with 'multiracialism' so that minority ethnic communities can believe that they have equal opportunities for success. This belief was reflected and reinforced in the way Taufik, a Malay-Muslim Singaporean, could win a national competition in a country where three-quarters of the population is ethnic Chinese. *Straits Times* reader Liow Swee Lian wrote in and jubilantly exclaimed that the

> results showed that the efforts of nation building have borne fruit. The winner of the Singapore Idol competition was judged solely on his merits and not on race, religion or social background. (Liow 2004)

Television trailers for the series finale deliberately presented Taufik and Sim as buddies who competed not in terms of race but in terms of musical styles: R&B versus rock (Alphonso and Thomas 2004). Media reports also took the trouble to feature Taufik's Chinese supporters and Sim's non-Chinese supporters. But the mimetic quality of *Singapore Idol* is much more sophisticated than that. The show and its media discourse occasionally hinted at the threat of racial and even religious communalism: Viewers were worried about the possibility of race-based or religion-based voting that would not only yield irrational outcomes but also augur poorly for multiracial and multireligious 'harmony.' In this way, *Singapore Idol* capitalized on cultural anxieties—the fear of racial riots and violent religious extremism—in order to get Singaporeans' attention (and viewership), and also to make them value the harmony that they now enjoy and the strong government that (they should believe) is necessary to secure it.

Singapore Idol also helped Singaporeans to imagine their nation. The competition began on Singapore's National Day 2004. Taufik, like a national hero, was featured on a Singapore stamp, performed the National Day Parade 2002 theme song, "We Will Get There," and was (with local artiste Rui En) the official performer of the National Day Parade 2005 theme song, "Reach Out for the Skies." These two song titles alone drew obvious parallels between Taufik's personal ambitions and achievements, and Singapore's self-image: a small, disadvantaged, but economically successful nation that has had to struggle to survive in a hostile world. As a major nation-building activity, *Singapore Idol* rallied Singaporean viewers to participate by interpellating them as active agents who could help determine not only the finalists' destiny, but by extension their destiny as a nation. Every week, the host announced the results by exclaiming that "Singapore has voted!"

But although the show mimicked an imaginary nation and helped to give that nation material content, it also advanced the idea that Singapore cannot be a closed nation-state, but must be a cosmopolitan global city that is welcoming of 'foreign talent.' The rules of *Singapore Idol* therefore did not exclude foreigners from participating as contestants as long as they were located in Singapore. When Canadian contestant Jeassea Thyidor, considered to be the most talented singer among the finalists, was voted off the show in the first round of the finals, Singaporean viewers wrote letters to the press debating the 'crisis' in terms of the nation's attitude to foreign talent. Clearly, this episode reflected the tension between Singaporeans' national and global identities, tension that the culture industry needed to reconcile: In its promotional material for *Shooting Stars*, MediaCorp TV described Thyidor, who starred in the series as a rich but neglected Indonesian wife, as someone who "now proudly declares Singapore home." The article concluded with "Who needs flag-toting citizens indeed when Singapore has such patriotic [expatriates]!" (MediaCorp TV 2005a).

Singapore Idol mimetically reflected and helped to reproduce the ideas and practices—meritocracy, entrepreneurship, multiracialism, nation-state, and global city—that conceal asymmetrical relations of power essential to the proper functioning of capitalism and the masking of its inherent contradictions and crisis tendencies. The show freely worked on stereotypes as a way not only to bring order to a complex social world through simplifying categories, but also

to reproduce relations of power that provide lucrative opportunities for audience gratification and so support the capitalist culture industry in a one-dimensional society. *Singapore Idol* readily appealed to racial stereotypes. Taufik—a former pizza delivery boy with a talent for R&B music, divorced parents, and a mother who works as a condominium cleaner—readily fit into the popular stereotype of Malays in Singapore. His success in the competition, it could be argued, cemented Singaporeans' belief that Malays can excel only in non-academic and less cerebral fields such as entertainment and sports. In fact, when Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong gave a speech to inspire the Malay community, he observed that

> [t]here are many more Taufiks out there and it is important to support these talented Malay youths as they pursue their dreams … many Malay youths … are very gifted in music, art, media communication, sports and so on. (Quoted in Latif 2005)

Clearly missing from this list, or perhaps relegated to the 'and so on' category, were academic and commercial achievements.

The show also readily appealed to stereotypes associated with gender, sexuality, and the body. During the competition, contestant Olinda Cho, who was loud in her speech, kept her hair fashionably short, and was deeply reluctant to wear dresses, was immediately stereotyped as a tomboy, a description that the judges suggested would count against her in the audiences' decision. She came from a middle-class background, lived in a large landed property, studied in Australia, and was seen to be overweight—and in that way unacceptably 'excessive.' As talented and likeable as she was, Cho was invested with an image of deviancy, but one that she could overcome if she listened to good advice. Cho protested good-naturedly that "they can still call me fat and it does not bother me at all as I am happy with myself" (quoted in Thomas 2004a)—a resistant moment, perhaps, when she seemed to renounce her feminine 'to be looked at' nature. In one of the later episodes, though, Cho was seen to have 'given in' to the judges' urgings, not only appearing onstage in an elegant black dress, but also performing the song "Superwoman," which she dedicated to her "future husband" (Thomas 2004c). Whether or not there was anything subversive in the fact that the song contained the lyrics "I'm *not* your superwoman," Cho's 'unruliness' was nevertheless subjected to a controlling male gaze that threatened to punish her (by withholding suc-

cess in the competition) if she refused to step back into a docile, 'Asian,' and feminine role in Singapore's patriarchal society. Furthermore, after she won third place in the competition, Cho signed a lucrative contract with Royal BodyPerfect, agreeing to let the slimming company photographically document her weight loss for advertising purposes. Here was the culture industry manipulating Cho into renouncing her 'excess' and into selling a body-image, and thereby manipulating thousands of other Singaporean women who yearn and will pay for the fantasy of such a transformation. In an interview, a physically transformed Cho declared, in a contrived way, that although she now owned "two black dresses and several low-cut tops," she would not go as far as to carry a handbag: "It's the same old me with new packaging" (H. H. Ng 2005).

Singapore Idol was also mimetic in its representation of democratic practice and political participation in Singapore. Every week, the host preceded his announcement of the results with "Singapore has voted" and in the finale Taufik was "the people's choice." Responding to the host's urgent calls to vote for their favorite Idols, Singaporean viewers were interpellated into democratic subjects in the telephone calls that they paid to make. MediaCorp group managing director Shaun Seow called *Singapore Idol* "a small lesson in democracy" (quoted in *Today* 2005). Singaporeans were willing to spend money to register their opinions and make an impact on a public outcome that they believed to be important. As fans, they actively supported their *Idol* contestants, excitedly discussing *Idol* issues at dinner tables, on weblogs, and in Internet forums, with Sim's fans even handing out flyers on Orchard Road, Singapore's main shopping belt (Thomas 2004e). In *Singapore Idol*, one can identify those features of reality television that van Zoonen (2004) characterizes as healthy for democratic civic life. But the 'democracy' in *Singapore Idol* was stage-managed by ratings-obsessed producers and editors. Lacking transparency and accountability, it falsely empowered audiences with a sense of control over the fates of the contestants. While this could describe the deficiencies of democratic practice in general, the show's spectacle might in fact have helped to 'compensate' for a democratic deficit in political life, particularly in authoritarian Singapore.

Singapore Idol's mimicry of democratic practice also served to reinforce government warnings against the wholesale adoption of

'Western liberal democracy,' which, especially in the context of small, vulnerable, and multiracial Singapore, could turn out arbitrary and irrational outcomes based on populist sentiment, 'tribal' loyalties, widespread ignorance and prejudice, and charismatic manipulation: that is, on everything but talent and enterprise. A more expansive practice of democracy—and real multiparty elections—would, of course, constitute a threat to the PAP's almost five decades of incumbency, during which it has enjoyed deep and wide powers over Singaporeans. The *Idol* judges—respected industry experts—served to reinforce the idea of how important it is to prevent democracy from degenerating into 'mob-ocracy.' The early elimination of forerunner Jeassea Thyidor has often been cited as an example of the irrational outcome that 'too much' democracy can produce. However, it has also been argued that insufficient participation was what led to such a perverse outcome. In a letter to *The Straits Times*, reader John Lee, for instance, explained how

> everyone wanted the results to turn out the way he expected, but no one wanted to participate in the voting. Passive viewers, that's what we are! … Perhaps if we all started participating, we might be able to keep the really good singers in the competition. (J. Lee 2004)

This is a vivid example of how the state-sponsored culture industry commodifies even democratic participation, using what Marcuse called the "language of one-dimensional thought" to unify opposites in order to repel any kind of critique or protest (Marcuse 1964/2002, 93): Viewer-citizens are led to believe that too much democracy is dangerous, but at the same time that not enough participation leads to incorrect outcomes—and so they should get more involved, make more telephone calls, and make more profits for the telecommunications and media companies.

Managing the Audience

Singapore Idol succeeded because it managed to attract large audiences every week, to encourage them to participate (without pay) in the manufacture of pop music stars, and to make them so emotionally invested in and attached to the brand that they would without hesitation go out to purchase the Idols' albums, merchandise, and other endorsed products. *Straits Times* journalist Cheong Suk Wai wrote about an '*Idol* fever' that has

> gripped Singapore, bridged … the generation gap, animated conversa-
> tions and dominated the communication highways of the young and
> hip—the Internet and SMS—in a way that is usually reserved for mega
> events like the General Election. (Cheong 2004)

In the media, audiences were often presented not only as fans, but
also as obsessive, even pathological, ones. In a rather self-indulgent
article, *Straits Times* journalist Suzanne Sng admitted to being in-
fantilized by the show, looking forward to her weekly "Idolising
party—champagne flutes in one hand, mobile phones at the ready
to vote in the other—and … behaving like crazy teenage girls" (Sng
2004). At the competition finals, Jamelia Edwards and four friends
dressed up as brides, held up placards, and screamed, "Marry me,
Taufik." The seventeen-year-old student admitted that she nor-
mally made

> 30 to 50 calls for [Taufik] each week but I'll up my votes for the very last
> time in the final showdown and who cares if I have to eat [only] bread
> for the whole month (quoted in W. Teo 2004)

A post-*Singapore Idol* trailer depicted its addicted audiences as suf-
fering from withdrawal syndrome. What these examples indicate,
as well as the many letters from viewers that were highlighted ear-
lier, is the show's enormous capacity to provide a mode of escape
from the mundane into the fantastical. Khondker interprets the
show's appeal as based

> not so much [on] worship for a larger-than-life star as lateral empathy
> [for] underdogs and Average Joes who have hidden talents because [au-
> diences] can connect with and identify with them. (Quoted in Hong and
> Thomas 2004)

But more than that, the idea that celebrity and glamor—American-
style—are within the reach of ordinary Singaporeans stuck in te-
dious and dead-end jobs must surely be very appealing to audi-
ences at the end of a long workday.

   As audiences identified with the successful contestants each week
and (mis)recognized their own life chances in the extraordinary
achievements of these ordinary protagonists, they were also allowed
the self-augmenting pleasure of participating in the humiliation of
other contestants presented in the audition and rejects shows as
misfits and freaks, all from the safe and anonymous distance that
television allows. These contestants—Hearn's 'image slaves,' whose
nicknames included Careless Whisperer, Bananaman, Lemon-Tree

Guy, Miss Do-Re-Mi, Pink Lady, and The Stripper—obviously lacked traditional star quality and singing talent. By accepting the competition's invitation to audition, they walked right into the producers' trap, and were ridiculed for their vanity and complete lack of self-awareness. The judges' performance of disbelief, disgust, and dismay during the audition and rejects shows, accompanied by their suppressed laughter and contrived (yet sometimes enjoyably witty) "ratings-boosting comments" (K. Ho 2004), helped to articulate what the audiences took pleasure in feeling, without having to take responsibility for any sort of cruelty: "After all, the rejects were just asking for it!"

As *Straits Times* journalist Lionel Seah observed,

> [r]eality television has a glutton's appetite for setting people up for ridicule, cheap laughs and pity. More often that not, it is the misfits and the failures who are the real stars. (L. Seah 2004)

But Seah's politically correct assertion that nobody "needs another cookie-cutter performer who can hit all the glory notes when flawed characters are far more interesting" (L. Seah 2004) could just be an attempt to suppress the guilt that audiences, producers, and commentators might face in deriving enjoyment (and profit) from a show that capitalizes on spectacular humiliation. Similarly, when *The Straits Times* informally sent four of these infamous rejects to form a panel of judges at *Idol* judge Dick Lee's concert, the rejects took every opportunity to harshly criticize Lee's performance (Alphonso 2004), which made them look even more ridiculous and gave the readers another excuse not to feel guilty about enjoying the humiliation that the rejects had faced on the show.

The minor moral panics generated by specific issues and contestants were another source of the pleasure that audiences derived from watching *Singapore Idol*. These apparently controversial concerns, when augmented by media intervention, quickly raised audiences' moral indignation, which soon disappeared as quickly as it emerged. Some of these issues have already been discussed, for instance, the suggestion that Jeassea Thyidor was voted off because of racial considerations, and the observation that *Singapore Idol* judges were trying too hard to imitate their American counterparts and, as a result, were coming off sounding crude and unconstructive, and serving as a negative influence for young viewers. There were several other examples. When talented contestant Candice Foo with-

drew from the finals without offering specific reasons, audiences criticized her for wasting an opportunity, and not having the will and stamina to succeed. At least twice in the series, audiences questioned the transparency of the voting system and voting outcomes, suggesting that the public vote had been overruled by executive decisions in the interest of ratings. On both occasions, formal explanations and assurances had to be given (Thomas 2004h, 2004i).

Also generating a minor moral panic among Taufik's fans was the suggestion of an 'anti-Taufik agenda.' Just before the finale, fans were concerned that Taufik's chances of winning would be diminished when the media reported about Sim's bankrupt mother, a move that they thought would hand Sim the crucial sympathy votes (Li 2004, Thomas 2004b). When Taufik released his first album, fans accused one major store of deliberately pasting the price tags over Taufik's face on the CD cover in a way that might have reduced sales of his album (Thomas 2005c). Taufik's fans also complained that his songs and interviews were not being aired on the local Malay-language radio stations because the stations were allegedly unhappy that Taufik was unable to appear on one of their programs (Y. Kwok 2005). Sony BMG replaced Taufik's first music video directed by Eric Khoo with a version produced by MediaCorp in which he was featured singing in a field. The original concept, in which Taufik played a waiter working in a pub, was probably deemed too sensitive for his Malay-Muslim fans, who might have been offended to see their Muslim pop idol working in a place whose primary purpose was to serve alcohol (Thomas 2005c).

Sim was also at the center of minor moral panics. Journalist Jaime Ee observed that English-educated Singaporeans did not want Sim to win because the Mandarin-speaking contestant would be a bad ambassador for Singapore on the world stage (Ee 2004a). As *Straits Times* reader Fareen Kasbollah, for instance, commented in a letter,

> [i]f you can watch Sly [Sim] go up on that World Idol stage, poor diction and all, without cringing and putting the volume on mute, more power to you. (Kasbollah 2004)

Another reader, Patricia Cheng, pointed out a contradiction in the way

> [t]he Government is pushing a "Speak Good English" campaign but we may be choosing an Idol who cannot even speak properly.
>
> Should he win, he will represent Singapore on the world stage. We need to think from a global viewpoint, and not just what our local market craves or desires. (Cheng 2004)

Another reader, Henry Lim, wrote to the Forum page and complained that Sim was "making the calf sign on all his shows," which he interpreted as the sign of the devil. Sim replied that "Everyone who loves rock music does it. Calling it a devil or cult thing is overreacting" (quoted in Thomas 2005b).

Moral panics often serve to distract attention away from other contradictions and crises in the system, focusing the public's attention on "folk devils" against whom their moral indignation must be raised (Critcher 2003). The moralizing of *Idol* discourse every week served to redirect the audiences' attention away from the crude commodification of culture, the blatant exploitation of contestants and audience-consumers, and the otherwise boring repetition of the *Idol* format every week. If anything, the panics could be seen as desperate attempts to sustain potentially flagging viewer interest in an essentially dull program.

Resisting the Idol

Just as William Hung was able to capture the attention of audiences the world over (and make some money out of this), Singaporean contestant Patrick Khoo—the Careless Whisperer whose frequently televised audition clip featured a stiff, barely audible, yet earnest performance of the Wham! hit *Careless Whisper*—was regarded as the 'anti-Idol' favored by the ironic or even rebellious viewers who, refusing to buy in to the standards of taste dictated by the global pop culture industry, managed to cast an 'oppositional gaze' at *Singapore Idol*. Even Royston Tan was so sympathetic to Khoo's sincere performance that he invited the Careless Whisperer to star in a short film that parodied the audition.

In the *Singapore Idol* rejects shows, other non-mainstream hopefuls were featured in a somewhat positive light, such as Lily Goh, who courageously, though unsuccessfully, auditioned for the show even though she was deaf. However, it could easily be argued that the audiences' sympathy and high-sounding praise for Goh were little

more than an act of self-deception, making a false distinction be-
tween admirable rejects and ludicrous rejects in order to justify the
enjoyment of humiliating the latter. Furthermore, while the Care-
less Whisperer and William Hung appeared to appeal to those
critical of the pop culture industry, their 'deviance' was not spared
from being commodified for profit, as the industry patented new
products out of these misfits who, it would seem, could also be sold
for the pleasurable consumption of the mainstream—'freak show'
style. Hung, who is described as "a real American Idol" on his of-
ficial website (http://www.williamhung.net/), has released more than
one album and is hoping to "join the young millionaires club" (*Age*
2004). The Careless Whisperer's notoriety effectively served as an
advertisement for Tan's short film.

The *Singapore Idol* competition, predictably, became the target of
several other satirical and parodic references. The satirical website
TalkingCock.com, for instance, has published several articles that
reference the competition as a veiled critique of Singapore's po-
litical system. Commenting on former Prime Minister, then Senior
Minister, and now Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's intolerance of
opposition and dictatorial style, website contributor Kway Png
(pseudonym; local term for chicken rice) writes:

> "We were searching and searching for someone who could be the local
> version of Simon Cowell," said MediaCock spokesperson Miss Koh Pee
> Kiat, alluding to the caustic British judge on American Idol. "Someone
> who is very critical, who won't mince his words or mollycoddle contes-
> tants, and whose every word will strike fear into the hearts of people. It's
> obvious to any Singaporean who fits the bill perfectly."
>   A spokesman for the Senior Minister's Orifice, Mr Lao Lee Kong,
> confirmed that SM Lee has received MediaCock's proposal and that he
> is considering it very seriously. (Kway 2004)

Commenting on the lack of political competition in Singapore's
democratic system, contributor Pak Cham Kai (pseudonym; local
term for white sliced chicken) writes:

> An informal poll taken by TalkingCock at the kopi tiam [coffee shop]
> indicated that the top two candidates favoured by the people for office
> were Taufik Batisah and Sylvester Sim.
>   "That's not such a dumb result," said professional political analyst
> Tok Kok Kheng, "More people are probably voting in the Singapore
> Idol finals than in the next GE [General Elections]." (Pak 2004a)

And commenting on the PAP government's shortcomings, Pak Cham Kai writes:

> "This will be a very [rigorous] exercise that will put contestants through every conceivable test to see if they have what it takes to be a Minister Idol."
>
> The contestants will be tested on: Their appearance. Contestants will be judged on how well they look in all-white [the PAP's uniform that connotes an incorruptible disposition], and also in windcheaters. Their sensitivity. Contestants must have good skin, meaning thin enough such that when pricked, they must quickly put on a defamation suit. Their performance. How well can they dance to the party's tune? Their vocal strength. Can they sing the same old song? (Pak 2004b)

Whether Singaporeans made comic reference to *Singapore Idol* as a means of satirizing the political system, or laughed at the show as mindless but thoroughly enjoyable entertainment not to be taken too seriously, there is little doubt that, as a node in a complicated network of global commercial interests, the show held considerable significance within the culture industry at the local as well as global levels. As a mimetic product of the culture industry, the show reflected and reinforced commonsense beliefs about meritocracy, democracy, the nation, and multiracialism, thereby performing an integral ideological function. The power of the culture industry resides in the way that it is able, in spite of its enduring sameness, to continue attracting audiences, including those who are fully cognizant of the way they are being exploited by its products. The producers of *Singapore Idol*, sensitive to the real threat of losing audiences once the initial novelty wore off, attempted every week to satisfy a range of entertainment needs by supplying something for everyone, from die-hard fans to even the most cynical boycotters of the show, and by making sure there were enough controversies to generate interest. The *Singapore Idol* competition is perhaps the clearest and most spectacular contemporary example of a standardized, pseudo-individualized, and lucrative product of Singapore's television industry, effectively performing the ideological work of sustaining an advanced capitalist society.

UNDER ONE IDEOLOGICAL ROOF? TV SITCOMS AND
DRAMA SERIES

Like the *Singapore Idol* competition, made-in-Singapore television
situation comedies and weekly dramas are typical—though cer-
tainly less spectacular—products of the culture industry, performing
similar ideological work while attempting to marginally differentiate
themselves from the stream of very similar television shows produced
every year, all without risking any real departure from the tried and
tested formats and formulas. While these sitcoms and dramas tend
to mimic and thereby support dominant ideological formations
largely through the use of stereotypes (especially racial and class
stereotypes), the sitcoms in particular sometimes contain playful and
satirical moments of resistance against the seriousness of bureau-
cratic authority and the follies of contemporary society. This chap-
ter will identify these critical possibilities amid the usually conser-
vative tendencies in Singapore's English-language sitcoms and
dramas. It will make critical references to a selection of responses
from focus group discussions conducted by Chong Kai Yee as part
of her 2001 honors thesis written for the National University of
Singapore, revealing audience responses that range from preferred
readings to more clearly oppositional ones. The chapter will con-
clude with a detailed critical analysis of episodes from Singapore's
most commercially successful English-language sitcoms: *Under One
Roof* (1994-2003) and *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (*PCK*) (1997-2007).

Situation Comedies and Melodramas

While the sitcom format has become more innovative in recent
years, even deliberately drawing attention to its own format and
artifice in the postmodern style, the basic structure of the tradi-
tional American sitcom still, by and large, informs most of the
output internationally, mainly because producers and buyers prefer
formulas that have worked, as these allow them to cover the high
production costs while still generating profits. The traditional sitcom,

whose comedy relies mostly on one-liners, running gags, and humor that often draws from racist, sexist, and generally bigoted stereotypes, usually consists of weekly, self-contained half-hour episodes. The same main characters appear in every episode in a regular setting: typically, the family home or workplace. The basic premise or concept of the show is usually linked to running gags (associated mostly with particular characters) that audiences can immediately identify and associate with the show.

The regular ensemble usually consists of archetypes whose generally problematic interactions and relationship to the social world present many possible story lines. At least one of the characters is often a 'fool' or 'buffoon' who goes through life in a naive and unknowing way; but in spite of nearly always misunderstanding the less honorable intensions of others, the fool—without intending to—draws attention to the foolishness and folly of others. Sometimes, the fool is the eternal loser no matter how hard he or she tries, but in this way, gains the sympathy of other characters and the audience. At other times, the fool is a superficial, ignorant, vain, and insensitive character, who goes through life with complete disregard for others. Often, too, there is a 'sage' who possesses superior wisdom, academic qualifications, maturity, or a broader experience of life, offering mostly unsolicited solutions to resolve the main conflicts in the plot. The sage is sometimes the source of wisecracks that range from good-natured to ill-tempered to downright mean. In family sitcoms, the nuclear family is often supplemented by grandparents, domestic helpers, neighbors, and colleagues from work, all of whom mostly possess the quality of being 'outsiders.' In keeping with the logic of efficient mass production, scriptwriters almost always resort to basic plot formulas that might be adapted and combined in a variety of ways, sometimes with a main plot and one or two subplots. The plots rarely extend beyond a single episode, and the characters hardly develop from season to season. In this way, episodes do not need to be contextualized and can be watched in any order. This sort of 'modularity' makes the shows more appealing to network buyers.

Essentially, the plot presents a problem of some kind that will be resolved by the end of the episode. The problem could be the unintentional consequences of making a mistake, of telling a small lie, of misunderstanding what someone said, of borrowing something without permission, and so on. The problem could also arise

when one of the characters decides to change his or her circum-stances—finding a new job, moving to another place, and so on—only to find that the grass is never greener on the other side. Of-ten, the problem arises from a conflict of values, but this popular device might also be the basic premise of the sitcom, running throughout the season and giving rise each time to new situations that are partially resolved at the end of each episode. Although these problems can draw audiences' attention to exploitations, op-pressions, contradictions, and tensions in society, and in that way heighten the critical possibilities of comedy, the all too easy and gratifying resolutions provided often lead to a deeply conservative outcome, where the moral of the story might be 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' or 'peace and order at any cost.'

Professor of television Hal Himmelstein identifies as a model for television comedy the Italian *commedia dell'arte* form, which was a

> racy mixture of rapid-fire satirical dialogue, slapstick, earthy buffoonery, music, and sometimes dancing … masks, or stock characters … little coherent drama, but rather a sequence of sideshows. (Himmelstein 1994, 114)

Himmelstein describes how comedy in general is a "crying out for human improvement" as it reveals the "ludicrous and ridiculous aspects of our existence" (Himmelstein 1994, 115). Particularly in "troubled times," comedy draws critical attention to the "contradic-tions and value conflicts of society" (Himmelstein 1994, 115). As audiences are confronted with ironic and satirical representations of their "collective fears and concerns regarding the constraints placed on the human spirit by oppressive institutions or outmoded customs" (Himmelstein 1994, 113), an opportunity for enlighten-ment and emancipation opens up.

However, as media scholar Judine Mayerle notes, the traditional television sitcom format affords much less scope for innovation (when compared with the series drama), since it has to comply with audi-ence expectations of the 'problem-resolution-order' formula for every episode. The comedy itself is dependent upon putting a safe distance between audience and the object of humor: The audience needs to feel "safe to laugh at the proverbial banana peel pratfall because it is not happening to them" (Mayerle 1994, 111), an ar-rangement that resembles the dynamics of humiliation in reality television discussed in the previous chapter. In this sense, the dis-

tance that is created prevents audiences from associating themselves
with the fears, oppressive institutions, and outmoded customs that
are represented in the comedy, thereby 'protecting' them from se-
rious critique. Himmelstein also identifies a conservative tendency
even in

> television's peculiar ability to present us ostensibly significant social com-
> mentary that, in its deeper layers, reinforces traditional values and there-
> by makes the threatening unthreatening and incorporates potentially
> emergent oppositional social strategies into the social fabric as demand-
> ed by the dominant values of the culture. (Himmelstein 1994, 163)

While Himmelstein acknowledges that satiric comedy and comedy-
drama on television, of all the television genres, present the clear-
est opportunity for expressing emergent oppositional ideology and
social criticism, he also points out that the networks have the pow-
er to "pull the plug on the maverick producer through counterpro-
gramming, prior censorship, or outright cancellation" (Himmelstein
1994, 194). He notes that controversial comedy series might attract
good ratings, but the "more truly oppositional series" tend not to
do well with audiences and so will be axed by the networks (Him-
melstein 1994, 194).

Television movies, weekly series, miniseries, and weekday soap
operas (or daytime serials) fall under the category of television
melodramas. Typically, television melodramas feature clear-cut vil-
lains and heroes, the former presenting a threat to the latter and
the social order that the latter stands for. The (usually male) heroes
struggle to avert this threat and rescue the (usually female) innocents
in society, leading to a happy ending at the end of each episode
or, when the story arc transcends the confines of the episodic struc-
ture, the serial itself. Media scholar Jane Feuer observes that drama
serials of this kind are constructed using multiple plot lines that
never really bring closure to the narrative as it continues beyond
discrete episodes and even beyond each season as cliffhangers are
employed to keep audiences in excited anticipation of the next
episode or season. Feuer also observes that daytime serials tend to
focus on the domestic setting designed to draw the housewife audi-
ence, while prime-time serials also feature "the world of business
and power" in order to attract male viewers, who are more likely
to be watching evening television (Feuer 1994, 552).

The term melodrama has acquired a pejorative meaning. Televi-
sion dramas are described as lacking in realism, driven by sensa-

tional plots that merely string together beautiful caricatures—the products of feeble attempts at characterization—brought to life through the practice of overacting and exaggerated emotions, made possible by the extended use of camera closeups. Media scholar David Thorburn observes that melodrama in its pejorative sense denotes

> a sentimental, artificially plotted drama that sacrifices characterization to extravagant incident, makes sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience, and ends on a happy or at least a morally reassuring note. (Thorburn 1994, 537-38)

As fantasy, television dramas provide a means of escape from the banality and alienation of everyday life. Thorburn fully acknowledges that they are

> market commodities … imprisoned by rigid timetables and stereotyped formulas, compelled endlessly to imagine and reimagine as story and as performance the conventional wisdom, the lies and fantasies, and the muddled ambivalent values of our bourgeois industrial culture. (Thorburn 1994, 539)

Nevertheless, he also suggests that this genre of entertainment is uniquely capable of giving audiences many complicated pleasures.

Thorburn's main argument to support this claim is based on the way "better melodramas" on television are uniquely able to capture "the idiosyncratic expressiveness of the ordinary human face and its unique hospitality to the confining spaces of our ordinary world" (Thorburn 1994, 546). Without a fully fledged theory of acting, he argues, such virtues would escape the theorization of culture industry approaches that immediately discredit the genre (Thorburn 1994, 546). More interesting, though, is Thorburn's argument that artificially contrived plots are a sign of the genre's maturity rather than unoriginality. To him, television dramas can exploit, rather than be exploited by, the formal requirements and the character formulas of the genre and its place within the culture industry. Through the "multiplicity principle," the television drama deliberately adopts and adapts the stories and situations that have been used or referred to many times in previous dramas throughout the genre's short history. The more recognizable the stories and situations, the more sensitive a literate audience would be to "the smallest departure from conventional expectations," creating countless

opportunities for "surprise and nuanced variation, even for thematic subtlety" (Thorburn 1994, 543-44).

This argument contradicts the basic idea that marginal differentiations of standardized cultural products based on formulaic and repetitive construction are ideological means of effecting a false sense of originality and variety in one-dimensional society, suggesting instead that the repetitiveness creates heightened sensitivity to minor variations which then expand the range of artistic possibilities. Taking this further, postmodern dramas (and sitcoms) are often intertextual, self-referential, and highly self-conscious parodies of not just content but form. *The Simpsons* (1989-present), an excellent example of this aesthetic, provides enormous pleasures—even intellectual challenges—for audiences who engage attentively with its playfulness, puzzles, and ironies. Television sitcoms and dramas are not, by virtue of their formats, condemned to be run-of-the-mill products of the culture industry—conservative and stupefying.

Comedy on Singapore Television

In 2005, the Programme Advisory Committee for English TV and Radio Programmes (PACE) criticized Singapore-produced sitcoms for their overdependence on low-brow humor and the absence of witty dialogue. The dramas, the committee argued, were in need of more complex story lines that did not have to resort to horror and violence as central themes. But MediaCorp, which is essentially a business, immediately recognizes that it is the low-brow and horror programs that command the highest ratings (Jeanine Tan 2005c, 40). Filmmaker Lee Thean-jeen observes how complex shows that "need time to find their audience, to grow" are treated with impatience by the Singapore television industry, which is "driven by numbers" in a way that suggests "[q]uality is often secondary" (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005c, 40).

As executive producer and director Jennifer Tan explains,

> Entertaining the masses is more or less our top concern. We have to make *Phua Chu Kang* and *Under One Roof* more mainstream, in order to attract a broad spectrum of viewers. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 21-22)

Tan reveals how the network will commission niche programs only after there are enough mass appeal programs that cater to the

mainstream (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 21-22). But even mainstream Singaporeans—"super stressed-out all the time"—are a really difficult audience to amuse, according to professional events host Justin Misson (quoted in Melissa Lee 2007, L9). Comedienne Patricia Mok, who is one of the regular cast members in Jack Neo films, notes how it is actually

> very easy to make factory people, heartlanders, Bengs, Lians and kids laugh. But it's harder when it comes to people who work in *atas* (high-class) jobs and wear ties. Sometimes they think the jokes you make are very crude, especially when you say them in Hokkien. (Quoted in Melissa Lee 2007, L9)

For taking the easy option and pandering to the 'masses,' the sitcoms in particular have been sharply criticized even by those working in the industry. Scriptwriter Tan Wei Lyn observes that "[t]here used to be more attention paid to characterization and story structure. Now, the focus is on easy laughs." The pressure to "get shows out fast" leaves little time for reflection on previous episodes (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005a, 28). Former director Seah Wee Thye notes how story lines have become too predictable and argues that "[c]haracters should not be wacky for no reason" (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005a, 28). More generally, as stand-up comedian Sebastian Tan observes, Singaporeans have become

> so used to a particular kind of comedy, that when you give them a new kind of joke, they don't know whether it's supposed to be funny or not. (Quoted in Melissa Lee 2007, L9)

Actor Adrian Pang laments that the television industry does not want to take a risk on "some really good writers in Singapore" whose work might be viewed as "too niche, too controversial or too high-concept." Writers are therefore encouraged to stay in their comfort zones of "mass-oriented, family-friendly, feel-good and safe slapstick fare." But life, Pang argues, is "too short to laugh at the same joke over and over again" (quoted in Cheam 2005b).

Journalist Adeline Chia (2007) identifies and celebrates a "specifically Singaporean humour" that comprises recognizable cultural references, political incorrectness, and the use of Singlish. But Pang worries about how the Singaporean brand of humor now seems to rely "wholly on the fact that it is expressed in Singlish rather than it being particularly funny per se" (quoted in Cheam 2005b). Popular culture critic Kannan Chandran wonders whether

"Singapore comedy [has] become a casualty of Singlish overload" as he agrees that

> MediaCorp has churned out sitcom after sitcom … based on the same formula of quirky families dealing with ordinary problems at home and at work. (Chandran 2005)

Actor and comedian Gurmit Singh (who plays Phua Chu Kang) believes, on the contrary, that there should be more freedom of expression, of the kind that resists the immediate branding of Singlish humor as low-brow. Singlish, Singh argues, is "part of Singapore humour, found only in Singapore" and, through this, "we are able to laugh at ourselves." He criticizes the many Singaporeans who have a "sad mentality" that dismisses local talent in favor of foreign ones, and in that way reduces the "platforms and avenues" to showcase local talent. He asserts that

> [w]hat we do not have, which our bigger brothers like America have, has nothing to do with the standard of talent. It comes down to two things: budget and marketing hype. (Quoted in Cheam 2005a)

While Pang and Chandran appear to be concerned about the over-reliance on Singlish for Singapore humor, Singh believes that Singlish is its authentic medium. All three identify the importance of giving more opportunities to local comic talents; and, especially in the case of Pang and Chandran, of allowing such talents to produce edgier material for television comedies.

However, Channel 5 viewer Brenda Chew does not think that Singapore comedies should be taken so seriously in the first place since their value to her lies in the way their use of low-brow humor can draw easy laughs, noting that "it's relaxing to watch them after a draining day at work" (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005a, 28-29). Chew's rather typical response problematizes the simple options laid out in the dilemma voiced by Seah Wee Thye: "Should they let audiences develop first before giving them sophisticated programmes—or should they give the audience more sophisticated programmes and hope they develop from there?" (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005a, 29). Even if audiences were to cultivate more sophisticated tastes, the tedium of work would often force them to seek out only the kind of light entertainment that would help them get through the day in preparation for the next. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued,

> The mentality of the public, which allegedly and actually favors the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system, not an excuse for it. (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/2002, 96)

The Ideological Work of Singapore's Sitcoms and Dramas

The English-language made-in-Singapore television sitcoms and dramas are clearly products of a culture industry that is dominated by MediaCorp's fundamentally commercial concerns and its nation-building responsibilities. Mimetic sitcoms and dramas often reflect and support ideological articulations of capitalism (possessive individualism, achievement orientation, meritocracy, and upward mobility) with the nation, social values (Asian values and family values), and racial stereotypes that constitute a sanitized (and sanitizing) version of multiracialism. Although the commercial imperatives are likely to drive the production of standardized but pseudo-individualized works that lack originality and variety, serving as superficial yet concretely material expressions of the taken-for-granted common sense that masks practices of domination, it is not entirely impossible for creative talent within such an industry to produce works that present alternative points of view or that are resistant, even oppositional, toward the dominant ideological formations. For instance, although scriptwriter Kalpana acknowledges the standard guidelines that place a limit on the material that she can write and the use of language, she nevertheless insists that television industry professionals "are pushing limits all the time" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 34). Similarly, as audiences encounter these works, even the most mimetic ones, they can develop readings that are negotiated and even oppositional, departing in some way from the preferred readings.

Most of these local productions help Singaporeans to imagine that they are members of a national community, in much the same way that newspapers and novels have provided a means for people to recognize themselves as constituents of large and complex modern communities with which they can identify, as the frequently quoted professor Benedict Anderson has famously suggested (Anderson 1991). MediaCorp's family drama serial *Growing Up* (1996-2001), for instance, features the lives of ordinary working-class members of the Tay family, against the background of the nation's

history since the 1960s. One of its scriptwriters, S. Yan, acknowl-
edges his 'National Education' role:

> We do produce programs which reflect upon our Singaporean history.
> To educate our younger generation about the life then, they ought to
> know the sufferings that our forefathers had to go through. (Interviewed
> in K. Y. Chong 2001, 22)

And yet, Yan is eager to distance this work from naked propagan-
da, insisting that "it is not our intention to influence our audience
in any way" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 22). Most Singa-
poreans have bought into the core nation-building ideas such as
survival, success, meritocracy, and multiracialism, but many are
skeptical of the propaganda efforts to instill these values, noting the
vast difference between the ideal and the actual. One television
viewer explained that "social and racial cohesion is a utopian thing.
To me, it's an idea that the programs are trying to sell" (Melvin,
interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 44). Another observed how "ra-
cial acceptance on local TV is so superficial. How many people [in
the real world] have best friends of another race?" (Nazri, inter-
viewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 45).

   These programs also serve to propagate social values in order to
achieve widespread acceptance of them. Naturalizing these values
as 'Asian values' has been a means of anchoring them to some es-
sentialized cultural and civilizational resource. 'Family values' are
often treated in this way. One viewer observes how the "nice and
happy endings" of such shows help to "make a positive representa-
tion of family harmony" and of family values such as "filial piety,
love, care and respect for one another" (Amy, interviewed in K. Y.
Chong 2001, 52). Jennifer Tan reveals that

> [t]hough keeping within the SBA [Singapore Broadcasting Authority]
> guidelines is not our most important priority, we have to keep in mind
> some socially positive values like racial tolerance, community cohesion,
> respecting one another. Characters are generally not allowed to smoke,
> be gay or cross-dress. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 22)

Assistant director Pepper See acknowledges the social role that she
plays, as well as the support from government, critics, and audi-
ences for "more family-oriented shows on TV, with positive social
and cultural values like good relationships, filial piety, respect for
the elders, family unity" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 23). By
assuming that the majority of audiences are conservative (espe-

cially the housewives), See accepts that "we can't have shows [that are] considered too provocative and daring" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 23). Jennifer Tan also admits to having been enticed with "attractive sponsorships" by government agencies that approach MediaCorp to make "national campaign friendly" shows (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 26). These shows reflect the conservative values thought to be held by mass audiences—the so-called 'heartlanders'—and are in that way appealing to them, which makes it possible not only to reinforce these conservative values in society but also to sell conservative audiences to advertisers and sponsors. One viewer explains how she connects with the shows that she watches: "I feel a part of it … there's a feeling of familiarity and commonality" (Lilin, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 46). Another relates how these shows "warm the heart" (Azizah, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 46). A third admits "that's what television is for. We don't want reality drama but fictitious happy private moments and families. Just pure fantasy that makes us feel good after watching" (Anne, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 50).

Racial Stereotypes and 'Othering': Fear of the Dark

In a multiethnic society, one fantasy that seems to appeal to the masses is the fantasy of racial homogeneity, where the individual can enjoy the comfort of being surrounded by others like himself or herself, and yet be able to regard from a very safe distance those who are different and potentially threatening to this racial purity. In multiethnic Singapore, the idea of multiracialism has been held up as the solution to potential hostility and even violence between the ethnic communities. But the practice of multiracialism has been based on a simplistic and superficial understanding of ethnic difference, often motivated by fear of the Other.

As a result, television sitcoms and dramas have also mimicked this superficiality where ethnic representation is concerned. And perhaps the most superficial concern of all has been the importance of maintaining a proportionate representation of the ethnic groups in each program. Executive producer A.T. argues that

> [s]ince Singapore is a multiracial society … I think it's only right we include our minority races … I believe it all depends on the situation that arises, or when the storyline calls for it. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 32)

Jennifer Tan justifies the predominance of the ethnic Chinese in English-language sitcoms and dramas: "Singapore is predominantly Chinese; we are merely reflecting the reality. There are minor representations of other racial groups. It is very ethnically balanced" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 33). Also asserting that there is no significant underrepresentation in these programs, S. Yan argues that viewers who want to see more non-Chinese representation "can always tune in to [Malay channel] Suria or Tamil Central" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 33). For Pepper See, the problem of underrepresentation is linked to the practical limitation of not having many non-Chinese actors to cast (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 33).

As is the case with multiracialism in society, the multiracial representation on these television programs tends to be superficial, particularly in the way minority races are given token appearances to fill the 'quota.' A Malay viewer laments how the token representation of racial minorities is

> a politically correct effort, rather than a sincere attempt to portray them in their social standing. You still don't see the minority characters getting as much airtime as the Chinese race characters. (Kartini, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 40)

A Chinese viewer, worried that "the minority races may not feel too happy about [underrepresentation]," believes that

> there should be a bit more participation from the minority races, no need a lot, maybe a bit here and there, so as to reflect the different races in Singapore. (Andy, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 41)

An Indian viewer believes that the value of a minority character getting to play a credible role is a starting point from which "we can actually push for things [that are] not represented on the current local programs, but [need] to be said" (Kiran, interviewed in Chong, K. Y. 2001, 42).

More significant than the question of proportionate representation of ethnic groups (and the importance of their characters) on television sitcoms and dramas is the way these shows often resort to racial stereotypes that appeal to mass audiences, of which Chinese viewers (both Chinese- and English-speaking) necessarily form the majority. The Chinese majority, as the privileged audience, are confirmed in their sense of superiority over the minority races

through the stereotypical depictions of race. A Chinese viewer argues that these stereotypes are actually reflective of reality:

> It won't work if they put a Malay as the boss of a contracting firm. If you want a driver, ya Malays will be suitable to act as the "ahmad" [common Malay name used as slang for chauffeur]. If want a roti prata [Indian bread] seller or [a construction] worker in that show, Indians will do also. (Joshua, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 37)

Another Chinese viewer also believes the stereotypes to be based on reality:

> Chinese usually are depicted as entrepreneurs, and it's quite true … That's our mentality how Chinese are like … so enterprising and always want to ' pia' [work hard] and make more money, unlike the Malays who's lazy and more easily contented. Do you see any successful Malays in any of the three shows? No, they are mostly blue-collar workers … These are quite reflective of the working ethics of various races in Singapore. (Kok Chee, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 38)

A Malay viewer observes how "the Chinese on TV are English-educated people, whereas the minority characters are those who are blue-collar workers." She worries about how stereotypes of Malays and Indians in the lower economic strata, if unchallenged, "may help contribute to the maintenance of that stereotype" (Hazlina, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 40). In this way, stereotypes might even make the minority-race viewers believe in their own inferiority. Another Malay viewer considers offensive the way Indians are made to speak with strong accents and Malays to sound "whiney" and "flighty" (Jamilah, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 39). An Indian viewer cannot identity with any of the minority characters, pointing out that Indians are rarely represented on these programs, other than as "mama shop owners," "talkative neighbors," or criminals:

> [T]hese shows do depict the subtle truth in Singapore … that many see Chinese as better than Indians, or Malays. We are supposed to be all equal citizens but some of us are more equal than others. (Jason, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 39).

Some minority viewers practice a passive mode of opposition to the depictions in these programs. A Malay viewer observes how "[p]eople tend to laugh with sitcoms, not get angry." But she herself no longer engages with these shows: "I just dismiss them as being incredibly naïve, laugh at it because it's stupid" (Azizah, in-

terviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 42). Another Malay viewer declares that

> [i]f the Chinese characters are made fun of, I'll laugh. But if I see something offensive about the Malays and Indians, I won't. The minority races stick together. (Kartini, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 42)

Another Malay viewer believes that

> They won't dare to mention the really negative stereotypes such as Malays being lazy and Indians are smelly. Nor would they show Chinese as gamblers and loansharks, Malays as drug addicts and Indians as hardcore drinkers. Obviously these demeaning stereotypical racial traits can't be depicted right?" (Zainal, interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 45)

But his assumption of subtlety where negative stereotyping is concerned is quite mistaken, as a quick survey of the sitcoms and dramas will indicate.

The MediaCorp sitcom *Mr Kiasu* (2001-2002) was based on a comic character whose name in Hokkien means 'afraid to lose.' Kiasu (Chew Chor Meng), who speaks typical Singlish, strives to get the best value for his money, always looking for good deals and things that he can get for free. Many Singaporeans have come to accept *kiasu*-ness as a national characteristic. The global fast-food chain McDonald's has even used the comic character to front its successful Kiasu Burger promotion and advertising campaign in Singapore. As sociologist Chua Beng Huat observes,

> One way to look at Mr Kiasu is to view him as a pathetic, laughable character. That's fine. But it is disastrous to valorize the idea. The term Kiasu is disparaging in Hokkien. If it is seen as something positive, we are in deep trouble. (Tripathi 1993)

As the show gained popularity, the producers decided to transform Kiasu from a cheapskate into a competitive individual, thereby putting him in line with government policy to encourage risk-averse Singaporeans to be more entrepreneurial and to overcome their fear of losing out in business ventures overseas.

Kiasu's cousin and colleague, Kiasee (Daniel Ong), is a university-educated computer engineer who speaks in a nervous, high-pitched voice with a mild American accent. His name is Hokkien for 'afraid to die,' and he is portrayed as overly sensitive, cowardly, and always unsure of himself. Like the characters Paul in *Under One Roof* and Chu Beng in *PCK*, Kiasee—a professional who speaks good English—gets characterized as insecure, silly, and effeminate:

a deliberate contrast with the more lovable, working-class fool Kiasu.

The only Malay character in the show is office secretary Minah (Nur Suhailah Salam), who is described on the official website as a "feisty young girl who has more sarcasm and street smartness than anyone would care for. Only problem is, no one takes her seriously." To her, the "world is round and simple" (MediaCorp TV 2003b). In fact, most Malay women on English-language shows are portrayed as working in supporting roles such as clerks, secretaries, or sales assistants.

Sabo Singh (Chacko Vadaketh)—a Sikh Indian—is the authority figure in the small trading company that the characters work in. As a manipulative, unreasonable, stingy, and untrustworthy boss, he evokes a sense of danger and fear among his subordinates. His name points to the way he exploits or 'sabotages' his workers, making them work till they drop. Although he is rarely outwitted in the end, his attempts to make life difficult for his workers are foiled in most episodes, and he becomes instead a ludicrous object of ridicule. The Sikhs—dark-skinned, bearded, and turbaned—have been a visually stark Other to the Chinese, evoking in that way a latent fear which comedic and ridiculous stereotyping helps to neutralize and perhaps even reverse.

In the MediaCorp sitcom *Living with Lydia* (2001-2004), Billy B. Ong (Samuel Chong) is a successful fish-ball manufacturer (the show is sponsored by local fish-ball makers DoDo) whose life is turned upside down after the arrival of Lydia Lum, a loud, garish, and cackling *dim sum* (Chinese dumpling) chef from Hong Kong who learns that she has jointly inherited Billy's house. Lydia is played by veteran Hong Kong actress and comedienne Lydia Sum. Billy's career-minded secretary, Rhonda (Koh Chieng Mun), has been trying for years to get him to marry her, but he hardly notices her romantic overtures. The character stereotypes and their interactions loosely mimic those seen in American sitcom *The Nanny*. In the second season of *Living with Lydia*, Suhaimi Yusof joins the cast as Sulaiman, a Malay man who makes friends with Lydia and is eventually hired by Billy to help market his fish-balls to the Muslim community. Lydia and Sulaiman join forces to antagonize and irritate Rhonda with their combined slapstick antics.

Producers of sitcoms and dramas have adopted the strategy of casting regional stars, as MediaCorp Studios managing executive

producer Daisy Irani explains, to "support distribution into markets where the stars are already known" (quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005b, 36). Casting 'foreign talent' Lydia Sum in *Living with Lydia* has made it easier to distribute the sitcom in markets such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, Canada, and America. Casting well-known foreign talent also brings in sponsorship. This approach dovetails with the PAP government's general efforts to attract foreign talent to enrich the limited local workforce. But such policies have been regarded by many Singaporeans as an unnecessary threat to their livelihood, particularly during periods of economic recession. Furthermore, to many Singaporeans, the policies seem to have attracted 'second-rate' foreign talent who enjoy unfair advantages and perks. From Rhonda's point of view, Sulaiman, like Lydia, is a 'foreigner' who has entered her Singaporean/Chinese world to make things difficult and unpleasant. Sulaiman's stereotype—through which the 'foreign'/Malay man is emasculated (Sulaiman is a former stuntman who is now employed by Billy), marginalized (he is always peripheral to the plot and his lines are entirely forgettable), and turned into a buffoon (his mannerisms are even more exaggerated than those of the others in this slapstick comedy, and his comic lines are without wit or intelligence)—helps privileged audiences to cope with their real-life frustrations, irritations, and fear of the racial Other.

In one episode, the protagonists have to deal with an unreasonable and officious Indian school principal, Mr Chacko (Chacko Vadaketh, the same actor who plays Sabo Singh in *Mr Kiasu*), who in this way disrupts the peaceful fantasy of an ethnically homogeneous world. Indians are very often given to play authority figures, not necessarily because they are respected, but because these figures represent the latent fear of the 'dark' Other. *Oh Carol!* (2002-2003) is a MediaCorp sitcom about a single woman, Carol Chong, who is a senior accounts director of an advertising agency, where the boss is again an Indian who can be unreasonable and officious, but is nearly always outwitted by his staff. Also Indian is her colleague Sam (played by well-known drag queen Kumar), a flamboyant fashionista who camps up his performance of a 'macho man' with an array of girlfriend problems. Following the commercial model of *Living with Lydia*, Carol is played by veteran Hong Kong entertainer and actress Carol Cheng. In the MediaWorks sitcom *Ah Girl!* (2001-2003), the Singlish-speaking protagonist (Cynthia Lee) works

at a mobile phone shop where the tyrannical and impatient lady boss is Mrs Fernandez (Nora Samosir), a Eurasian woman whose name Ah Girl consistently and severely mispronounces to exaggerate her 'foreignness.' Like the Indians who are often cast in positions of authority, Mrs Fernandez is a harsh, insulting, and often unreasonable and temperamental boss. In the MediaCorp police drama *Triple Nine* (1995-1999), Inspector Herbert de Souza (Mark Richmond), a Eurasian police investigator, is portrayed as a brusque, scornful, anti establishment loner and loose cannon—in this case, the dark-skinned (and long-haired) man is a threat to authority and orderliness.

More daring has been MediaCorp sitcom *Achar!* (2003-2005), based on the concept of interethnic marriage and the problems of dealing with the racial prejudices of in-laws. While foregrounding such prejudices in a comic way can have the effect of critiquing the unfounded basis of many racist views, the reverse could result too if viewers regard the Other's racism as typical of their kind. So, although both the Chinese in-laws as well as the Indian mother-in-law Uma (Malti Lalwani) are initially portrayed as equally unreasonable in their objections to and subsequent acceptance (with deep reservations) of the marriage, the series gradually begins to villainize Uma as the main obstacle to the couple's happiness.

In multiethnic settings on television, the Malay character is often objectified, passive, or decorative. At best, the character is instrumental to the purposes of the protagonists; at worst, it represents an unpredictably violent and destructive force in civilized society. Charles Yong (Edmund Chen), a senior doctor in MediaCorp medical drama series *First Touch* (2001-2003), is unambiguously depicted as a rational, educated, and peace-loving Chinese gentleman—the melodramatic hero. In one episode, Malay nurse Faridah (Noor Naserimah), who is unhappy with her boyfriend, turns to Yong for comfort and advice. At one point, the Malay boyfriend and his gang of ruffians—the melodramatic villains—burst into the hospital and confront Yong, accusing Yong of stealing his girlfriend. Yong refuses to fight but suggests that they settle the problem outside the hospital premises. The boyfriend punches Yong in the nose, but Yong still refuses to fight back. The irrational violence demonstrated by the jealous Malay boyfriend contrasts starkly with Yong's calm and controlled manner. Faridah, disgusted by her boyfriend's behavior and cowardice, says that Yong is much more of a man

than he. Faridah's choice of the Chinese doctor over her Malay boyfriend could suggest not only a superior basis of masculine attractiveness, but also how the Malay community should embrace the more rational, controlled, and truly manly virtues of Chinese culture. The Malay woman, who is herself objectified as a helpless nurse, plays out her supporting role only to dismiss and effectively emasculate a Malay man. In another episode, Faridah, who gets involved with a married Malay man and becomes an unwed mother, finds good counsel in another Chinese protagonist, Dr Wee Teck Meng (Nick Shen). The message: It takes a rational and caring Chinese man to rescue a sexualized Malay woman from her lack of reason and self-control.

In an episode of MediaCorp school drama series *@ Moulmein High* (2001-2003), the weakest link in the class swimming team is an overweight Malay student with a negative attitude, and lack of motivation, discipline, and self-confidence. Although the common-sense association of the Chinese with the cerebral and the Malays with the physical might suggest that the latter would perform well in sports, swimming as a team sport requires mental toughness and self-mastery, qualities that are excluded from stereotypes of the 'lazy native' dragged from colonial days into the present. This fictional situation on prime-time television resonates with everyday-life prejudices held by the privileged Chinese audience, who might be able to empathize with the swimming team's frustrations. In the end, the Malay student overcomes his weaknesses with the encouragement and help of his Chinese teammates, who at first condemn him as useless but later learn the value of teamwork and support. The swimming team's victory is not so much a victory for the Malay student who rises above his 'cultural deficit,' but for the Chinese students who have learnt to accept the inferiorities of others as well as their responsibility to help others to do the best for the sake of all. The homologies between the swimming team and Singapore as a nation-state whose survival depends on economic competitiveness are clear. The message that Malays can be 'redeemed' by the beneficial influences of the Chinese, who must therefore be more bighearted toward them, is on the surface a positive one, but at the same time it perpetuates notions of racial inferiority and neediness, and of Chinese noblesse oblige, doubtless a troubling yet gratifying thought to a Chinese audience.

In MediaCorp police drama *Heartlanders* (2002-2005), Corporals Ricky Soh (Vincent Ng) and Jamal Salleh (Aaron Aziz) are partners in the neighborhood police force. Casting a Chinese and Malay actor in the lead roles would appear to be a progressive move, but it becomes quite clear from the story lines that the more interesting, developed, and central character is Ricky, the real protagonist in each episode. Even press releases and other promotional materials focus heavily on Ng, the Chinese actor and former martial arts exponent, describing him as a "leader of the troop," a "hero to damsels in distress," and a "'knight in shining armour' kinda guy, who takes it upon himself to solve the whole world's problems." His sex appeal is also emphasized through sound bites such as "Vincent-the-stud-in-uniform … snatching you from the wicked claws of evil" and "good looks, good bod, good heart … a prime catch." The same promotional materials simply mention that the "rest of the cast" includes popular Malay actor-model Aaron Aziz, who plays Jamal. Jamal is described as a "newbie cop trying to make good," and is presented as sincere, naïve, inexperienced, ambitious about his career in the police force, and a good support for Ricky. He has conservative views, particularly about the behavior of Malay girls, but Ricky's advice makes him less "narrow-minded" (MediaCorp TV 2003a).

In one episode of *Heartlanders*, Indian resident Anil suffers from an inferiority complex caused by his older and more educated wife, Sonia. He deals with this by beating her up—the wife-beater is yet another stereotype of Indian males. Sonia runs to her father, Gani, but he refuses to take her back as this would be contrary to tradition. In the end, she is found dead, stabbed by Anil. Gani now "hides the secret and pain of his daughter's death beneath a jolly face" (MediaCorp TV 2003a).

It is clear from these examples that the sitcoms and dramas thrive on mimetic content and racial stereotypes in particular. Commercially speaking, negative stereotypes of the racial minority groups are employed profitably—consciously and unconsciously—to make the shows appeal to the privileged audiences consisting of Chinese Singaporeans, who make up about 75 per cent of the population. In laughing at themselves, minority audiences might also come to accept these negative portrayals as unfortunate but accurate representations of their group. In this way, dominant interpretations of Singapore's 'multiethnic' reality are perpetuated, and multiracial-

ism continues as a superficial ideological expression of racial har-
mony, beneath which lie well-entrenched beliefs about racial supe-
riority/inferiority and practices of racial discrimination. However,
more critical audiences, and in particular those from the racial mi-
nority groups, might not in fact accept these mimetic portrayals of
race, but might instead cast an oppositional gaze at or at least give
a negotiated reading of these portrayals, thereby problematizing the
simplistic assertions about multiracialism that saturate the public
sphere.

Apart from these alternative and oppositional responses from
audiences, it might also be possible to locate moments of negotia-
tion and resistance in the shows themselves, limited though they
might be. The following sections will attempt to identify these lim-
ited ideological resistances in selected episodes of two of the most
successful sitcoms to be produced in Singapore: *Under One Roof* and
PCK.

Under One Roof *(1994-2003)*

Under One Roof was Singapore's first English-language sitcom. Based
on the fictional Tan family—"Singapore's funniest family," it remains
the benchmark of commercial success, winning many awards in the
Asian Television Awards during its multi-season run. Veteran US
comedy writer Steve Kaplan notes that

> [b]asing all comedy on true-to-life characters … is essential to the suc-
> cess of future Singaporean productions; if they are to achieve the suc-
> cess once enjoyed by *Under One Roof.* (Quoted in Jeanine Tan 2005a,
> 28)

Marketing the sitcom to program buyers, MediaCorp highlights five
reasons for its appeal:

> It's funny (of course); it's real (relatable stories); it's family (there's love,
> warmth and sharing, underneath all the laughter); it's your friends and
> neighbours (you can see similar characteristics in the people around
> you); and it's Singaporean (the food, the multi-racial cast and it's set in
> a typical Singapore government flat). (MediaCorp TV 2005b)

As Tan is one of the most common family names in Singapore,
viewers are meant to identify strongly with this family, which is, as
executive producer Andrea Teo explains,

how Singaporeans like to think of themselves. Living in a 5-room HDB [Housing and Development Board] flat in Bishan, then the housing estate to be in, the children all graduates, and with a strong father figure. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 27)

Pepper See explains that

Under One Roof depicts the lifestyles of a middle class family and good family values such as respect, filial piety and harmoniousness. They are accurate in portraying a general Singapore culture of living, which makes them so convincing and popular to the public. We always try to give what is identifiable and believable. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 27).

A.T. proudly asserts that

in our Asian countries, many of us still adopt the principle of living with our parents and grandparents under one roof. So adopting such storyboards for our local programs reflects our local culture more profoundly. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 28)

Set mainly in the living room of the Tan family's apartment in Bishan—a real-life, typically sprawling public housing estate with colorful blocks of flats and landscaped public gardens—the sitcom portrays and thereby celebrates close family ties and rich neighborly interactions between the different ethnic groups. But as much as the producers might want to assert the realism of *Under One Roof* as a reason for its success, the portrayals of heartland life are inescapably romanticized.

In the Tan family, Ah Teck (Moses Lim) is the lovably authoritarian father-figure. He is a miserly and gormandizing shopkeeper whose work often takes him to China. In every episode, Teck tells long-winded and didactic stories set in southern China. In listening to him, the audience is reminded of the wise old Chinese sage—Teck is the cultural and moral bridge that links his modern Singaporean family to the traditional, if only notional, Chinese homeland and all its imagined values. In spite of his shortcomings, Teck is seen as a simple man, for whom the family is most important, making his authoritarian retrieval of Chinese values acceptable, even comforting. At the end of his stories, Teck always asks his reluctant listeners (and by extension, the audience) if they know what the moral of the story is. The father figure's questions, like the narratives in the sitcom, directly interpellate the viewer into the dominant ideological values. Teck's wife Dolly (Koh Chieng

Mun) is a gullible, superstitious, *mahjong*-playing housewife (*mahjong*: a Chinese game), whose function seems to be to uphold traditional family values and glorify the primarily (in her case, exclusively) domestic role of women. In heavily accented Singlish modulated by sheer frustration, she asks her university-educated daughter, Denise (Vernetta Lopez), "How can you find a husband when you cannot even cook instant mee [noodles]?" She tries to teach Denise how to cook "for the sake of her future husband."

Their elder son, Paul (Andrew Lim), is the family 'fool.' He is a Westernized, English-educated Chinese accountant and, like *Mr Kiasu*'s Kiasee and *PCK*'s Chu Beng, is portrayed as effeminate. A hypochondriac who likes classical music and adores veteran Hong Kong star Sally Yeh, his behavior is 'compulsive-obsessive-repetitive.' When he eventually gets married, it is to an emasculating career-obsessed woman, and their exaggerated romantic relationship is more cute and comical than in any way sexual. Paul's younger brother, Ronnie (Nicholas Lee), is a business student at the National University of Singapore. He has an inflated ego that makes him overestimate his charm when it comes to attracting women. The Tans' only daughter, Denise, also eventually goes to the same university and is the sensible one—the young and Westernized 'sage'—in the family. Toward the end of the series, Denise's Scottish boyfriend is eventually accepted by her traditional parents. Two other families are peripherally featured as the Tans' neighbors: a Malay couple Yusof (Zainal 'Zaibo' Ariffin) and Rosnah (Norleena Salim), and a pair of Indian and unmarried siblings Daisy (Daisy Irani) and Michael (Rajiv Dhawn).

"Of Parrots and Parades"

The producers of the widely popular *Under One Roof* were regularly 'commissioned' to make special episodes promoting social messages that were in line with government-initiated national campaigns to promote the Mandarin language, Total Defence exercises, crime awareness, and so on. These more crudely propagandistic episodes also included attempts to promote patriotism, especially to coincide with the National Day celebrations in August. In the episode entitled "Of Parrots and Parades," Denise makes a National Day video for her school that she wants to call "My Singapore, My HDB." Ronnie discovers to his great annoyance that

it is his turn to queue up for National Day Parade tickets, a ritual that many Singaporean families perform every year, even taking leave from work to obtain tickets for what is probably the biggest and most costly party in Singapore.

In one of the two main plots in this episode, Dolly joins forces with Rosnah and Daisy to compete against talkative and boastful neighbor Mrs Lam (Irene Ang) in the Neighborhood National Day 'cook-off.' Organized by the Bishan Community Centre, the theme of the cooking competition is 'a true Singaporean dish.' Mrs Lam, who has won the competition for eight successive years, tests her recipes on her neighbors, including Teck who, to Dolly's annoyance, praises her cooking and eats so much of it that he cannot eat the dinner that Dolly has prepared. The 'multiracial' trio try to figure out what to cook in line with the theme: "Singapore is about people and many races, let's cook something Malay, Chinese, and Indian." They enter their hybrid dish, curry coconut *char kuay teow* (Chinese noodles fried in Indian curry and Malay grated coconut). At the competition, Mrs Lam's kitschy food presentation—complete with patriotic lights and flags—causes a power failure, and all the contestants are awarded a consolation prize which, to Ronnie's delight, turns out to be four National Day Parade tickets, for which he will no longer need to queue.

In the second plot, Teck agrees to look after his Thai supplier Mr Patapong's (Lim Tiap Guan) singing parrot. Disappointed when the parrot refuses to sing for him, Teck challenges Yusof to teach it to talk and sing. Yusof takes away the cage and decorates it with streamers and a Singapore flag but, shortly after, loses the parrot. He enlists Ronnie's help to find it, promising to queue up for the parade tickets if Ronnie finds the parrot. They eventually find the bird in the possession of Mr Lam (Loh Aik Koon), who refuses to return it. Later, they bump into Mr Lam, who declares ironically, during his videotaped interview with Denise, that "being Singaporean means having a proud history with a bright future and a gracious and courteous society." Embarrassed by his own hypocrisy, he 'graciously' returns the parrot. Upon his return to Singapore, Patapong proceeds to free the parrot in line with Thai custom. Having trained it to be a 'homing' parrot, he is confident that it will eventually fly home to him anyway. The resonance with a globalizing Singapore is clear: 'Caged' Singaporeans should be 'free' to pursue larger prospects overseas as long as they have been emo-

tionally and patriotically anchored to their homeland—implanted
with a 'homing instinct.'

The episode ends on a 'feel-good' note, with everyone watching
Denise's video on the living-room television:

> **Teck:** Being Singaporean means many things to me.
>
> **Ronnie:** The 5 Cs—cash, car, condo, credit card, coffee shop.
>
> **Rosnah:** Singapore is where I met my husband.
>
> **Dolly:** Competition, *lah.*
>
> **Teck:** *Char kuay teow, roti prata,* fish-head curry [local food].
>
> **Mrs Lam:** *Ha kau* [local food].
>
> **Mr Lam:** Courteous and gracious society.
>
> **Teck:** *Mee pok* [local food].
>
> **Yusof:** That's where I met my wife.
>
> **Denise and neighbor Lisa (Phyllis Quek):** Good neighbors.
>
> **Dolly, Daisy, and Rosnah:** Good friends.
>
> **Teck:** *Or luak* [local food].
>
> **Denise's boyfriend, Adam:** *Baris sedia*! [Malay parade command
> well-known to national servicemen]

At the end of this video, the parrot 'sings' local folk song "Singa-
pura" (Singapore's Malay name) and the end credits roll to a 'pop'
rendition of "Singapura" instead of the regular theme music.

"Burn Old Flame, Burn"

Under One Roof reinforces dominant ideas about the family, includ-
ing the status of the female homemaker. This is vividly illustrated
in the episode "Burn Old Flame, Burn." In the teaser, Teck reveals
that he has been receiving attractive offers to buy over his minimart,
but he remains uninterested in them. The typically flighty Paul
suggests that "arranging chopstick can help keep things in perspec-
tive. It makes you think straight." Ronnie urges his father to sell,
since "this is your chance to join the big league." In the next scene,
Teck is reprimanding his cheeky worker and delivery boy at his
shop when his old flame from Sunflower Secondary School, Susie
Sim Bee Lian (Margaret Lim), visits him. They affectionately call
each other by their old nicknames: Susie is Ah Lian while Teck is

"Tek Ko" Teck (a now ironic Hokkien reference to "skinny" bamboo pole). After school, Susie left Singapore for New York, married a supermarket chain owner, and took over the company upon his death. She now wants to expand into Asia and, as Teck discovers, has been sending him letters offering to buy over his minimart. Smitten by her charm and sophistication, Teck cannot stop praising Susie and her achievements when he goes home. Dolly jealously proclaims, "I can also do that if I didn't have to take care of you, and the children, and clean the house."

The family are all excited as they wait for Susie to arrive for dinner. Paul has arranged a "perfect pyramid of persimmons" and Ronnie dresses up in a bright green suit, explaining that green is "the most conducive color for corporate interfacing." When Susie arrives, Dolly emerges from the bedroom, dressed up in a red gown, feather boa, and beehive hairstyle. Dolly's inferiority complex turns her into a grotesque figure. The dinner table conversation revolves around Susie's corporate success, with Ronnie looking on in deep admiration. Dolly thinks there are "danger signals" that she is losing Teck to an impressively cosmopolitan and successful career woman. Dolly's ability to find good bargains at the fish market pales in comparison with Susie's achievements. Susie makes a final offer to buy Teck's shop and says that she will expect an answer upon her return from a business trip to Hong Kong.

Dolly confides all her insecurities in Rosnah, who tells her that although Susie might seem "high-class," it is Dolly who can cook and take care of the family. Dolly believes that Susie can afford to buy anything her family wants. Meanwhile, Ronnie persuades Teck to embrace the trappings of life in the fast lane, and in particular the gourmet food. Just before Susie returns, Dolly confronts Teck, but he tells her, "You're my wife. I've been happily married to you for twenty-nine years." When Susie arrives, Teck reveals that he will not accept her offer:

> I like being my own boss … I'm not interested in big cars or country clubs. I'm a simple person and I've also got the most important thing to me—my family.

The camera then cuts to Dolly looking relieved and touched. Teck starts to tell a story, but Susie does not want to hear it. Ronnie seizes the opportunity and asks for a job, but is told that he has to wait till after he graduates: "You work your way up and prove

yourself. That's the American way … If you're good, you could be a manager in five years." Dolly is surprised that Susie does not want to hear any of Teck's stories. Teck replies, "That's why I married you, because you are the only one who likes them."

Clearly, sitcoms like *Under One Roof* help to justify patriarchal mindsets by romanticizing a culture that defines women's authentic roles in terms of the family, and depicting any departure from this as an aberration or a loss that comes with having to embrace modernity, a loss that one should endeavor as far as possible to minimize. The show helps to valorize women's role in the family and thereby justify the exploitative "dual career" expected of most women in Singapore who earn relatively lower wages than their male counterparts, but are still expected to work for free in the households headed by their husbands. Interestingly, the episode upholds the traditional family as more important than ambitiousness and the prospects of upward mobility, also central tenets of Singapore's ideology of meritocracy.

"Mat Rock and Mee Rebus"

While the protagonists of *Under One Roof* are Chinese, the supporting cast is made up of Malays and Indians, showcased in a way that suggests also that the Singapore nation's protagonists are Chinese and the supporting members are of the minority races. In a few of the episodes, however, the Malay and Indian neighbors take center stage, and it is in these episodes that the stereotypes come across most clearly. Yusof is a bald man who sells *mee rebus* (noodles with gravy) for a living. But the real person in charge, however, is Rosnah, his overweight, melodramatic, sulky, and sometimes manipulative wife.

In the episode "Mat Rock and Mee Rebus," Rosnah is visited by her friend Sabiah (Zaliha Hamid), whom she has not seen for almost twelve years. Although they hailed from the same Malaysian village, their lifestyles have diverged tremendously: Sabiah's husband, Suhaimi, has been made a *Datuk* (a Malaysian honorary title). Sabiah entertains rich and famous people in her mansion, travels to places like Switzerland, drinks Perrier, and shops with a gold card. Rosnah enviously tells her hawker husband, Yusof, about Sabiah's new circumstances, and chides him for only thinking about the past instead of focusing on the future, their progress, and ambitions:

"When you were younger, didn't you have any dreams?" she asks. Yusof replies, "Yes, I did. I wanted to be a pop star."

Upon hearing this, Ronnie jumps at the chance to be Yusof's marketing consultant for a new restaurant at which Yusof's new band will perform in fulfillment of his dreams. Rosnah is delighted, but soon changes her mind as she realizes that, with Yusof's absence, she will have to work doubly hard at their *mee rebus* stall. Dressed in a garish costume, an Elvis wig, and sideburns, Yusof ignores Rosnah's pleas, so she runs to the Tans and bursts into hysterics. Paul and Denise save the day by making Yusof an offer for the *mee rebus* stall that he cannot refuse, claiming that Rosnah has decided to work for them instead. This confuses Yusof tremendously and he, to Rosnah's relief, abandons his plans and returns to his old ambitionless self, saying, "Making money is good, but having a good partner is better, and my best partner is always by my side." At this point, Rosnah and Yusof burst into a rendition of "Love Me Tender." The stereotype is clear: Malays can only hope to be entertainers, though they might not be successful at it, even with the help of the enterprising Chinese. Envious of one another, they are unrealistic dreamers without the talent, practical sense, or determination to succeed at serious work and business. These are the stereotypes that help to perpetuate the 'cultural-deficit thesis' that continues to inform Singaporeans' view of the Malay community as a perennial problem.

"Daisy and the Deadline"

The episode "Daisy and the Deadline" actually begins in India, with Indian classical music in the background. There, Daisy's uncle dies and is surrounded by scheming members of the Bombay Boys Club who want to claim the inheritance that has been willed to Daisy only if she can find a husband before a two-week deadline expires. The other niece, Letchmi (Kersi Aspar), who also has a claim, comes running in crying hysterically when she hears of the death, appealing to the stereotype of over-dramatic Indian women. Motivated by the money and her feminist disgust at the chauvinists of the Boys Club, Daisy goes to a dating agency and spends four hours looking for suitable companions. Every date that she has arranged for the evening turns out to be unsuccessful. Daisy wonders if it is because she is "too pushy," articulating another stereotype

of the educated Indian woman portrayed as talkative and unreasonable. She even attends the programs of the Social Development Unit, a government matchmaking agency, but comes across as too desperate and is rejected by everyone there. Paul and Denise again save the day by organizing an interview with suitors at their home. Instead of falling for any of the applicants that show up, Daisy falls in love with the plumber who happens to be fixing her kitchen pipes, but she is too late: Letchmi has beaten her to the inheritance.

In a second plot, Dolly and Rosnah look for a part-time job in a telephone survey company, but are sacked for criticizing the product that they are supposed to be promoting. They eventually decide to sell Tupperware and organize a party for this purpose. To their horror, the cost of organizing the party leaves them with a pittance for a profit. This is yet another occasion when Dolly reconsiders her purely domestic role and decides to venture into the salaried world. Invariably, her efforts are frustrated, and she is led to realize time and again that true fulfillment for her is to be found in looking after her own family.

Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd *(1997-2007)*

PCK is the longest-running English-language sitcom in Singapore. Most of the action takes place in the home of an extended family whose diverse members present many opportunities for playing out a range of issues and story lines through what Pepper See describes as "polarized couplings" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 29). The title character, Chu Kang, is a building contractor with a prominent mole on his face, long fingernails on both his little fingers, and a tightly permed hairdo. He dresses mostly in an ill-fitting, white long-sleeved shirt that is not tucked into his trousers and an oversized pair of yellow rubber boots. He walks with a manly swagger and often rests in a squatting position favored by *ah bengs* (Hokkien term denoting Chinese ruffian with garish dress sense). Visually, he comes across as entirely working-class, but with his small building firm, he is affluent enough to live in private and landed property. The house itself is garishly decorated with pink walls, a synthetic leather sofa set, a gold-plated telephone, and an indoor water feature where he keeps his pet koi. Chu Kang is por-

trayed as crude but lovable, his bad taste a mark of sincerity rather than affectation. With a devil-may-care attitude, he bungles things up in English-speaking Singapore, but always gets by in the end.

Interestingly, the Indian actor who plays the Chinese character Chu Kang is Gurmit Singh, a Sikh who learnt Mandarin in school, later converted to Christianity, and then married a Chinese woman. He is one of the most successful television artistes in Singapore, and has achieved this, interestingly enough, through his hilarious portrayal of an uncouth Chinese building contractor, complete with Chinese accent and broken English. He is never thought of as an Indian man mocking the Chinese heartlanders and getting away with it through televisual comedy. On the contrary, it might be said that Singh is licensed to poke fun at the same people who have come to accept him as their own.

Chu Kang's brother, Chu Beng (Pierre Png), is an effeminate, easily agitated, constantly worrying, and henpecked architect. He writes romantic *haiku* (Japanese poetic form) for his wife and panders to her every whim. He often gets bullied by ruffians, and is protected or avenged by his streetwise brother. In one episode, Chu Beng has a quarrel with Chu Kang over who should be the head of their architect-builder partnership. Chu Kang declares that he should be head, but since there is a woman behind every successful man, Chu Beng should be that woman. In a girlishly flustered way, Chu Beng declares: "I am not a woman!" and then marches off. In another episode, when Chu Beng is asked to pose for a risqué calendar, he becomes vain and preens obsessively. An irritated Chu Kang says that Chu Beng behaves like a girl. The questioning of Chu Beng's masculinity is a running gag in the series and, as with Kiasee in *Mr Kiasu* and Paul in *Under One Roof*, offers comic gratification to heartlander viewers who might be disgruntled in their real lives with a system that seems to favor the more educationally qualified, Westernized, and English-speaking Singaporeans.

The effeminate Chu Beng is coupled with a snobbish, pretentious, and affected wife, Margaret (Tan Kheng Hua). She enjoys the finer things in life, is interested in the arts, and seeks out invitations to important social events. Her bourgeois lifestyle is starkly contrasted with the concerns and preferences of Chu Kang's loud and vulgar wife, Rosie (Irene Ang), who dresses garishly, speaks an exaggerated Singlish, and spends most of her time and her husband's

money on shopping, slimming treatments, and *mahjong*. In one ep-
isode, Margaret the vegetarian develops a craving for raw carrots
while Rosie slobbers over *char kuay teow*. In another, Margaret rem-
inisces about being proposed to at the upmarket restaurant Maxims,
while Rosie reveals that Chu Kang proposed to her at popular lo-
cal Chinese restaurant Fatty Weng. Margaret is over-the-top, high-
ly excitable, and domineering. She comes across as entirely artificial,
even in this relentlessly slapstick sitcom.

Up until the fifth season, *PCK* had an all-Chinese cast. Jennifer
Tan justifies this by explaining that

> [t]he characters are so funny and their human traits are so identifiable
> that they become universal. However the absence of minority races
> wasn't a conscious decision. Still the first priority of this production has
> always been the concentration on Phua Chu Kang's life and the people
> around him. The Phua family is Chinese and live on landed property, so
> there are not much opportunities for meeting neighbours. (Interviewed
> in K. Y. Chong 2001, 33)

When a Malay character (Adfin Shauki) is finally introduced, he
turns out to be an electrician who has not been able to pass his
electrical engineering examinations, once again an underachieving
buffoon inserted as a token character. Even his name, Bobo, sug-
gests a buffoon.

Pepper See remarks that, in spite of its farcical style, "the char-
acters are deeply rooted in reality" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong
2001, 29). Jennifer Tan believes that its "'feel good' element is im-
portant to the Singaporean audience" (interviewed in Chong, K.
Y. 2001, 28). But beneath the fun and entertainment, S. Yan be-
lieves,

> [a] satirical comedy of some [sort], exaggerated caricatures of different
> classes and the comedy antics of the characters are depicted to the full-
> est here. But we are not poking fun at any of the people in this society.
> PCK is just trying to bring out the lifestyles that Singaporeans adopt, be
> it that of the heartlander or cosmopolitan. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong
> 2001, 29)

PCK does, in fact, manage to contradict at least two important
policy goals of the government. The first of these goals is to pro-
mote the widespread use of standard English so that Singaporeans
can communicate effectively with the larger English-speaking world:
The continued use of Singlish, the government believes, will be
economically costly. Chu Kang speaks broken English, drawing

laughter from Singaporeans who react approvingly to the spectacle of their patois being taken out of the context of their own everyday lives and fed back to them through their own television screens. In this way, comedy derived from an organic (and in that way seen to be 'authentic') language confronts the power, arrogance, and seriousness of Singapore's administrative state and its governing bureaucracies. Singlish, to many Singaporeans, is also a marker of national identity that Singaporeans should be proud of. The series was delightfully 'subversive' in its initial years of telecast, when it appeared to go against the grain of thinking about the economic benefits of speaking good English and about the mass media as a nation-building instrument of the PAP government. However, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, once again emphasizing the importance of being understood in the English-speaking world, urged the fictitious television icon to improve his English as an example for Singaporeans to emulate, a public gesture that relaunched a heated debate about the value of Singlish. In a subsequent episode, Chu Kang attends night classes to improve his English, although he never quite achieves the 'officially desired' level of proficiency.

PCK also seems to contradict the government's aim to increase Singapore's population to serve the capitalist economy and the military defense of it. While the government has been implementing policies to encourage young Singaporeans to get married and have children, Chu Kang and Rosie, as Kalpana observes,

> do not have children, that's not very wholesome right? After the National Day Rally speech where PM Goh encouraged married couples to have kids, we also incorporated this in one episode. Rosie tried means to get pregnant, but to no avail. I don't see PCK as a propaganda tool to convey the message of reproduction across to the public, but more as a show taking mild digs at the happenings in this society. (Interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 30)

Jennifer Tan even describes the Phua family as "dysfunctional," but she admits that the little subversions are "contained within certain norms" (interviewed in K. Y. Chong 2001, 28). In fact, by the end of the sixth season, Chu Kang and Rosie finally give birth to twins, Romeo and Crystal, so this little subversion is completely subsumed by the nuclear family norm.

"Saving Pte Phua"

Class differences and the clash of values are the main source of comedy in *PCK*. In the main plot of episode "Saving Pte Phua," the brothers Phua are called up for their annual National Service. Before they go, Chu Kang asks Chu Beng to do some work for him while he takes care of other business. Chu Beng replies, "What, you want me [an architect] to do manual labor?" Chu Kang says, "Of course. It's for the nation. If you help me clear the mess, then we won't get distracted during reservist [National Service] and we can defend the nation better." Chu Kang's workers, the archetypal "fools" Ah Goon (Ray Kuan) and King Kong (Charlie Tan), tease Chu Beng for working "like a girl." Chu Beng demands more respect but learns that Chu Kang often bullies his workers, always pretending that he has other, more important work to do. Their client Ms Lopez (Fiona Xie) enters the room and is disgusted by the workers' clumsiness. Chu Beng speaks up for King Kong:

> You should take pity on him. You see, he's not very educated, a little bit slow … likes to talk a lot but does very little … I try to be nice. It's my company and I try to be charitable.

Chu Kang overhears the conversation and thinks that Chu Beng is talking about him, looking down on him for his lack of educational qualifications. Later, Chu Kang starts to victimize Chu Beng, giving him only a tiny hammer to do the work and accusing him of being lazy. When Ms Lopez again enters to complain about the workers, Chu Kang blames Chu Beng, explaining that

> I took pity on him … let him work in my company. He studied in a university but he still not very smart. Also he always bullied by his friend. He must even ask permission to go toilet … a loser! … I'm the boss, he's the worker!

Chu Beng, a captain in the reserve army, receives a letter telling him that he has been posted to Private Phua Chu Kang's camp. When they both go for National Service, Chu Beng takes every opportunity to make life difficult for his brother, punishing him and his platoon mates. The captain tells Chu Kang's platoon, "I'm going to whack you delinquents into shape, because this country needs real men, men of character, men of integrity, men of intestinal fortitude." Chu Kang says, "They don't understand, they are uneducated like me." Later, unaware that his brother is standing right behind him, Chu Kang mimics Chu Beng:

> This country needs men, men with clean underwear, men who use big words … men who are bullied by their wives so that they can come here and bully us.

Chu Kang is put through a series of humiliating punishments, including cleaning the toilet with only a toothbrush. Chu Kang and Chu Beng eventually confront each other and learn about the misunderstanding. They make up and hug affectionately, leaving the soldiers—in a slapstick moment—to wonder if they are gay lovers.

In the secondary plot, Margaret's son, Aloysius (Marcus Ng), reveals that he is getting bullied in school because Margaret has insisted on pronouncing his name the correct way (al-oo-ISH-us) instead of using the very commonly mispronounced form (al-OY-shus). His classmates think he is a snob, but Margaret insists on using the correct form. Chu Kang's business competitor, Frankie Foo (Lim Kay Siu), comes for a visit and agrees to teach Aloysius to defend himself against the bully "since there is no man in the house." But in the confrontation, Frankie and Aloysius run away when the bully turns out to be bigger than either of them. Aloysius later pleads with Margaret to let him go back to using his mispronounced name. Margaret only agrees to this when her mother-in-law, Amah (Neo Swee Lin), reveals that Margaret's real name is "Seow Huay Lian." Margaret agrees to Aloysius' request and begs everyone to keep her "low-class" name a secret.

"What If … "

In this episode, Chu Kang is nominated as head of wood floorings and cornices in the Southeast Asian Brotherhood of Contractors. Chu Beng is skeptical about the association, which wants to charge Chu Kang S$3,000 if he is selected for the post. Chu Kang thinks Chu Beng is jealous, and says

> [y]ou think I cannot win the real award is it? Only my clever brother who studied in Australia can win is it? … For over thirty years, I sweated and worked and worked some more so that you could study in Australia … so ungrateful! … I didn't go to university because of you … What if I was the one who went to study overseas?

Just then, in classic slapstick mode, worker Ah Goon enters the room carrying a big plank and clumsily hits Chu Beng on the head, rendering him unconscious.

Chu Beng's dream enacts a counterfactual past in which he works as a barber and Chu Kang studies architecture in London. Margaret is Chu Beng's "*ah lian*" (female version of *ah beng*) girlfriend, a sales executive at a department store. In the dream, Chu Kang—who has now come to be known as "Charles"—returns from his studies abroad and meets Chu Beng in his barber shop. He speaks and dresses in a highly affected and exaggeratedly Anglicized manner. Charles' new wife, "Rosalind," is an equally affected version of Rosie, and claims to be the daughter of a *Datuk*. Chu Beng is delighted to see his brother, with whom he hopes to go into partnership and "make lots of money together." Margaret realizes Rosalind is really Tan Chin Huay, not the daughter of a *Datuk* but a "low-class" commoner. Margaret, who wishes to impress Chu Beng, asks Rosalind to teach her how to behave in a sophisticated way in exchange for not revealing her secret.

Charles is too busy to visit his mother Amah at home, so she and Chu Beng have to visit him while he conducts a business meeting at his friend Franco's house. Amah urges Chu Kang to work with Chu Beng since he slogged to finance Chu Kang's studies abroad. But Chu Kang wants instead to do business with the highly affected Franco (Lim Kay Siu, the same actor who plays Chu Kang's arch-rival, Freddie Foo). Chu Beng asks if Charles will be his model for the finals of the Golden Good Morning Towel Barber Competition, as the prize money could help him sustain his barbershop. But Charles has no time for this as Franco has found him a multimillion-dollar contract to design a "neo-Renaissance, post-post-modernist, cubist multiplex." When Margaret tries to impress Chu Beng with her newly learnt etiquette, he is too distracted to notice it as he is trying to find a model for the competition. Later, Franco explains that they want to tear down Chu Beng's salon to build the multiplex. Margaret enters the room and angrily reveals Rosalind's true identity as she thinks Rosalind has not done a good job of teaching her to be sophisticated. Charles asks, "In the name of Her Majesty the Queen, who is Chin Huay?" They all adjourn to the Phua flat: Charles enters, covering his nose in disgust. Amah tells him how much they have scrimped and saved to send him overseas. A repentant Charles decides to reject Franco's offer and dashes off to the competition, but it is too late—a dejected Chu Beng declares that "all is gone."

At that point, Chu Beng wakes up from the dream and finds Margaret by his side, thanking Rosie for being there for them. He discovers that the results of Chu Kang's nomination are about to be announced, runs to the ceremony in his hospital pajamas, and, when he sees his brother, bursts into tears for not taking more interest in Chu Kang's affairs. Chu Kang says, "Men don't cry," reveals that he has won, and offers to share his prize with Chu Beng: "We won … we are the Brothers Phua".

"French Connection"

In the episode "French Connection," Margaret gets Aloysius to watch a video of French cooking to prepare themselves for his school funfair. Aloysius wants to make local snack *kueh tutu* but Margaret thinks this is "peasant food." Behind Margaret's back, Chu Kang humors Aloysius by mimicking the French chef in the video, Gaston. Later, Chu Kang informs Chu Beng that their client requires him to change his designs. Chu Beng thinks that Chu Kang always gives in at Chu Beng's expense, but is told by Amah that Chu Kang has made many sacrifices in order for him to study in Australia. In another classic slapstick moment, Chu Kang walks into his office and trips over some pipes. As he tries to put away the pipes, Chu Beng opens the door in his face.

Chu Kang is in hospital. But when he regains consciousness, he assumes the persona of French chef Gaston. He does not recognize anyone, but passionately embraces Margaret, then Rosie, as they enter the hospital room. At home, "Gaston" is insufferable as he criticizes the décor and food. He puts up a French flag in the living room. He criticizes Chu Beng's designs, and then goes on to make a pass at Margaret, who is greatly impressed and seizes the opportunity to educate the Phua family in the finer things in life. The rest of the family believe they have to tolerate the obnoxious "Gaston" for him to get better. But unable to take it anymore, they scheme to knock him on the head to cure his amnesia. Amah chooses a tennis racket, Chu Beng a frying pan, and Rosie a hammer. Suspecting their intentions, Gaston flees from them, but runs into a pipe that Ah Goon is carrying and loses consciousness. When he awakens, he is still "Gaston." Only when he sees his shocking reflection in the water does he return to being Chu Kang.

Dream sequences and hallucinations such as these are employed as a comic device in *PCK* to set up incongruous situations where

class positions and their associated mannerisms and affectations are inverted to hilarious effect. Although the laughter that such incongruities draw might have a critical edge that forces an at least momentary reexamination of order and social hierarchies, the laughter is more likely—judging from the conservative resolutions of each episode of *PCK*—to serve as an outlet for the anxieties that arise from the possibility of disorder and uncertainty. Therefore, the grotesque dreams and hallucinations that appear—through counterfactual exaggeration—to allow contestation of the taken-for-granted class positions in the Phua family eventually give way to reality, where class distinctions are not eliminated but resolved in happy endings that reaffirm harmony within the family.

"The Smell of Money"

In the main plot of the episode "The Smell of Money," Margaret starts an aromatherapy business. Rosie walks in wearing her new "parfum," which she bought from the neighborhood store. Margaret throws an aromatherapy party for her bourgeois vegetarian friends where she announces that part of the proceeds from her homemade products will go to the Endangered Dugong Recreation Center. She also assures them that the scents will make their husbands go wild. Rosie walks in with her shopping and hands Margaret the recycled toilet paper that she requested. Rosie's perfume reminds the other ladies of the "cheap and slutty" smell of the women that their husbands are having affairs with. Rosie feels self-conscious about the unflattering description of her lack of class and sophistication, and is further taunted by Margaret. Rosie, instigated by Amah, decides to compete with Margaret and make her own fragrances. With Amah's secret addition of common paint thinner, Rosie's perfumes are a hit and she manages to get even Margaret's vegetarian friends to buy her products, since the fragrances were able to keep their husbands at home. In the end, Rosie makes more profit than Margaret, but not after Amah takes her cut.

Conclusion

Under One Roof, perhaps the most successful Singapore-made sitcom, bears all the hallmarks of the culture industry: The weekly episodes

are formulaic; the plots are predictable; the comedy is infantilizing; and the racial, class, and gender stereotyping that goes on in each episode is typical of the kind of mimetic content that reinforces a taken-for-granted simplification of complex realities. Ideologically, the sitcom works to maintain the status quo by laughing over the tensions and contradictions of living in Singapore, and resolving all complex problems in late capitalist society by the simple—and gratifying—evocation of the mythical happy Asian family and a sense of neighborliness.

The producers of *PCK*, in contrast, manage to encode moments of resistance to the official discourse, government policy positions, and the middle-class affectations of newly rich Singaporeans. Through the uncompromising use of Singlish by the working-class protagonist, his childless family life, and the ridiculous portrayals of his sister-in-law's bourgeois pretensions, *PCK* offers a carnivalesque opportunity for audiences to join in the mockery of officialdom's seriousness, and the hypocrisy and insecurities of the new rich. For instance, the exaggerated stereotypes of class serve, in a playful way, to draw a critical response to class relations in Singapore. Nevertheless, *PCK* is just as much a product of the culture industry, and so faces considerable pressure to conform to the needs of market and state. The fantasy of Chinese racial homogeneity and the single (and short-lived) negative Malay stereotype that play out in the show are indications of this. Also, the easy endings for each episode serve, just as they do in *Under One Roof*, to resolve the contradictions and tensions revealed in each episode's central 'problem,' and in that way never allow a cheeky moment to turn into a socially transformative opportunity. The net effect is a conservative one.

The Singapore-made sitcoms and dramas discussed in this chapter are typical products of the culture industry, designed not to offer 'aesthetic challenges' but to provide light entertainment and, in the case of the sitcoms, to draw the laughter of the culture industry that professor of English Andrew Stott describes as "a placebo which [the industry] feeds to the population of the 'false society' … to divert them from reflecting on their inauthentic existence." To the Frankfurt School critical theorists, this laughter is "a kind of infantilized false consciousness, attached to images … that allude to the gratification of desires" (Stott 2005, 144). As mimetic products, the sitcoms and dramas perform the ideological work

necessary for maintaining the one-dimensional capitalist society, and they thrive on stereotypical representations of race, gender, and class that provide easy gratification, even though the audience response sample shows some negotiated and even oppositional readings of these televisual texts. While the program writers themselves might from time to time resist the official policies, the sitcoms and dramas nearly always end on a conservative note. Almost inevitably, the real moral of the story, as Teck labors to explain to his family, neighbors, and audience, is: Laugh and cry with the problems and subversions played out on TV, then switch it off and return to the order of one-dimensional society.

IMAGINING THE CHINESE COMMUNITY THROUGH THE FILMS OF JACK NEO

In 2005, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts named filmmaker Jack Neo (b. 1960) one of five recipients of the Cultural Medallion, an annual award that since 1979 has recognized individuals who have 'attained artistic excellence' in the fields of literary arts, performing arts, visual arts, and film. The decision to honor Neo—as well as pop musician Dick Lee (who had been a judge on the *Singapore Idol* competition, discussed in Chapter 3)—with such a prestigious award sparked a heated debate in the media and arts community as to whether pop culture should be considered an appropriate field for such an award and whether the two entertainers really deserved it.

Straits Times film correspondent Ong Sor Fern regards Neo as the only director with a "grasp of the psyche of the average Singaporean and empathy for the man in the street." But she argues that Neo was a "populist"—rather than an "artistic"—choice for the award. While he is a competent filmmaker and has proven himself commercially, there is still much room for improvement where technical and aesthetic abilities are concerned, and his films have not had enough time to prove themselves as enduring works of art (Ong 2005c). Neo, for example, has not been able to develop his cinematic technique beyond the 'television skit' format that he excels in. Too many scenes in his films are overly melodramatic. And every one of his films concludes, often abruptly, with a predictably easy and unfeasibly happy ending (Ong 2006d). Playwright and law professor Eleanor Wong points to the "muddled benchmarks" that authorities are using to measure the "creative industry" and asks, "Is the medallion about commercial success or artistic merit?" (quoted in Chow 2005, 4). Arguing against taking a snobbish attitude toward popular and even populist art, *Straits Times* entertainment editor Yeow Kai Chai claims that Neo deserves the award because he "touches a (raw) nerve by articulating the concerns of heartlanders, who make up the heart of the country"

(Yeow 2005). David Chew, an arts reporter for *Today*, describes Neo's films as capturing "the tone of the so-called heartlands and the nation's psyche … [adding] to the vernacular, becoming an intrinsic part of Singapore's pop culture" (Chew 2005, 40). *Time Magazine* columnist Bryan Walsh (2002) describes Neo as the "subversive underlying id" in censorious Singapore, who is willing to "put on the screen what his audience actually thinks, feels and even how they talk." Singapore Film Society chairman Kenneth Tan (not this book's author), who sat on the Cultural Medallion assessment panel, believes that Neo's films are "representative of Singaporean culture. And in developing a film industry, we want to develop something that is distinguishably Singaporean—and Jack's films are it" (quoted in Chew 2005, 40).

As a Singaporean feature film director or writer, Neo has averaged an impressive output of one film a year since his first, *Money No Enough*, in 1998. With box-office takings of more than S$5.8 million, it continues to be the third top grossing film of all time in Singapore after *Titanic* (1997) and *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997); and the highest grossing made-in-Singapore film. The second and third highest grossing Singapore-made films are *I Not Stupid Too* in 2006 (more than S$4.2 million) and *I Not Stupid* in 2002 (more than S$3.8 million) respectively (Singapore Film Commission n. d.). All three films were written by Neo, who started out in 1980 as a Chinese-language television comedian. Neo the film scriptwriter saturates his dialogues with ribald and irreverent humor peppered with puns in Mandarin and Hokkien, the kind of humor that appeals especially to a Chinese-speaking mass audience and, in particular, the segment that feels increasingly alienated from Singapore's seemingly Westernized orientation and pretensions. Along with his comic and sometimes bittersweet portrayals of everyday life in the heartlands as well as his satirical jibes at both government and society, it is probably Neo's low-brow comic formula that explains the commercial success he has enjoyed and is admired for, even by some opinion-leaders in the arts community. Singaporean humor columnist Tay Yek Keak believes "real comedy is that which aims at the masses," citing Neo's films as a successful brand name in the comedy-for-the-masses market (quoted in Ong 2007a). Film scholars Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar note how Neo's films, circulated primarily in the local mainstream commercial market,

are densely packed with local knowledge that makes the films extremely popular with the heartland audience, but this same characteristic limits their capacity to travel beyond Singapore (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 216-17). And yet, his *Homerun* (2003) and *I Not Stupid Too* (2006) were able to capture the attention of film festival programmers; the latter was invited with 11 other Singapore films to screen at the Cannes Film Festival's *Tous les Cinémas du Monde* in 2006, where it was reported to have played to "faint sounds of sobbing from the audience" (S. Y. Lee 2006, 4).

Since the late 1980s, Neo has been the director of talent management company and production house J Team Productions. On his company's website, Neo is immodestly described as having been

> crowned the "Local Entertainment Legend." He is a great man with humble origins. He believes everyone has his own road to success. He upholds his beliefs throughout his 30 years of relentless contribution towards the local entertainment industry.
>
> The unprecedented scope of Director Neo's talent encompasses all the major disciplines—acting, directing, singing, lyrics composing, producing and writing. To excel in just one area is rare; to excel at the lot is nothing less than extraordinary … He is a true blue Singaporean who believes that everyone can play a part in contributing to the nation. His patriotic stand even earned him a worthy praise from PM Goh in his 2002 Rally Speech.
>
> Today, we see Jack Neo as a role model for everyone, as an example of passion, commitment, fortitude and determination. (J Team Productions 2004)

Most of his films contain social and political criticism couched in—and perhaps, as a result, protected by—low-brow humor. Media scholar Jacqueline Tan argues that Neo deliberately uses comedy not only to create a bond among Singaporean audiences, but also to disguise his political commentaries as harmless fun (Jacqueline Tan 2004). The issues raised in his films—particularly the problems of a regimented, narrow, stressful, and divisive education system as enacted in *I Not Stupid* (2002)—have become a talking point in parliamentary debates. In spite of the criticisms he makes, his films are passed by the authorities without any need for censorship. Neo was in fact awarded the Public Service Medal in 2004, and his films were mentioned not once (as described in the company website bio) but at least four times in the prime ministerial National Day Rally speeches of 1998, 2002, 2003, and 2005. Mak-

ing these rhetorical references to Neo, whose connection with the heartlands is a well-established fact, can help to soften the technocratic government's image, giving people the impression that the government, too, can relate to common people and appreciate the problems they face. References to Neo's films in these speeches can also serve to vividly illustrate cold and abstract ideas, making them more appealing and personally meaningful to heartlanders.

In the 2002 speech, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong urged Singaporeans to be like Neo, who has

> applied his creative energy to produce three movies. Two of them were highly successful … I watched *I Not Stupid*. I can understand why it touched many parents' hearts. My wife liked it so much that she watched it three times. She felt that Jack Neo deserved a National Day award. But I told her, "Two No Enough"! (C. T. Goh 2002)

In an effort to discourage Singaporeans from "quitting" the country for a better life elsewhere, Goh quoted Neo as a model citizen who had said, "Here, I'm the No. 1 wife. Elsewhere, I'm the concubine," and the prime minister noted that, "[u]nfortunately, not all Singaporeans feel like Jack Neo" (C. T. Goh 2002). In the 2003 speech, Goh cited Neo as a "positive example of resourcefulness," able to lift the standards of the film industry "several notches" in spite of its "small domestic market and the lack of acting talent" (C. T. Goh 2003). Goh also expressed his approval of Neo's *Homerun*, a film that resonates strongly with the messages of National Education:

> Last year, I praised Jack for his movies *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid*. I told my wife, who felt he deserved a National Day award, that two good movies were not enough. Well, Jack's latest movie has become a box office hit. Looks like I may have to revisit the matter of an award for him! (C. T. Goh 2003)

In the Mandarin section of the 2005 speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observed that with China's emergence, there has been an economically motivated revival of interest in the Chinese language and culture in Singapore. In spite of that, he noted how Neo had asserted that in Singapore "only the English educated are the élite, while the Chinese educated are the true essence of the country, … [a] disappearing essence." Disagreeing with Neo's observation, Lee asserted metaphorically that

> [t]his is a long running serial, and the best shows are yet to come … Last year we revised the Chinese language curriculum to ensure the long term vitality of the language in Singapore. I look forward to your continued support for this major reform. (H. L. Lee 2005a)

Lee's words reveal a cautious approach to the Chinese-educated community in Singapore, a community whose concerns and fears about the dominance of the English language and Westernization in general seem to be well-represented in Neo's films. The curricular revisions that Lee referred to had been controversially regarded by the community as a dangerous compromise in favor of the English-educated Singaporeans: The 'watering down' of the Mandarin curriculum would lower Singaporeans' general proficiency in Mandarin, and presumably the language's status. This move, some community leaders believed, was yet another example of the government's disregard for the Chinese-speaking community (who, notionally, constitute the main part of Singapore's heartlanders) in favor of more cosmopolitan Singaporeans along with talented foreigners glorified for their role in the New Economy. These community leaders often consider the 'cosmopolitans' to be de-culturalized, Westernized, unpatriotic, and even morally questionable.

This chapter will discuss Neo's commercial success and the appeal of his films for the Chinese-speaking mass audience, secured mainly through the comic use of racial, class, gender, and sexual stereotypes; satirical modes of social and political criticism; and simple, moralistic story lines that end happily. The chapter will discuss the place of this commercial success within Singapore's culture industry (evidenced by Neo's flagrant resort to product placements and endorsements) and its importance to the government's policies for the creative industries. The chapter will discuss Neo's films as sites of ideological struggle where dominant ideological formations come into conflict with Neo's social and political criticisms, particularly on behalf of the Chinese-speaking community, out of which Neo has emerged as an organic intellectual of sorts. And yet, much of Neo's critical sting has been attenuated by his brand of comedy, the imperatives of commercialism, and the government's (mainly successful) efforts to co-opt him as a model citizen for the creative economy.

For instance, although Neo's *I Not Stupid* appears to be critical of the government's pro-foreign talent policies, and of Singaporeans'

apathy and unquestioning obedience to their authoritarian govern-
ment, the film nevertheless continues to buy into—and in fact re-
inforces—the commonsense belief in capitalist meritocracy, the
prospects of self-improvement, and personal responsibility for suc-
cess (and blame for failure). Neo argues that

> [b]asically, my movies have a very positive message, no matter what. At
> the end of the day, they're not meant to subvert the social order. I speak
> of truths using humour. (*Straits Times* 2004b)

Neo has won the favor of two prime ministers not only because
of his exemplary success as a commercial filmmaker, but also for
the hegemonic, ultimately pro-establishment function of his films.

The Chinese in Singapore

Jack Neo's films are in Mandarin and Hokkien, often with a smat-
tering of broken English. His protagonists are nearly always Man-
darin- or Hokkien-speaking members of the Chinese community,
struggling within a basically Westernized English-speaking society.
Although they are often treated, at the start, as lowlifes, underachiev-
ers, failures, or criminals, they eventually overcome life's obstacles
through determination and the support of friends, family, and com-
munity, and by being true to their cultural and moral values.

The Chinese-educated often lament how Singapore society seems
not only to be blindly embracing modern Western values and life-
style choices, but also to be belittling those who believe it is crucial
to retain their Chinese roots. A spectacular example is what has
come to be called the 'Nantah issue.' Nantah, an abbreviated ref-
erence to Nanyang University, was officially opened in 1958 as the
first Chinese university outside China. It was built with the money
of philanthropist Tan Lark Sye, but also with contributions made
by ordinary members of the proud Chinese community, including
poorly paid "wharf coolies, construction workers and dance host-
esses" (SFCCA 1990, 31). In 1980, the PAP government effected
a merger between Nantah and the University of Singapore to form
the National University of Singapore. Nantah had to move from
its premises to the University of Singapore's Kent Ridge campus.
To Nantah staff and students, the merger was really a political ar-
rangement to assimilate the Chinese-medium institution into the
dominant English-medium university. Nantah's staff and its 10,000-

plus graduates believed they were being systematically marginalized and were resentful of this move. Official reasons offered for the merger included concerns about educational standards, but the government's actions were interpreted as an "unjust persecution of the university from the outside" (Ching 1992). Trying to keep the "Nantah flame" alive has been, according to Nantah "activist" Ching Chiang, "an issue which has plagued the relationship between the Chinese community and the government of the day" (Ching 1992).

However, as the Chinese-speaking community makes up a very significant proportion of the electorate, the PAP government cannot afford to be overly insensitive to its needs. In 1978, a Ministry of Education report recommended the creation of a few Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools that would aim to raise Mandarin to first-language level alongside English. The report articulated the importance of preserving the valuable learning environment found in the traditional Chinese school system. SAP schools would become a means of preserving the cultural roots of Chinese Singaporeans. At about the same time, an annual Speak Mandarin public education campaign was launched that survives to this day (Gopinathan 1994, 70-74). In the early 1980s, Confucian ethics was established as one—though clearly the most important—of six religious knowledge subjects that secondary school students were required to read (Chua 1995, 147-67). In 1983, a research institute was also set up to study East Asian philosophy.

These 'sinicization' policies were justified as necessary for maintaining cultural ballasts against negative influences from the West and globalization more generally, and for building up cultural resources for engaging with China, expected to be an economic superpower that Singapore could benefit from (Chiew 1997, 223-26). The policies were also justified as a means of preserving qualities that were in the 1980s receiving universal—often academic—attention as conditions that promoted 'miraculous' economic success in the Confucian countries of East Asia (Lodge and Vogel 1987). These policies have also been interpreted as attempts by the government to appease the Chinese-educated community, who were being asked to change their mindsets and accept the larger imperatives of economic growth and development.

Another way of dealing with the Chinese-educated community has been to label publicly any 'excessive' claims by members of the

community as instances of 'Chinese chauvinism.' This makes the community vulnerable to laws and enforcement mechanisms put in place to deal with serious threats to public security and order (such as the Internal Security Act) and legitimized by a national history bearing evidence of ethnic violence associated with Chinese communism and communalism. Lawyer and opposition politician Tang Liang Hong argued that the silent Chinese majority should be given a greater say in national affairs, which were at the time dominated, he believed, by an English-speaking Christian minority. When Tang ran in the 1997 general elections as a candidate for the opposition Workers' Party, government leaders accused him of being an anti-Christian Chinese chauvinist and, therefore, a dangerous extremist. During the election campaigns, Tang declared that his accusers were liars. This counteraccusation triggered several waves of libel suits from the PAP leaders. Tang fled the country, leaving behind his wife, whose passport was subsequently seized by the authorities. He now lives abroad in exile (Baker 1997). Tang's example, though complicated somewhat by party-political circumstances, is a chilling reminder of the possible consequences when one is too enthusiastic in championing the cause of one's ethnic community and culture.

While Mandarin is regarded and promoted in Singapore as a valuable language both for establishing economic relations with China and for evolving a Chinese cultural élite with access to 'high culture,' the use of other Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese has been systematically discouraged by the government. The slogan for one Speak Mandarin campaign was "Mandarin is Chinese," demonstrating the official view of language in general and Mandarin in particular as a civilizing force that distinguishes, codifies, and defines the 'best' in a cultural community's lived realities. Officially, the promotion of Mandarin and the gradual elimination of Chinese dialects are meant to improve Singaporeans' proficiency in Mandarin, generally found to be lacking. The use of dialects has for decades been banned from television and radio. Popular Cantonese serials from Hong Kong, for example, continue to be 'dubbed' into Mandarin so they can be shown on Singapore television. In recent years, small attempts to reintroduce the dialects for artistic purposes have been witnessed, mainly in the field of theater. Independent Chinese clan associations, organized according to dialect group, continue privately to promote

the use of dialects and cultural practices associated with these groups, and have even detected growing interest in such matters among the younger generation of Singaporeans (Neo 2003). Many have, for example, signed up for language lessons conducted by these associations. But by and large, the dialects still assume a marginalized, 'low culture' status, as reflected in many of the dialect-speaking stereotypes found on Singapore film.

Jack Neo emerges from this milieu as an organic intellectual who draws attention to the seemingly marginalized condition of Chinese-speaking Singaporeans, whose 'authentic' culture has been not only disorganized to eliminate their political clout but also reorganized for economic purposes. Chinese culture and values, it would seem, have been given only 'lip service' in public discourse, shunted from national importance as the cosmopolitan global city endeavors to make itself relevant to the global flows of commodities, capital, talent, and ideas. Through his portrayals of the marginalized Chinese-speaking Singaporeans (recognized as Singapore's heartlanders), Neo has been pivotal in reducing the differences and divisions between Mandarin-speaking and dialect-speaking Chinese of various socioeconomic classes. As Neo's privileged audience, Chinese-speaking Singaporeans are ideologically recruited by his films into an imagined community whose boundaries are intensified by the stereotypical Othering of Westernized Chinese and non-Chinese Singaporeans. These mostly unflattering stereotypes also serve as a psychological means of coping with or even taking revenge on the Other as a real-life source of irritation or fear. A dominant pattern in such stereotypical portrayals has been to exaggerate and caricature mostly physical and behavioral differences with respect to the Chinese-speaking 'mainstream.' The non-Chinese and non-Chinese-speaking characters are undeveloped, decorative, non-essential, emasculated, puerile, buffoonish, ridiculous, immoral, or even criminal. Although Neo's low-brow comedy often presents the Chinese-speaking protagonists too as flawed in similar ways, these characters—unlike the Westernized Chinese or minority-race characters—are allowed to develop over the course of the narrative and the 'happy endings' usually also involve a heroic overcoming of the basic flaws.

Money No Enough *(1998)*

With its as-yet-unrivaled commercial success, *Money No Enough* presented sufficient evidence at the height of the Asian economic crisis that Singapore's film industry warranted a serious revival. Scripted by Jack Neo, who also starred as its protagonist Chew, the film provided a formula for success that other filmmakers adopted uncritically and unimaginatively in order to make quick money from the newly 'discovered' heartlander audience base. Neo's own films, it might be argued, have suffered from not being able to escape a formula that he, ironically, has perfected.

Money No Enough asks why Singaporeans, no matter how affluent they are, never seem to have enough money for the things they want. Through the financially complicated lives of three friends—office worker Chew, building contractor Ong (Mark Lee), and coffee shop assistant Hui (Henry Thia)—the film explores the propensity of materialistic Singaporeans to live beyond their means and the terrible consequences of doing so, themes and concerns that resonated well with audiences facing up to the Asian economic crisis, which began just a year before the film's release.

The film appeals first and foremost to the Chinese-speaking community by drawing on its concerns and fears in a time of increasing globalization and economic crisis. As media student Jeffrey Low observes, the film's appeal lies in its use of "a dialect [Hokkien] which is commonly used by large sections of the population but is not officially recognized," within a "context which most can appreciate: the pursuit of material wealth" (Low 1999, 45). The film's protagonist Chew has worked for ten years in a local company, All Lee Enterprise, so named because the company hires only people whose names contain "Lee." Lee is one of the most common Chinese family names in Singapore, and it is also the family name of Singapore's first and third prime ministers, Lee Kuan Yew and his son Lee Hsien Loong. The satirical reference to the Lee family's considerable influence in Singapore's politics and economy is not easy to miss. A young Chinese Singaporean (Ernest Seah) returns to Singapore after having been educated overseas and is employed by the company. His grotesquely pretentious name, Jeremiah Adolpher Lee, immediately differentiates him from the rest of the Mandarin-speaking staff. Indeed, Lee declares that he has difficulty conversing in Mandarin since he has been away for such

a long time. On the same day, Chew, who speaks Mandarin and
very little English, is expecting to be promoted to department man-
ager, but finds out that it is the "new bird" Lee who is getting the
promotion instead because of his overseas qualifications, command
of English, and computer skills. In his new position of authority,
Lee bullies Chew, humiliating him for his bad English.

Neo's script portrays Lee as effeminate and possibly homosexu-
al. According to the more puritanical strains of the contemporary
Asian values discourse that valorizes the heterosexual family based
on a binary and essentialist worldview of gender and sexuality, ef-
feminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality are all deemed to be
unnatural and therefore immoral. The portrayal of Westernized
Chinese men as effeminate and homosexual connotes how their
imitation of Westerners and the loss of their 'true' Chinese iden-
tity have made them unnatural and perhaps even immoral. As ef-
feminacy and homosexuality are not portrayed here in a positive
or even neutral light, but instead as both cultural threats and objects
of ridicule, there is a strong suggestion that Westernized Chinese
men should be feared and ridiculed as degenerate: a corruption of
original and authentic Chinese identity and values by the process-
es and influences of Western modernity that have also rewarded
them in globalized Singapore.

Lee humiliates Chew in the presence of his colleagues by derid-
ing his poor spelling and grammar. Chew insinuates that Lee ob-
tained his position in the company by forging a homosexual rela-
tionship with their "old boss" (Lee Weng Kee), who is also portrayed
as effeminate. A flustered Lee responds with exaggerated gestures
and flamboyant outbursts, giving Chew an opportunity to call him
a young *ah gua* (Hokkien for transsexual). Chew also calls the old
boss, whose effete mannerisms resemble those of classical Chinese
eunuchs, an old *ah gua*. At night, Chew encounters a sexually al-
luring woman in his dreams, but quickly realizes that this is not a
woman at all, but Lee dressed in drag. Lee seductively urges Chew
to apologize for his behavior in the office. Chew complies and, im-
mediately, the old boss emerges with garish makeup on his face,
welcoming Chew "to the family," which he realizes is a perverted
form of the Asian heterosexual family. To his horror, Chew grows
long painted nails, a sign that his apology has emasculated him. In
this dream sequence, an English-speaking and Western-educated
Chinese man is a highly camped-up cross-dresser; a Chinese-edu-

cated boss who betrays his own culture by favoring and promoting a Westernized Chinese man is an effeminate homosexual; and a Chinese-educated man who gives up his dignity to keep his job is on his way toward becoming a transvestite. The parallels between sexual and cultural perversions are clear. But Chew snaps out of his dream. He has sex with his wife and on the next day aggressively confronts Lee and the boss, resigning from the company with pride and his masculinity restored.

In the second half of the film, Chew faces all kinds of difficulty finding a new job that pays well, realizing painfully that all such jobs require a good command of English, computer literacy, and a university degree. Chew seeks help from his old friend, who is now a director of three companies even though he once could not speak any English. Chew is impressed by the way he is now able to reprimand even his Caucasian employee in English. But the director explains, to Chew's dismay, that he had

> no choice. Customers speak English. Everyone speaks English nowadays … To be successful you must know English and computer. I only employ those people who know these.

In contemporary Singapore society, Chew and his Chinese-speaking friends are helpless, finding it difficult even to complete basic application forms. The trio find themselves in huge debt, and Ong gets into trouble with vicious loan sharks. Eventually, they start a small car-polishing business that, as luck would have it, impresses a Jaguar-driving customer to such a degree that he arranges for a business tie-up with international vehicle-care company Autoglym (one of the film's sponsors).

The privileged Chinese-speaking audiences, recognizing themselves in these disadvantaged characters, are drawn into the film, which helps them imagine themselves as a community, differentiated not only from the Westernized English-speaking antagonists but also—in a less hostile fashion—from the non-Chinese minority races. Having returned from studies abroad, Lee is unable to converse in Mandarin with his colleagues, a situation that scriptwriter Neo clearly wants to present as shameful. Chew assures Lee that, after he spends some more time in the department, his Mandarin will certainly become very good since everyone in the department speaks it. To prove his point, Chew calls upon Malay co-worker Ali (not credited), who springs to attention and recites the first two lines of

Singapore's National Pledge in very poorly pronounced Mandarin. The office staff burst into thunderous applause, feeding into a racial fantasy in which ethnic minorities willingly and painlessly assimilate into a dominant Chinese-speaking community of Singaporeans. The fantasy also resists the official promotion of English as the language of social interaction, and in fact reflects how Mandarin has become the lingua franca, even in situations where non-Mandarin speakers are present (MICA 1999). If non-Mandarin speakers fail to learn the language, they will be left behind not only socially, but also in their careers. Having ethnic minorities 'choose' to speak Mandarin, as Ali seems to have done, is a means of containing their threatening Otherness since they will now be understandable and therefore more transparent, but these minorities will never be able to speak Mandarin as proficiently as the Chinese themselves. Ali, who wins the approval of his Mandarin-speaking office colleagues for learning to speak their language, is still presented as a buffoon or a trained monkey that will perform a routine the moment it is called upon to do so. A dominant stereotype of Malays on film and television is the buffoon, whose mere presence is calculated to draw laughter from the audience. But Ali, the Malay buffoon who speaks bad Mandarin, is still better than Lee, the effeminate Chinese who cannot even speak his native language. The buffoon is used to disgrace Westernized Chinese Singaporeans who are unwilling to reconnect with their cultural roots.

Indian stereotypes also bring on quick laughs, often just by being present. When Hui's sisters discover that their mother is terminally ill, they rush to the hospital and, in the general confusion, surround a stretcher bearing a patient they think is their mother. Anxiously removing the blanket, they are horrified to find under the covers the body of a mustached Indian man instead. In an earlier scene, when Chew tells Jeremiah Lee that their company, All Lee Enterprise, hires people only if they have "Lee" in their names, the incredulous Lee singles out a Sikh employee as someone whose name is surely not "Lee." Chew replies that the Sikh is "ManggaLEE," a Chinese mispronunciation of the word Bengali. (In fact, the notion that Sikhs originate from Bengal is itself mistaken.)

At the same time that Neo draws the Chinese-speaking community together, he also criticizes their tendency to be greedy, and obsessed with money and material possessions. The mainly Hok-

kien-speaking characters in the film describe themselves as not having time for anything but making money, and so they would prefer to leave matters of public importance to the government. The characters live well beyond their means, aspiring to conspicuous middle-class lifestyles and buying on installment or borrowing from loan sharks. In fact, their friendships seem to be structured according to the borrowing and lending of money. Their vulgar lifestyles are, in an early scene, contrasted with images of starving children in Africa and India that stream into Chew's living room through the television set as Chew complains about the quality of the abalone served at dinner. In a later scene, when Hui's sisters are told that their mother has leukemia, the very first question they manage to ask is whether the treatment would be expensive. After she passes away, the ladies put on a noisy show of mourning at the funeral ceremony. The funeral entertainment is loud, garish, and expensive. In front of everyone, the daughters argue loudly to determine who among them should be acknowledged for footing the bill, a peculiar way of demonstrating filial piety. All in all, the seedy world of *Money No Enough* consists of building contractors, loan sharks, betting shops, karaoke pubs, prostitutes, and pornographic videos. Its inhabitants are crass, vulgar, greedy, and even criminal.

Neo's script also attempts to criticize the government by making quick references to its more unpopular policies. For example, the abbreviation GST, which stands for the then recently introduced Goods and Services Tax, according to Chew, should really stand for "go squeeze them." And Ong points out that the COE, the exorbitantly priced Certificates of Entitlement that Singaporeans need to purchase before they can buy a vehicle, sounds like the Hokkien phrase for "die for them." However, the political criticisms, though witty, remain superficial—a quality that marks most of Neo's subsequent films.

The criticisms also tend to divert attention away from the film's larger ideological work of reestablishing hegemony at a time of crisis. In the closing scene, Chew and his friends, having finally achieved success, speak directly to the audience, stating the moral of the story: In spite of real obstacles in life, it is still possible to pick oneself up from failure. Chinese-speaking audiences are given the assurance that they, too, can overcome the odds. In fact, the challenges they face could bring out the kind of entrepreneurial qualities thought to be absent within the book-smart English-edu-

cated class, but ever so important for the New Economy. In the context of the 1997 economic crisis, Neo's film rallies heartlander audiences (specifically the Chinese-speaking majority) and offers them a cultural product that is deeply gratifying because it seems to sympathize with their predicament and to offer irreverent (yet superficial and safe) criticism of the government. The film helps Singaporeans to laugh their way through an economic crisis, appreciate the dangers of spending beyond their means even in times of plenty, and strengthen their belief in the meritocracy myth where even the disadvantaged can rise to the top.

In the closing scene, a didactic Chew (who sounds as if he has converged with his creator Jack Neo) explains:

> Before someone achieve success, he'll encounter a lot of obstacles. Important thing is he must be persistent. Like myself, I fell down and got up many times. Actually, I was very unlucky before I achieved my success … But I've endured all the difficulties. Bravely I kept moving forward.

In the same closing scene, Hui explains how he overcame his inferiority complex and faced his problems with determination, eventually achieving success:

> I have a little success today and I want to thank my three sisters. Because they looked down on me and that's why I want to become successful and show it to them.

Not only did the film widely disseminate ideological messages that served to conceal the contradictions and crises of capitalism in Singapore during the late 1990s, it also became a highly lucrative product, the kind that Singapore's fledgling creative economy needed desperately.

Liang Po Po: The Movie *(1999)*

One of eight Singapore films made in 1999, *Liang Po Po: The Movie* was the first to be produced by MediaCorp Raintree Pictures (in association with Eric Khoo's Zhao Wei Films) and was the start of a long-term partnership between Neo and Raintree—only *That One No Enough* and *One More Chance* were subsequently made without Raintree's participation. The title character, Grandmother Liang, was a reprisal of Jack Neo's cross-gender role on popular Mandarin variety television show *Comedy Night* (Liang is the Mandarin form

of Neo). *Liang Po Po*'s commercial success might, in part, be explained by the familiarity that the television character enjoyed, particularly among young Chinese-speaking Singaporeans. Neo's cross-dressing belongs more properly to family-oriented entertainment, in contrast to the menacingly eroticized portrayal of Jeremiah Lee in *Money No Enough* meant to ridicule Westernized Chinese Singaporeans who forget their roots. Nevertheless, the less wholesome side of Singapore portrayed in *Liang Po Po* is similar to the anarchic heartlands depicted in *Money No Enough*. In the film, Liang escapes from a home for the elderly and gets into trouble at every turn. She befriends Ah Beng (Mark Lee) and Ah Seng (Henry Thia), two essentially good-hearted gangsters whose job is to sell pirated VCDs and collect debts. After she has demonstrated her ability to sell these VCDs by gaining the buyers' sympathy for her old age and to collect debts by irritating the debtors until they pay up, Liang is admitted to the gang and gets involved in all kinds of capers in an effort to be fully accepted by her new community.

The film provides cultural resources to help Chinese-speaking heartlander audiences imagine themselves as a disadvantaged community, including witty references to the government's promotion of Mandarin and English over Chinese dialects as well as its ban on pornography and chewing gum. As political criticism, however, they are superficial attempts that merely gratify audiences but preserve the status quo. More developed, though, is Neo's criticism of the government's New Economy-related policies that seem to privilege foreign talent and require Singaporean workers to 'upgrade' their skills. The gang leader (John Cheng), hoping to upgrade his gang's image and skills, flies in two big-time Hong Kong triad members as consultants (played, ironically, by real-life Hong Kong actors Eric Tsang and Shereen Tang). Not only are their recommendations completely inappropriate in the Singaporean context, but they actually try to manipulate the gang for their own criminal purposes. In the final showdown, the ever-efficient Singapore police force, with the unexpected assistance of Liang, saves the day, proving right what the Hong Kong gangsters said in an earlier scene about the problem that triads face in countries where the government is 'too efficient' and where politicians do not stand to benefit from supporting 'illegal' causes. The ideological negotiation is clear: While the film points out the flaws in the government's foreign talent policies, it also culminates in a strong vindication of a

political system that is not corrupt and—unlike a much freer system such as Hong Kong's—is very capable of preventing serious crime.

Neo's social criticism tends, understandably, to be much less compromised and negotiated than his criticism of the government. Liang can find companionship only within an illegal organization. As Liang is sent to rob a bank in order to raise enough money to save the life of a gang member, she finds that no one in the bank takes her seriously until she accidentally fires a live round. Then, when she makes her escape holding a bag of money in one hand and a gun in the other, no one on the street even notices her. Neo's comment about the elderly in Singapore society is clear and particularly poignant in relation to the erosion of filial piety, an express Chinese value that he wishes to uphold by shaming Singaporeans through satire.

That One No Enough *(1999)*

That One No Enough ('that one' being a reference to sexual intercourse) deals with the themes of love, sex, marriage, and infidelity, as played out in the lives of three friends: office worker Hao Ren (Jack Neo), businessman Guo Rong (Mark Lee), and provision shop assistant Ah Kun (Henry Thia).

As writer, director, and actor, Neo captures a mainly Hokkien-speaking world that is vulgar and sordid. Guo Rong regularly visits prostitutes, keeps a mistress, and watches pornographic videos. According to him,

> the best wife is one who would look after the home and kids, most important she must not be too smart, that way she will obey your every word.

Ah Kun, who lives with his aging mother, buys a computer in order to access web pornography. In his first encounter with a prostitute, he discovers he is impotent, and yet, he later brags to his friends about how he "did her until she cried. I gave it to her eight times. And she was begging for more." He then tries to cure his impotence through traditional Chinese medicine, but mistakenly consumes it instead of applying it as directed, and suffers diarrhea as a result. The friends frequent a coffee shop where the food-seller boasts quite openly about his three wives, who work for him at the stall but also satisfy his sexual needs. With three wives, he

argues, a man can be faithful since there is no need to look outside marriage for sexual gratification. The male conversations are acutely misogynistic.

Most of the female characters are crass. For instance, at a party, the womenfolk sit together and joke uninhibitedly and graphically about childbirth, their sex lives, and their husbands' infidelities. One woman even compares the role of a wife to that of a whore. In another scene, guests at a wedding dinner gobble up the food, asking each other how much money they gave as wedding gifts. Guo Rong's shrewish wife slaves over a chaotic household of screaming children in the daytime. Guo Rong is rarely at home and, on the few occasions that he is, he refuses to help discipline his children and resists her requests for intimacy. She soon discovers that he is cheating on her, goes to his mistress' flat to catch them in the act, assaults them, and lands herself in prison.

Hao Ren (whose name means 'good person') is the only one among them who seems morally upright. But his wife of eight years, Min Hui (Hong Hui Fang), is so focused on her career that she neglects him, and is utterly reluctant to start a family in spite of a nagging mother-in-law eager to have a grandson. Min Hui's business calls constantly interrupt any opportunity for intimacy. She has to deal with important American clients, communicating with them in English. When she wins the Businesswoman of the Year award, she is congratulated by her Caucasian colleagues, who wear business suits at a poolside party where local people are shown dressed only in shirts and ties. Min Hui has embraced the identity, lifestyle, and values of a modern career woman, rejecting her traditional role in the household. Her association with Western clients signals the destruction of traditional values by negative Western influences that globalized business prospects make unavoidable. To conservative Chinese-speaking audiences, Min Hui is a bad woman who brings disgrace to her husband by not providing him with a child, by spending more time with Western associates and clients than with him, and by being visibly more successful than he is, which would cause him to 'lose face' in public. The trendy mix of Mandarin and English that she speaks in the company of her close friend signals a 'corruption' of Chinese culture rather than bicultural competency. Min Hui's mother-in-law has no qualms about asking her in front of the extended family if she is barren. After repeatedly unsuccessful efforts to persuade Min Hui to provide a

grandson, the superstitious mother-in-law finally decides to trick her into drinking a talisman's brew that is supposed to be powerful enough to give her six children. Neglected by his wife, Hao Ren lapses into an affair with her secretary. After discovering this, Min Hui decides to forgive him and is described by her secretary as a "good boss, good wife, good person." Indeed, at the end of the film, she fulfills her duties as a Chinese wife and daughter-in-law by becoming pregnant with a baby boy. The film ultimately 're-deems' Min Hui and, in that way, serves to reinforce the patriarchal values of the Chinese-speaking world.

As usual, Neo takes the opportunity to highlight the disadvan-tages of not knowing English in Singapore. Guo Rong helps Ah Kun to buy a computer and is served by an English-speaking Ma-lay sales assistant who is unable to communicate with him in Chi-nese. With only primary school level English, Guo Rong says to her,

> You no know Chinese *ah* … OK I speak English *ah* … want to play In-dian-net [Internet] … how many money *ah*? … chop his vegetable head [direct translation of Hokkien colloquial expression for 'swindle him'].

The sales assistant is clearly amused by his broken English. In the general confusion, she figures out what he means to say, but she also takes some delight in correcting his English. Ironically, Guo Rong imagines that "her English is so poor, she misses nine out of ten words that I say."

As usual too, the non-Chinese characters are peripheral, purely decorative, and to be despised or laughed at. For example, when Ah Kun and his girlfriend make out in their truck, parked in the privacy of a deserted parking lot, a group of peeping toms come to spy on them. The camera provides a closeup of an Indian man peering through the window. In another scene, an Indian female office worker hears some gossip about Hao Ren's affair with Min Hui's secretary and promises not to tell anyone, but immediately conveys the information to a Malay co-worker. The Malay man listens intently and nods his head as she speaks to him in Tamil, but then exclaims when she has finished, "What are you saying? I don't understand a word." She then speaks to him in English, and he proceeds to convey the piece of gossip in Malay to a Sikh col-league, right after confirming that the latter does understand Ma-lay. This piece of gossip is increasingly peppered with exaggerated

and lurid details. The real message here: Non-Chinese people, amusing as they might seem, simply cannot be trusted with secrets.

I Not Stupid *(2002)*

Written and directed by Jack Neo, *I Not Stupid* is about the plight of three Chinese-speaking schoolboys—Terry (Huang Po Ju), Kok Pin (Shawn Lee), and Boon Hock (Joshua Ang)—who have been streamed into EM3, one of the lowest tiers in Singapore's highly competitive and unforgiving education system. School is so stressful that Kok Pin attempts suicide. Through the eyes of the three boys, audiences get a fresh and critical perspective of the challenges that parents also face in such a system. Neo deals with these 'serious' themes through his trademark comedy style that resonates strongly with the Singaporean audience; in fact, anthropologist Yao Souchou describes *I Not Stupid* as a "monumental 'in-joke'" that "Singaporeans clearly enjoy and identify with … in a way an outsider cannot" (Yao 2007, 150, 156). And yet, this very local film has also been released in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China, winning the Golden Torch Award 2002 by SIGNIS (Taiwan) and voted one of ten Best Chinese Films at the Golden Bauhinia Awards 2003 (Hong Kong).

The film not only draws Chinese audiences in Singapore into an imagined community, but also exhorts particularly the English-educated Chinese (who are believed to possess a negative attitude toward Chinese culture in general, and the Mandarin language in particular) to cherish their native language. Terry's sister, Selena (Cheryl Chan), frustrated about having to communicate in Mandarin during her Chinese lesson in school, declares that her ambition in life is to become a Caucasian: "[I]f I am a Caucasian, I won't have to learn Chinese anymore." Selena's disappointed teacher tries to convince her that Singaporeans who do not know Mandarin will not be able to understand who they really are:

> Being a Chinese, you have to know Chinese. That is your mother tongue, your roots … Not knowing Chinese, we will fail to understand the Chinese culture … we will fail to understand ourselves … you won't even know what you could be missing.

This scene intercuts ironically with another in which the manager of an advertising company tries to convince its new American creative director, John, that one does not in fact need any proficiency

in Mandarin to succeed in Singapore. Like *Money No Enough*, the film quite clearly laments how, in contemporary Singapore, the English language, mathematics, and computer literacy have become more important than the Chinese language and cultural proficiency. The film also indicates how Singapore society is unable to appreciate and nurture the less material and monetary aspects of life: Kok Pin's artistic talents are regarded as a useless distraction from his studies, and his prospects as an artist are made clear only when he finally receives a scholarship to study art in the US.

The political criticisms in *I Not Stupid* manage to go beyond the puns and irreverent one-line references to the government and its policies that are typical of Neo's other films. The satire is more developed; the characterization has more depth; and the relatively more skillful balancing of comic and tragic elements helps to sharpen the criticism of not only the education system, but also the government's paternalistic ways and its approach to foreign talent. Yao observes that

> There is no disguise of the didactic intent here. Reprimanding the adults is also to offer a critique of the State, with the children the innocent victims. Indeed when adult Singaporeans are shown at their most unsavoury and unflattering, there is no guessing where their values come from and what has made them so. Like a shadowy puppet master behind the curtain, the PAP State pulls the strings that animate the storyline. (Yao 2007, 142)

For example, Terry's domineering mother, Mrs Khoo, always wears white (the color of the PAP's uniform, signifying incorruptibility); believes that she and her husband have worked hard to make sure their children can enjoy the comforts of home; and constantly tells them, "You are so lucky to have a good and responsible mother … everything I do is for your own good." The dialogue between Mrs Khoo and her daughter Selena in particular plays out several of the familiar arguments surrounding the government's paternalism and the pressures for democratization in Singapore. When Selena decorates her bedroom in a way that does not meet with Mrs Khoo's approval, she overrules her daughter's ideas (see Figure 5-1):

> I know whatever I say you won't like it, but one day you will appreciate it. This is for your own good. Trust me … This is your room, but don't forget this is my house. So I will make the final decision. I know you are an intelligent girl. That's why I let you help to decorate your own room.

> But look at the kind of choice you make, so not suitable … Don't believe ask your brother …

But to her dismay, Terry, the spoilt child contented with material affluence, replies in exactly the way his mother always taught him to: "I don't know. This is none of my business." Like Mrs Khoo, the PAP government has become increasingly frustrated by the apathy of its citizens (as this could mean that they will not come out strongly to support their government when support is called for), but ironically, this apathy is the result of growing up in a country where the government monopolizes all public decision-making, stifling real debate and oppositional voices. In fact, in another scene, Kok Pin and Boon Hock tease Terry, asking him, "What if your Mom asked you to eat shit?" Terry replies, "Then I would just eat it. With her around, even if it is shit, she will make it really delicious."

Figure 5-1: Still from *I Not Stupid* (2002)

Recognizing his daughter's growing rebelliousness, Mr Khoo advises his wife to adopt a less authoritarian style, just as Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong have had to adjust their styles away from the more dictatorial approach of Lee Kuan Yew as the Singapore citizenry gradually matures.

> The kids are growing up, you need to change your method. You need to reason with them. You are always exerting your authority, saying, "I am your mother and you should just listen to me." With time, this method will not work anymore.

When Selena demands more freedom, Mrs Khoo berates her 'ungrateful' daughter: "Freedom? Everybody also wants freedom. I will give it to you slowly, step by step. Otherwise you will burst like a balloon." The government, too, promises more openness and fewer restrictions, but only at a pace that it alone will determine, a pace that has been just too slow and uncertain for many proponents of democracy. But Mrs Khoo also understands that even as children grow up and demand more freedom, they can still be bribed by material benefits. She wins back her daughter's favor with a new pair of sports shoes. "Children are all alike," she argues, "Give them a little something and they forget the past." The PAP's resounding victory at every general election since 1959 and the practice of giving out 'election goodies' through the annual Budget seem to indicate the truth of this assertion.

Neo also criticizes the government's pro-foreign talent policies that seem to introduce unfair competition from second-rate foreigners. Kok Pin's father works in an advertising firm that has just hired an American, John, to be its creative director. John has dubious credentials and also manages to steal good ideas from the local talents who are his subordinates. A potential client, Mr Khoo, who owns a *ba gua* (barbecued pork) company, believes at first that "*ang moh*'s [Caucasian's] idea is always very special … even if I have to pay more, I don't mind." Khoo later learns to his frustration that John's new and trendy ideas are insensitive to and ignorant of Chinese culture. John mispronounces *ba gua* as *ah gua* (meaning 'transsexual'), produces a television commercial using two scantily dressed Caucasian girls seductively eating *ba gua*, and packages the product—popular during Chinese New Year—in an inauspicious black wrapper that looks like a packet of tampons. In another scene, when two boys invited to Terry's birthday party bully him by running away with his food, he cries out helplessly, "This is my house, can you respect me?" Much like the government that is anxious to make Singapore attractive to foreign talent and capital, Mrs Khoo explains to her son, "They are our guests. You must learn to be a gracious host."

The critique, however, is compromised by Neo's subsequent exploitation of its commercial potential. A McDonald's advertisement reenacts a scene from the film in which Kok Pin is about to be caned by his mother when Neo's character walks in, but this time with McDonald's meals that make everything better again. A Mit-

subishi advertisement shows Neo choosing the brand of air condi-
tioners because he "not stupid." The two companies were his main
sponsors. The film also spawned *I Not Stupid* merchandise, includ-
ing a Chinese New Year music album, comic books, vitamin tablets,
and a deluxe VCD version that came with a 20-page guide for
students and parents offering examination tips and suggestions for
making quality time for the family. Not long after, Neo made a
television series version of the film that ran as weekly episodes on
MediaCorp's Mandarin-language Channel 8.

Homerun *(2003)*

Homerun is a reworking of Iranian film *Children of Heaven* (1997) by
Majid Majidi. Written and directed by Neo, the film has won a few
international festival awards, pointing to the filmmaker's ability to
transcend his localized formulas for commercial success. These
awards include the Grand Prix prize of the Golden Swan Awards
2003 at the 20th Moscow International Film Festival for Children
and Youth, the Best New Performer Award (Megan Zheng) at
Taiwan's 40th Golden Horse Awards 2003, the CIFEJ Prize at the
14th Cairo International Film Festival for Children and Young
People 2004, the Golden Butterfly Prize for Best Direction at the
Asian Cinema of the 19th Isfahan International Festival of Film
and Video for Children and Young Adults, the Young Jury Award
at the 1st International Film Festival for Children and Youth in
Madrid, and the People's Choice Award at 2005 Montreal Inter-
national Children's Film Festival.

Set in Singapore just before it gained full independence in 1965,
the story revolves around the lives of Ah Kun (Shawn Lee) and
Seow Fang (Megan Zheng), young siblings who live with their fa-
ther—an odd-job man—and pregnant mother in a village where
they struggle to make ends meet. The film begins with Ah Kun
losing his sister's shoes while running some errands, and continues
with a bittersweet account of how the resourceful, resilient, and
self-reliant siblings find ways and means to overcome the problem
without having to tell their financially strapped parents. At the end
of the film, Ah Kun takes part in a cross-country race with the aim
of winning the second prize—a pair of school shoes—for his sister.
But he wins first prize instead, and is distraught. At this time, too,
a baby is born to the family. Finally, Ah Kun clears up a misun-

derstanding with his long-time rival, the wealthy Beng Soon (Joshua Ang), who presents them with a gift of two new pairs of school shoes.

Although the themes are universal, the film is very much a Singaporean work, mapping the experiences of two children onto the fears and aspirations of a young Singapore, the birth in the family coinciding with the birth of an independent nation. In the background are radio speeches by Lee Kuan Yew and references to familiar events in The Singapore Story, such as anticolonial demonstrations and a bomb explosion in MacDonald House on Orchard Road. One of the youngest characters—nicknamed Little Red Dot, former Indonesian president Habibie's derogatory reference to Singapore's insignificance—expresses Singapore's anxieties and ambitions when he explains that "small can be helpful too."

Although more artistically accomplished than Neo's other films, *Homerun* continues to capitalize on and perpetuate well-known stereotypes. The Indian, for instance, is presented as an unreasonable authority figure who is to be feared. The Indian school principal punishes Ah Kun for frequently coming to school late, without ever giving the boy a chance to explain. He seems to be without compassion, sleeps in his office when he should be working, and punishes Ah Kun more severely when he discovers that the boy's classmates have in the spirit of camaraderie all pitched in to help Ah Kun complete his punishment. Finally, he expels Ah Kun from school.

By resorting to stereotypes of the Singaporean and the Malaysian (related in some ways to stereotypes of the Chinese and the Malay), *Homerun* also satirizes the prickly relations between Singapore and Malaysia, coming down rather strongly against the latter. Beng Soon is the captain of the village soccer team who expels half the team and confiscates their uniforms because he is jealous of Ah Kun's soccer skills: "We should go our separate ways," he says after making a big deal out of an arbitrary matter. Singapore's independence was gained when it, too, was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 because of 'irreconcilable differences.' Subsequently, Ah Kun's new team decide to clean up at the village well, but they encounter Beng Soon's team there. They exchange greetings in an uneasy and suspicious manner and, misinterpreting each other's actions ("a knife hidden behind smiles"), almost come to blows. Beng Soon demands that Ah Kun's team ask for permission to use the well since it is

located on his grandfather's land; and when they use the water to wash their shoes, Beng Soon interprets this as a sign of disrespect. Later, when Beng Soon realizes that he needs the younger Ah Kun to do his homework for him, he enters into a negotiation to trade shoes for homework. But at each stage of the negotiation, Beng Soon reneges on previous agreements and changes the terms in his own favor. Ah Kun—desperate to find shoes for his sister—agrees to less-than-equitable terms of exchange. But Beng Soon even reneges on the final agreement. When Ah Kun protests by pointing to the written contract, Beng Soon accuses him of inappropriate conduct.

Neo draws heavily from the negative images that some Singaporeans are believed to have of Malaysian leaders: overly sensitive (always taking offence), inept and lazy (unable to do their own homework), untrustworthy (going back on their word), and bullying (using force instead of reason to gain the advantage). Through these images, the film gratifies Singaporean audiences and rallies them behind not only their country but also their government as they are reminded of tense areas in Singapore-Malaysia relations such as the 'water negotiations' (Singapore still relies on Malaysia for most of its untreated water), Malaysia's historical claims to land that belongs to Singapore (for example, the Pedra Branca island and the location of Malaysia's railway checkpoint on Singapore soil), and so on.

If not for the sensitive acting, directing, and camerawork, which have made the film artistically credible, it would not be difficult to view the film as a very well-made piece of national propaganda attuned to the motifs of The Singapore Story: Singaporeans, like Ah Kun and Seow Fang, must learn to deal with hardship and bullying, to be resourceful and determined in finding creative solutions to problems, to work not only for themselves but for the good of others, and to ultimately step up and run the race even without proper shoes! In his 2003 rally speech, Goh described how he could easily relate to *Homerun*:

> It moved me, because I had lived through the scenes in the movie. In 1961, after my A-levels, I taught for a few months in Kay Wah Chinese Primary School near Thong Hoe Village in Lim Chu Kang. It was a rural school. The students were poor. I saw many toes peeping out from worn-out shoes.

> The movie brought my mind back to our past. But *I wondered whether our children could appreciate the deeper symbolism of the torn and tattered shoes.* Our villages have given way to HDB estates, our cheap shoes to branded shoes. (C. T. Goh 2003, emphasis added)

The film concludes with the siblings running together on the open road wearing their spotlessly new shoes, but they come to a point where the road turns muddy. Standing at the edge of this long, muddy stretch, they think to themselves in a voice-over, "Without our shoes, we could see our problems easily. Now that we have our shoes, can we still identify our problem?" (see Figure 5-2). Today's young and affluent Singaporeans, the government often laments, might not be able to identify and withstand the coming challenges since they have had little or no experience of hardship and their comfortable lives have reshaped their priorities.

Figure 5-2: Still from *Homerun* (2003)

The Best Bet *(2004)*

The Best Bet, dealing with the Singaporean love of gambling revolves around the lives of three friends: office workers Richard (Richard Low) and Shun (Christopher Lee), and *bak kut teh* (pork bones soup) seller and illegal 4-digit (4D) bookie Huang (Mark Lee). They start up a business using funds borrowed from a bank and from loan sharks. But bad luck ruins their business even before it can properly begin, and Shun and Huang end up in prison. Richard is tasked to buy a lucky number through an illegal bookie; but when the ticket wins first prize, he and his wife (Chen Liping) are tempted to keep the winnings for themselves. The rest of the film is about

how the couple wrestle with greed as they realize that it will always be "money no enough" because wealth makes it difficult to distinguish between true and false needs (see Figure 5-3). Deception breaks down their friendship with Huang and Shun who, when released from prison, suspect they have been cheated of their winnings. To cover up their deception, Richard and his wife live in fear and secrecy—which means that not only are they unable to use their money to buy the things they desire, but they are not even able to pay for the expensive hospital treatment that Richard's mother-in-law needs in order to live. Richard gives in to lust and takes his shampoo girl as his expensive mistress. As the web of deception grows more complicated, Richard is finally exposed in a comical series of mistaken identities, and is attacked violently by his former friends Huang and Shun. At this point, he awakens to find that it was all a dream and embraces the 'second chance' not to deceive his friends. The film ends with the lottery winnings being used to finance a new, trendy, and eventually very successful restaurant that features Huang's creative culinary skills.

Figure 5-3: Still from *The Best Bet* (2004)

The film was released at the tail end of heated public debates surrounding the question of whether the government should allow casinos to be built in Singapore. Although supported by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the film might be seen as a voice in this debate that vividly illustrates the social costs of gambling, countering the pro-casino arguments that most Singaporeans suspected the government to be backing as a way of salvaging a flagging tourism industry. In the film's 20-minute "The

Making Of" featurette, the film's writer and director, Jack Neo, expresses his hope "that people can actually wake up and see how gambling can actually affect your life." Executive producer Daniel Yun identifies the theme of the film as "the role of gambling in the accumulation of wealth," offering the lesson that gambling "cannot be a problem solver." Actor Richard Low unambiguously declares, "Make gambling a hobby, not a habit. Heavy gambling not only hurts yourself, but your family, your loved ones, and your friends." The film's larger message, it might be argued, is that Singaporeans should divert their money, energy, and creativity away from gambling and toward legitimate entrepreneurial activities, in line with what the government has been urging for decades. Upgrading Huang's Old Economy-style *bak kut teh* stall and turning it into a New Economy restaurant based on innovative business models and creative products—the film's happy ending—is the example that Singaporeans should emulate.

As with nearly all of Neo's films, the flagrant product placements point toward overt commercialism. Describing itself as rising "from humble beginnings to [become] a global health care provider," main sponsor OSIM is a Singaporean company that sells relaxation and health-care products around the world. Characters in the film explicitly uphold OSIM as their entrepreneurial ideal, and Neo also inserts a thirty-second scene—essentially an advertising spot—in which Richard's newly rich family is given a demonstration of the latest OSIM products and an explanation of their benefits. Novena furniture shops and Mitsubishi air conditioners and refrigerators were similarly 'advertised.'

Commercialism also compromises the antigambling message most glaringly in the way that the film is, without irony, promoted at the end of the featurette when the narrator announces:

> Numbers are everywhere. Even on the marketing materials. Who knows, you might just pick out a winning 4D number during the movie. Catch *The Best Bet* in theatres near you. Bring your own pen and paper for your lucky numbers.

This is one of many very clear examples of how the culture industry's relentless need to market its products neuters the capacity of these cultural products to present a thoroughgoing critique, or even a negotiated struggle over ideology.

I Do I Do *(2005)*

In *I Do I Do*, Peng (Adrian Pang), a Chinese-speaking delivery boy, is constantly being pressured by his mother to get married, but he has been repeatedly rejected by the woman he loves, Wenhui (Sharon Au), a thirty-five-year-old single career woman who is also being pressured by her nagging mother to get married. She cannot find the 'perfect match': someone who is "attractive, rich and older than me." She observes that the good men are already married and "singles with career, personality and good looks are mostly gays." Wenhui falls for her new colleague Jianfeng (Allan Wu), a handsome, English-speaking executive. When she sees him, she hears romantic French music in her head. He is two years older than she, making him an ideal match according to her fortune-teller's predictions. He brings expensive wine as a birthday gift for her father, and pretends to be honorable and respectful by holding off Wenhui's advances. Then, she finds out he is being threatened by loan sharks; but this is really part of a scam to trick Wenhui into giving him money, which she does. When she realizes her mistake, she tries to commit suicide but is rescued by Peng, who is finally able to win her heart.

As usual, Neo presents his mainly Chinese-speaking audiences with a problem for the Chinese-speaking protagonist—in this case, his Westernized rival Jianfeng, the villain—and then proceeds to end with a gratifying victory for the underdog, a Chinese-speaking heartlander. At the start, Peng appreciates the problem of not knowing English in Singapore and decides to go for evening classes, where he meets a beautiful British teacher who also speaks Mandarin, Hokkien, and Cantonese. She is attracted to him, but Peng resists the seduction from the 'West,' which is not strong enough to turn him away from his true love for the Chinese Wenhui (see Figure 5-4). In fact, when they finally come together, they discover that Peng is two years older than Wenhui (in line with the fortune-teller's prophecy), but only according to the traditional Chinese lunar calendar, not the Western Gregorian calendar. Championing Chinese culture, Neo consistently presents degraded images of the West even as he accepts the inevitability of Westernization.

In an early scene, Peng watches a fictitious televised speech in which the prime minister announces that "Singapore is facing an unprecedented trial. If our citizens won't have children, we'll be-

Figure 5-4: Still from *I Do, I Do* (2005)

come a deserted island." Peng (presumably articulating Neo's critical message) disagrees, "But you must find a wife to bear you children … Why waste money on encouraging births? Having children is personal." The speech continues,

> Childbearing is no longer personal, it's a national issue. There'll be a new campaign: not two or three, have four and be income-tax-free. What the government needs now is people who dare to have children.

Once again, Peng disagrees, "You have to get hitched first! Implement a $100,000 marriage subsidy. Bearing children will be the national hobby!" Neo seems to be criticizing the government's population policies, which have focused on giving monetary incentives for 'baby-making' while ignoring the problem of 'romance.' The film was, however, also officially supported by the government matchmakers: the Social Development Unit (for the eugenically influenced pairing of graduates) and the Social Development Section (for non-graduates). The film could almost be seen as part of national policies, including financial incentives, to increase the birthrate. One of the characters, after discovering that his girlfriend is pregnant, observes:

> To abort a child is tantamount to throwing away money. $3,000 for first-born, $9,000 for the second, $18,000 for the third and fourth child. It's easier than striking 4D … Of course I'll love the child too! But our government is so generous. So why not take the money?

In one of the scenes, Peng meets his member of parliament (MP), played by Jack Neo, to ask for help in finding a mate. During the meeting, jokes are made to poke fun at the PAP's questionable

electoral strategies: witty one-liners that are a feature of Neo's films. But the criticism is shallow; and, ultimately, Neo's ironic attempt to speak the part of a PAP MP is no irony at all since he is really advancing the government's pro-marriage/pro-childbirth message through his film.

Once again, the product placements are flagrant. *I Do I Do* is a love story released during the St Valentine's Day month and also at a time in the year when the extremely commercialized Romancing Singapore campaign was at its height. The characters in the film all work for the real-life DoDo company (the film's sponsor), which produces fish-balls and instant noodle products. At least twice, the characters literally give business presentations that showcase DoDo's food products; and in one of them, DoDo is described as having grown "from humble beginnings" (like Neo himself). In one scene, the characters declare how convenient it is to prepare a range of tasty DoDo instant noodles. The brand is clearly embedded in the English title *I Do I Do*. And the Chinese title *Ai Do Ai Do* suggests a love for DoDo products (*ai* being Mandarin for love).

One More Chance *(2005)*

One More Chance is a film about the problems that ex-convicts face in trying to reintegrate into society, where employers and even family are unwilling to accept them and where a return to crime is not only tempting but sometimes seems to be the only alternative. Huang (Mark Lee), Kwang (Marcus Chin), and Hwee (Henry Thia) are jailed for fraud, illegal gambling, and robbery respectively. Huang's fiancée, Bee Poh (Apple Hong), frustrated by the teasing that her daughter suffers at the hands of classmates, decides to leave Huang for the wealthy and handsome Mike, who can give her and her daughter everything they want. As with many of Neo's films, *One More Chance* draws to a hasty and implausible conclusion: The mandatory happy ending takes place at Mike and Bee Poh's wedding when the groom unexpectedly tells Huang that the wedding is really for him, since he, Bee Poh, and their daughter should be together as one family. Once again, this is a gratifying victory for the heartland underdog against the wealthy (but ultimately kind) Mike—Neo's choice of a Western name for this character is no coincidence.

The comedy is based on crude humor, with many scenes depicting or referring to defecation. It is also based on stereotypes: the lecherous gay man in prison and the Indian traffic warden (Daisy Irani). The latter, for instance, is inserted into the narrative for no other reason than to be ridiculed: In different scenes, she is accidentally hit by darts, pierced by kitchen knives, taken hostage by a bumbling criminal and, at the very end of the film when her ticket-issuing machine fails to work, thwarted in her attempt to issue parking tickets to everyone attending the wedding (see Figure 5-5). The entirely Chinese-speaking cast applaud thunderously at this point, bringing some poignancy to her earlier remark, "I know you hate me, but I will summon you till you're dead." The much-hated figure of the traffic warden converges with the fear of the dark in the form of a ludicrous character with exaggerated accent and mannerisms, who is not only repeatedly violated through slapstick comedy but also ultimately foiled by a cheering mainstream.

Figure 5-5: Still from *One More Chance* (2005)

The comedy also extends to criticism of government policy. A conversation among prison inmates on the casino debates is illustrative of this:

– Government wants to build a casino.
– They've run out of ideas.
– Doesn't the government discourage gambling? Gambling dens always get raided.
– They're building their own casino soon, that's why they must kill off their competitors.
– I know, it is called a 'monopoly.'

– Whatever it is, they are the boss, they can say what they like.
– In the past, casino is the bane of social order. Now, they say it's more like a 'bank' than a bane. Well, they are always right.
– But frankly, this may not be a bad idea! It's better than regretting it 20 years later. Singaporeans love to gamble. Given a choice, why lose money to outsiders?
– No *lah*! They're building an integrated resort, not a casino.
– It's just a name. A casino, by any other name, is a casino.
– The casino makes up only 3% of the resort.
– Yah right … ! Take away that 3% and how much that 97% would earn? Peanuts!
– Hey watch your words or they might lock you up.
– We're already in here [prison], what's there to fear?

Quite typically, these criticisms, didactic and to be enjoyed at the most superficial level, are merely stated without going into any kind of depth or complexity. More effective perhaps is the film's role as a vehicle for the Yellow Ribbon Campaign, an admirable civil society initiative that aims to inspire the community to accept ex-convicts and help them in their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Typically also, the film promotes such brands as Rolex watches, Sakae Sushi restaurants, Bee Cheng Hiang *ba gua*, Tai Hua sauces, and Tian Po jewelry. When Huang presents Bee Poh with the Tian Po diamond ring that he bought by pawning his Rolex watch, he tells her,

> The ring is called 'Perfection.' My life can never be perfect again. I give you this 'Perfection.' May Mike be a perfect husband for you. May you have perfect bliss in many more ten years to come.

At one point in this highly commercialized film, Neo takes a dig at foreign art-house films: When Huang and his daughter attend a French film rated four-and-a-half stars, he notices that the cinema has only four-and-a-half patrons, who eventually fall asleep anyway. The crude dismissal of such films might indicate either Neo's overconfidence or rising insecurity about the increasingly populist and commercialized nature of his own filmmaking. Even Raintree's Daniel Yun (who was not involved in producing this film) has expressed severe disapproval. In a public forum, he revealed:

> When I watched [*One More Chance*], I felt very angry. I left the theater because I felt that in Singapore, to have the chance to make a film is still a privilege: If you grow and you improve, that's fine; but if not, if you're just trying to pass a deadline, if you're just trying to look at the commer-

cial considerations, it is actually quite sinful. I always thought of using Jack Neo to collaborate with people from different parts of Asia because I feel that if Jack Neo is given a decent budget, if we have money from different parts of Asia, he can make something like *Kung Fu Hustle*, with the special effects and all that … But after seeing *One More Chance* … I don't want to be associated with Jack Neo for a while. (Yun 2005)

I Not Stupid Too *(2006)*

The sequel to *I Not Stupid* deals with the theme of communication within the family and the problems that are caused by the lack of it. Steven (Jack Neo) and Karen (Xiang Yun), the parents in an affluent middle-class family, are so engrossed in their careers that they neglect their two talented children: fifteen-year-old Tom (Shawn Lee) and nine-year-old Jerry (Ashley Leong). Once again, Neo seems to be making a statement through the choice of Western names. The parents' practice of double standards and constant nagging not only destroy their children's self-esteem but also push Tom to find 'family' support in a neighborhood youth gang. To provide a working-class contrast, Neo presents a second, related story about a widower and ex-convict (Huang Yi Liang) whose emotional inexpressivity and physically abusive behavior drive his fifteen-year-old son Chencai (Joshua Ang) to delinquency and eventually expulsion from school. As usual, the problems are easily resolved by the end of the film as Steven and Karen are forced to deal with the explosive consequences of their poor parenting: They become more attentive to their children and realize the importance of providing encouragement and praise. Chencai realizes how much his father really loves him when the limping man comes to his aid in a gang fight and is fatally injured. Spurred on by his father's death, Chencai goes on to become a martial arts champion who, in a most incredible turn of events, brings glory to Singapore by beating an American competitor! Indeed, the simple and happy endings are consistent with a moralistic film built on what Ong Sor Fern criticized as a "preachy script … [in which] the choppy scenes unfold like a series of public service announcements with each character mouthing lessons in parenting and communication" (Ong 2006a).

In *I Not Stupid Too*, Neo once again manages to emphasize the importance of Mandarin; but this time, he seems to be making an argument for the judicious use of English in the teaching of Mandarin in schools—an approach recently favored by the government

in its revised curriculum (as indicated in Lee Hsien Loong's 2005 rally speech quoted above). The more traditionally Chinese-educated Singaporeans have criticized this approach as a sure way of lowering standards just to please the Westernized English-educated Singaporeans. The school principal (Selena Tan) is informed by Mandarin teacher Mr Fu (Johnny Ng) that his students are uninterested in improving their Mandarin because their own school principal is unable to speak it well. The principal admits that her command of the language is weak, but she is willing to learn. She adds, "Many students speak only English at home. If you can explain in English, they will understand better." When Mr Fu retorts that he never had teachers who explained the English language to him in Mandarin, she replies that "we must be forward-thinking. It's a different generation … stop using passé teaching methods. It's not going to help the students." It is possible here to argue that Neo—an organic intellectual of the Chinese-educated community, ostensibly critical of a Western-oriented government and society— has been at least partially co-opted by the state to play the useful role of winning support for the government's more controversial policies.

Ong Sor Fern also describes the film as "commercially-minded mediocrity" (Ong 2006a). Indeed, prominently featured throughout the film are New Moon canned food products, United Overseas Bank credit cards, and NETS CashCards. In fact, a 3G telephone (promoted by SingTel) is instrumental in helping the film draw to a happy ending: Steven, interrupted during his business presentation by a video message that he inadvertently receives on his Sing-

Figure 5-6: Still from *I Not Stupid Too* (2006)

Tel 3G telephone informing him that his son Tom is being beaten up in a gang fight, gives up this crucial moment in his career to rescue his son (see Figure 5-6). New Moon, UOB, NETS, and SingTel are all sponsors of the film.

Just Follow Law *(2007)*

In *Just Follow Law*, Neo turns his critical eye to the public sector, drawing from it many predictable 'red-tape' situations that form the bulk of his comic material and the target of his satire. A young and élite civil servant, Tanya Chew (Fann Wong), offends her colleagues, Eric Tan (Moses Lim) and Lau Chee Hong (Steven Woon), who have been longer in the service and are resistant to change. Lim Teng Zui (Gurmit Singh), a lower-division employee, is made a scapegoat for a mishap involving a government minister. Chew 'cuts' his bonus, and is pursued by a furious Lim in a car-chase scene that leads to a freak car accident, from which they emerge with their bodies supernaturally switched. Lim (now in Chew's body) makes a mess of the department, as he now leads it with a "break every rule" approach. Tan and Lau plot to have the department shut down. Lim decides to cooperate with Chew (in Lim's body) to whip the department back into shape and to organize a large-scale job fair to convince the authorities not to close it down. They have to contend with a series of comical bureaucratic encounters with inflexible public servants. Utterly frustrated, Chew exclaims, "In Singapore, everything needs a permit. Please do something that doesn't require a permit, a license, the police, and doesn't involve any government bodies!" But eventually they succeed in getting the exhibition off the ground. However, disaster strikes when a stage catches fire due in no small part to the sabotage attempts of Tan and Lau; but it is Lim's maverick ways that end up saving the minister's life and he is given an award. The film ends with hints that Chew and Lim have not been able to reverse the body switch but are now married to each other. True to Neo's didactic style, the film makes it clear that both Chew and Lim have learnt valuable lessons in life through this exchange.

Unlike Neo's other films, *Just Follow Law* contains mainly English/Singlish dialogue. But like his other films, it presents many in-jokes, superficial references to topics of current interest, and stereotypes of racial minorities that seem to appeal to a local audi-

ence. It features, for example, Muthu (Krishna s/o Packiri Rethi-
nam), an Indian security guard and stereotypical buffoon, who tries
to prevent a fire truck from parking in a VIP lot even though the
building next to it is about to go up in smoke (see Figure 5-7). In
his defense, he declares,

> Last time I never follow rules. *Kena* [colloquial Malay for 'get'] scolding.
> Now I follow rules. Also *kena* scolding … I think I better go back to In-
> dia.

Figure 5-7: Still from *Just Follow Law* (2007)

Typically also, the film integrates, and therefore advertises, a large
array of products from the film's many sponsors: in one scene, for
example, audiences get to see a taxi carrying a real-life Mitsubishi
air-conditioner advertisement that features Jack Neo. The 'body
exchange' idea, a much overused and tired device in commercial
films, points towards the need for Neo to radically rethink a success
formula that might have run its course. Raintree Pictures, at least,
is quite clear that it will need to move beyond Jack Neo (Ong
2007b).

Conclusion

Jack Neo's 'heartlander' films have been commercially successful
because they appeal to mass audiences who derive pleasure after
a hard day's work from light entertainment that is based on famil-
iarity (and not innovation), morally uplifting stories with happy

endings (uncomplicated by ambiguity), and the kind of comedy (stereotypes, puns, slapstick, and irreverence) that helps them forget life's many problems. Neo's films are formulaic: Through simple and predictable stories, character types that are repeated from film to film, and a regular setting that seems to celebrate (even romanticize) the anarchic social life in the heartlands, Neo the script-writer discusses money, sex, gambling, and society's attitude to the elderly, academic underachievers, singles, and ex-convicts.

The commercial success runs in tandem with Neo's ability to galvanize his audiences as Singaporeans but, even more significantly, as Chinese-speaking Singaporeans who are imagined into a community through his films. As an organic intellectual, Neo articulates his criticism of society and government in the name of the Chinese-speaking community that appears to be systematically disadvantaged by the dominance of the English language, Westernization in general, and the inflow of foreigners that a globalized economy necessitates.

However, Neo's films do not, by and large, amount to any deep, complex, or comprehensive critique of socioeconomic conditions in Singapore. Presenting the Westernized, English-educated Chinese and the non-Chinese minority races as targets of mockery while giving the Chinese-speaking community a vision of possible success—still within the rules of the game—might satisfy a racial fantasy that does not in fact translate into any kind of socially critical action. Although *I Not Stupid* is dense with critical—though quickly glossed over—references to government policies and social mindsets, Neo has claimed that he "did not want to create problems or put the government in a bad light" (quoted in Olesen 2002). In many ways co-opted by the system—as the regular prime ministerial endorsements and national awards would suggest—Neo, after all, restores faith in a crisis-prone system that the more critical would say is exploitative, oppressive, and in need of structural change. This is particularly true of *Money No Enough*, released a year into the Asian economic crisis of 1997. In one-dimensional Singapore, Neo appears to be more than willing to compromise when it comes to market forces. Not only do many of his films feel like extended product advertisements, but also, it could be argued that his safe and superficial criticisms of society and government have themselves been commodified into products whose easy consumption allows

audiences to purge their frustrations and then return to their 'happy consciousness.'

Yao notes how *I Not Stupid*, for all "its harsh humour and relentless digs at the State … betrays its critical sense when it insidiously finds a place in the State's scheme of things," and stresses in particular the "need for a spirit of independence so crucial to the creative industries" (Yao 2007, 152). Indeed, in a Mandarin television forum, Prime Minister Lee—also eager to improve his popular image—expressed his disapproval of art that challenges the mass audience, praising instead Neo's films for being "popularized, mass-market art" (quoted in C. L. Goh 2006). In reply to Neo's question about the possibility of being arrested and sued by the government for his criticism of government policies, Lee very revealingly remarked, "Very dangerous. Maybe you'll be invited to tea," a reference to the PAP tea sessions that its prospective electoral candidates are invited to attend (quoted in C. L. Goh 2006).

THE TRAGEDY OF THE HEARTLANDS IN THE FILMS OF ERIC KHOO

The DVD release of Eric Khoo's feature film *Be with Me* (2005) comes in packaging that features a quote from *Time Magazine* critic Bryan Walsh, who describes the film's director as "Singapore's most talented filmmaker." Born in 1965 into one of Singapore's wealthiest families, Khoo was immersed in the world of cinema from an early age. He attended The City Art Institute in Sydney, Australia, where he studied cinematography. Starting out with short films, he directed *When the Magic Dies* (1985), *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990), *August* (1991), *Carcass* (1992), *Symphony 92.4 FM* (1993), *Pain* (1994), *Home Video* (2000), and *No Day Off* (2005), some of which were screened at international festivals where they received awards. He also directed numerous music videos, television commercials, and an episode ("Sex, Lies and … ") of the television series *Drive* (1998). As an executive producer running his own production firm, Zhao Wei Films, Khoo worked on Royston Tan's *15* (2003), *4:30* (2006), and *881* (2007), and Toh Hai Leong's *Zombie Dog* (2004); more commercially oriented films such as the Jack Neo vehicle *Liang Po Po: The Movie* (1999), *Stories about Love* (2000), and *One Leg Kicking* (2001) (which Khoo also co-directed); and made-for-television miniseries *Drive* and *Seventh Month* (2004).

Khoo is perhaps best-known for his three critically acclaimed feature films *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *12 Storeys* (1997), and *Be with Me*, all of which have been screened at major international festivals. *Mee Pok Man* won festival awards not only in Singapore, but also in Fukuoka and Pusan. *12 Storeys* won the Golden Maile Award for Best Picture at the 17th Hawaii International Film Festival and two awards at the 10th Singapore International Film Festival. It was also the first Singapore film officially to be invited to participate at the Cannes Film Festival. *Be with Me* played as the opening film of the Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival and has received very positive reviews from international critics: *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis, for instance, even admitted that she

"was in tears by the end, which is fairly rare" (Zhao Wei Films n.d.). While his films have earned international recognition, Khoo has also been honored by the state for his role in the local arts community: He received the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for film in 1997 and the Singapore Youth Award (Individual) in 1999 in recognition of his dedication to filmmaking and his contributions to society. In 2007, he was awarded the prestigious Cultural Medallion. Khoo also sits on the National Arts Council's resource panel for film. In 1998, he was profiled by *Asiaweek* as one of 25 exceptional Asian trendmakers for his influence on film and television. A year after, *Asiaweek* listed him as one of the leaders for the millennium. Khoo does not regard himself as a "leader of local cinema," but has nevertheless been very supportive of budding local filmmakers with potential, mainly through his Zhao Wei Films (Yong 2005). Royston Tan, for instance, has clearly benefited from Khoo's encouragement, tutelage, and ability to raise funds (Yong 2005).

Khoo's depiction of the spiritually empty and ultimately tragic lives of the working class (with the notable exception of his life-affirming *Be with Me*) contrasts sharply with Jack Neo's comically anarchic and seriously didactic portrayals of the heartlands. Media scholars Tan See Kam, Michael Lee, and Annette Aw argue that,

> [a]s critique, [Khoo's] films represent a growing awareness among the current generation of independent filmmakers about the need to provide alternative ways of 'seeing' the nation-state. (Tan, Lee, and Aw 2003)

Although most of Khoo's films present hard-hitting critiques of an alienating and despiritualized Singapore produced, administered, and celebrated by an authoritarian, technocratic, and materialistic state, it is clear that these critically acclaimed art-house films also present the state with an internationally branded, and therefore potentially lucrative, resource for building the 'renaissance city,' a global arts hub that is attractive to foreign talent and expected to be at the center of Singapore's new creative economy. The state's essentially economic ambitions, in turn, create new conditions of possibility through which Khoo can shepherd his art and social criticism safely, find more nuanced ways of expressing them, and

perhaps even profit from them. As journalist and media scholar Cherian George observes,

> even if officials felt pricked, the government chose to tolerate [*Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*] as instances of the thorns that would inevitably be found in a local culture industry that was flowering like never before. (George 2000, 147)

Here again lies the tension between film as a site of ideological struggle and film as a product of the culture industry, a much more dynamic tension in Eric Khoo's case than in Jack Neo's. Film scholar Gina Marchetti describes *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*, in postmodern terms, as being part of the very things they critique:

> Both films travel as commodities while also being self-consciously critical of the marketplace. Resuscitating the idea of a 'national' cinema by presenting a vision unique to Singapore, Khoo frustrates any fantasy of nation building by systematically underscoring the mistakes and excesses of Singapore's government from education and housing to law enforcement. (Marchetti 2006, 133)

Central Critical Themes

Several of Khoo's films portray a dark, dirty, desperate, and deviant side of Singapore, a side that the authorities, anxious to protect their political legitimacy and to attract foreign tourists, capital, and talent, would much prefer to hide. These portrayals clearly mark him as a critical voice quietly raging against a one-dimensional capitalist society, and the perverse consequences that such a society has had on both the marginalized as well as those who struggle to conform. As women's studies professor Esha Niyogi De argues,

> [f]rom the perspective of a male insider, Khoo explores what is going wrong with the ways that people think, act, and learn to be Singaporean, and how one sets these right. (De 2002, 201)

In a one-dimensional society, genuine community is fundamentally fractured by the demands of the economy, and nearly all alternative visions, resistant urges, and oppositional tendencies are either criminalized by the state, or repressed by self-deluding individuals, or commodified by the market and integrated into an affirmative system whose single-minded pursuit of profit, productivity, and consumer satisfaction—presented as a prerequisite for collective

survival itself—promises and appears to deliver material benefit and psychical comfort to its risk-averse worker-citizens.

One-dimensional Singapore breeds a culture of obedience to strict (and strictly enforced) codes of conduct and to an authoritarian and paternalistic government, regarded (sometimes grudgingly) as the provider of material comfort and the definer of meanings and values through coercion, regulation, and censorship. Though they might complain superficially about their government's policies and actions, as Jack Neo and his characters often do, most Singaporeans are basically obedient citizens who have bought into the ideology of capitalist success both at the level of the producing-consuming-owning individual and at the level of the nation-state to which the individual's fortunes appear to be tied. The ideology of meritocracy gives obedient citizens the hope of upward mobility, which they can secure by being economically competitive, materially acquisitive, progress-oriented, system-affirming, and survival-minded. Hard work, thrift, discipline, moral self-restraint, and self-sacrifice—often spuriously justified as values that are authentic, appropriate, and even exclusive to Asian, even Confucian, Singapore—give rise to a continually delayed chain of gratification. Constantly told that they have arrived as middle-class citizens, Singaporeans—particularly those who live in public housing—look forward to the surface pleasures of hard-earned material affluence, whilst submerged beneath them are repressed desires and anxieties waiting to explode. It is these hidden and often secret destructive energies that Khoo's films ferret out so graphically. Khoo not only brings them to the surface for all to see, he causes them to erupt destructively.

The Singapore landscape is notionally divided into, firstly, the global-city spaces where geographically mobile foreign talent and the professional local élite come to work and play; secondly, the private housing estates reserved for only about 15 per cent of the population; and thirdly, the lower-income public housing estates occupied by the majority of Singaporeans, who are officially celebrated as the ones who are the most patriotically, culturally, and morally anchored through their preoccupations with family, ethnic and religious community, and the (mostly neo-Confucian) value system that enshrines respect for authority, diligence, thrift, and self-control.

It is in this third space, celebrated as Singapore's heartlands—a space that the Censorship Review Committee describes as a "wholesome ambience" in need of protection (Censorship Review Committee 2003)—that Khoo locates the most immediate and physical form of one-dimensionality in Singapore. The architecture and urban design of the public housing estates structure the limits and possibilities of interaction and self-consciousness among the majority of Singaporeans in the course of their daily lives as they negotiate the discourse of hard work, material acquisition, and personal progress. Khoo's films, particularly *12 Storeys*, focus on the public housing apartment blocks as a physical expression of one-dimensional society. As individuals are inserted into these buildings—into apartments that they (mis)recognize as their homes—so are they interpellated by the hegemonic ideological accounts that bring meaning to their subjectivity in terms of nationhood, citizenship, and good governance. Sociologist Chua Beng Huat describes public housing as the "literally concrete reminder of the pervasive presence of the government" (Chua with Yeo 2003, 179). Christopher Justin Wee Wan-Ling, a lecturer in literature, describes how in Khoo's films,

> Singapore's modernist built environment appears … as a disjunctive and claustrophobic space to which individuals have to adjust emotionally—generally unsuccessfully. They attempt to get away from the clichéd blandness of efficient Singapore, within which intimacy and individual autonomy seem restricted. (Wee 2002, 130)

Khoo excels at capturing grittier, less sanitized images of Singapore's underbelly, a fourth space in the Singapore landscape that contradicts the official, glossy-postcard projections of the modern global city whose images he often inserts into the narrative flow as contrasting textures. As Marchetti observes, the "hygienic orderliness of Singapore's Orchard Road shopping district, downtown financial center, efficient rapid transit, and HDB flats hide the irrational, chaotic, and uncontrollable" that in Khoo's films are highlighted as "pick-up bars, hawkers' stalls, and vomit-strewn toilets" (Marchetti 2006, 131). His short film *Home Video* (2000) actually begins as holiday footage taken by an American tourist in Singapore. As the camera focuses on various picture-perfect scenes of places on the tourism circuit, the approving American provides a commentary about how Singapore's laws make it a clean, efficient, orderly, and

safe place. He observes that Singaporeans must be rich since everyone seems to be driving a Mercedes-Benz. In a mixture of praise and condescension, he concludes that Singapore is a modern country since it has Burger King, Starbucks, and other features reminiscent of Disneyland. He also concludes that Singaporeans are smart people since they speak English. Writing more generally about Singapore as a "filmic city," architect Ang Hwee Chuin observes how

> [i]t is as if Singapore has been planned to occur as a series of perspectives—with Changi Airport as the starting point—and engineered to absolute perfection. Unconsciously, we are all starring in a great tourism promotion video of Singapore—a montage of piecemeal images of Chinatown, Little India, Geylang Serai, Sentosa, Merlion and the [Central Business District]. Sounding almost like a mass-targeted Bollywood production? (Ang 2003, 16)

Midway through Khoo's short film, the American tourist is ironically robbed of his video camera by a Singaporean man who then uses the camera to capture images of the sleazier side of Singapore that he lives in—less glossy, less First World, and much less like Disneyland.

In contrast to images of clean, bright, and happy public housing estates that have served as monuments to the PAP government's political legitimacy (most clearly projected in television sitcom *Under One Roof*), Khoo's various filmic portrayals foreground architectures and urban environments that alienate, isolate, and madden the working-class majority of Singaporeans who are made to believe they are part of the fictional 80 per cent of Singaporeans who are middle-class. As an artist, Khoo is able to locate and project aesthetic beauty in the dilapidated back alleys, crumbling old buildings, seedy prostitute dens, and isolating public housing apartment blocks without trivializing them. Nevertheless, his critique, as Chua Beng Huat observes of *Mee Pok Man*, remains sharp.

> Against this triumphal discourse of independent Singapore, the intentional choice of combining various elements of the marginalised and the ready-to-be-discarded—the old flat, and all the characters in the film— is an intentional act of subversion, deflating the triumphalism by pointing to the underbelly of the nation where failures are too well hidden under the new affluence. (Chua with Yeo 2003, 180)

In some of his films, Khoo seems to look back (almost nostalgically) to a time in the past when society (he imagines) was more

genuinely compassionate, interactive, communicative, interesting, and free—a real community that now has been atomized by the imperatives of global capitalism. In his short film *When the Magic Dies* (1985), for example, he deals with the theme of aging in Singapore. To promote the work of the Community Chest, a government-linked charity organization founded two years earlier, the film highlighted the "trauma," "plight," "suffering," and "torment" that the elderly faced as they were shunned by the youth, placed in homes for the aged, and viewed as a national problem. One elderly man in the film expresses regret about the way "warmer" old buildings in Singapore are being demolished to make way for "colder" new buildings. But the film also highlights the older generation's enormous capacity for love, an idea that returns triumphantly two decades later in *Be with Me*.

Much less optimistic, though, is the very quiet and slow-paced short film *Symphony 92.4 FM* (1993), in which Khoo explores the loneliness of an old man (Chiew Sung Ching) who lives an alienated existence in modern Singapore. One Sunday morning, the old man, whose pet dog the audience discovers has died, wakes up, has breakfast, and stares blankly at a television show on the finer points of corporate dressing. He goes out for a walk in the old back alleys, gazing at an empty old building where a girl he had courted in his youth used to live. It is his birthday and he brings home a cake for the occasion. These scenes are filmed in black-and-white, but his reminiscences of a happy past are presented in color. At the end, the man takes his own life, and the film cuts to a scene of a train moving noisily through the HDB estate where he lives. Often in Khoo's films, scenes of profound tragedy and helplessness are separated by images of Singapore's high-tech trains—a symbol of progress—running ceaselessly and indifferently through the estates within which countless other small tragedies are enacted.

The state regularly presents the 'family' and 'community'—by which it means the heteronormative nuclear family and the ethnically ordered but nationally minded community—as normative units of Singapore's culture and society, units that it sometimes describes as coming under threat from 'Westernization.' But this patriarchal Asian communitarian orientation, especially when pressed into the service of capitalism, masks a hierarchical and oppressive system where ritualistic obedience to the authority of the Father (whether in the family, the workplace, or the state) prevents, even

replaces, the possibility of human connectedness and love. Khoo's films seem to critique the way modern Singapore's constrained definitions of the family and community have actually degraded human relationships to such a degree that real family and community are no longer possible, except as hollow forms containing estranged relationships—relationships that exacerbate, instead of ameliorate, the individuals' mutual inability to cope with modern expectations.

In the short film *Carcass* (1992), the protagonist (Joe Ng) lives in an all-male household of butchers where his abusive, drunken, and thoroughly misogynistic father (Chia Chwee Guan) compares himself to the pigs that he slaughters since he also "everyday eat and sleep." The father rambles on about the way women should be treated: He preferred removing the nipples from slabs of pork to fondling the nipples of his late wife since she, like all women, had only two of them. He boasts to his other son (Ngo Chong Meng) about how he can have sex with a woman within 100 seconds. The slow-witted protagonist, who prefigures the Mee Pok Man, takes his late mother's dress as a fetish, smelling it tenderly for comfort. In one explosive scene, his father walks into the room and rips the dress apart in disgust, as he reveals that his wife was a "whore" who would sleep with others for money. The protagonist feels castrated by his hyper-masculine father, but instead of turning against his father, he runs off to have comfort sex with his regular prostitute, whose den is located in the older, more dilapidated part of Singapore. In this violently patriarchal setting, the protagonist also tries to cope with his anxieties and helplessness by escaping into the fantasy world of television dramas that portray glamorous middle-class corporate lifestyles. Unable to find emotional fulfillment in his family, he turns to the pleasures of prostitution and television to buy a fantasy that can make life just a little more bearable.

The short film *August* (1991) is one of the rare occasions when Khoo focuses on the moral and emotional failings of bourgeois society instead of the heartlander class. By fastening his camera to a dog, Khoo presents a story from the point of view of the protagonist's pet, a story about the wife's (Jacintha Abisheganaden) adultery and conspiracy to murder her husband (Tan Tee Keon). The film *Barbie Digs Joe* (1990) is another example of bourgeois emptiness. Using stop-motion animation techniques, Khoo tells a story of how the doll Barbie, unhappy with sexually inactive Ken,

is heroically rescued from her boring existence by action figurine
G. I. Joe. As they make a new life together, Barbie continues to be
dissatisfied with her condition. Unable to identify what exactly the
problem is, the doll is only able to tell herself that "it's all make-
belief." Two other narratives resonate with this: one about a little
girl who pursues a little boy who seems much more interested in
looking for his missing G. I. Joe figurine; and a second about an
adult couple (presumably the grown-up boy and girl) who quarrel,
break up, and then make up after finding their long-lost dolls at a
car park that used to be a toyshop. The film ends with the fairy-
tale tag "All existed happily ever after" in a way that sits disturb-
ingly with Barbie's realization that her unfulfilled life is "all make-
belief."

Admitting to being strongly influenced by Martin Scorsese's *Taxi
Driver* (1976), Khoo creates complex antiheroes, all dysfunctional
individuals struggling to cope in a rigid and yet fast-paced society
administered by harsh norms, rules, and regulations. In the black-
and-white short film *Pain* (1994), banned in Singapore for four years
for its graphic depiction of extreme violence, Khoo's protagonist
(Darren Lim) is an unemployed snatch-thief whose self-abusive
practices escalate as he tries in vain to find a job. His masochistic
obsession with inflicting pain on himself includes piercing his fin-
gertips with needles while watching pornography, burning his body
with cigarettes, inserting toothpicks into his fingernails, putting out
a candle flame with the palm of his hand, cutting himself with a
razor blade, and slamming shut a drawer on his hands. The frus-
trations of looking for a job stand for the larger sense of helpless-
ness that he faces in Singapore society. At the height of his frustra-
tions, he kidnaps, tortures, and kills a shopkeeper (Nazir Hussain),
then seals the dismembered body in a wooden box, which he se-
cretly stores away in a dilapidated house. The audience is led to
believe that a policeman is about to discover this box when it is
revealed in a twist ending that the policeman is in fact the mas-
ochistic protagonist himself who, having finally found a job, con-
tinues to be fascinated with pain and violence. This disturbing film
not only blurs the lines between good (policeman) and evil (murder-
ous thief), but also locates potentially explosive emotional distress
in one of the more iconic symbols of a one-dimensional society:
the policeman.

In "Sex, Lies and … ," an episode of made-for-television series *Drive* (1998), Khoo's protagonist, Tan Wee Meng (Gary Ee), is a Hitchcockian voyeur who fantasizes about Janice (Corrine Ng), mistakenly believing that she is real-life actress Michelle Goh (who plays Bunny in *Mee Pok Man*). Janice, who lives in a neighboring apartment block, is the object of both Wee Meng's sexual fantasy as well as his camera gaze as he secretly videotapes her from his apartment. His perverse actions however eventually provide videotaped evidence that helps Janice to confront her colleague Patrick (Yiu Leng Hiang), who has molested her. With Wee Meng's help, Janice takes control of her life and demands that the molester contribute a huge sum of money to a feminist organization. The convergences with *Mee Pok Man* are obvious, even though the earlier protagonist's attempts to save Bunny lead to a macabre ending of necrophilia and decay. Television, perhaps, demands a less disturbing ending.

Khoo's antiheroes are rarely able to resist one-dimensionality; instead, they either become excluded from mainstream society altogether or, in their struggle to fit into it, suffer tragic fates as they negotiate their deficiencies, marginality, deviance, perversion, criminality, and madness.

Mee Pok Man *(1995)*

In *Mee Pok Man*, the protagonist (Joe Ng, also the protagonist in *Carcass*) is a slow-witted man who sells noodle-soup at a coffee shop frequented in the late hours of the night by prostitutes, their pimps, and the thugs who work for the pimps. Bunny (Michelle Goh), one of Mike Kor's (Lim Kay Tong) girls, longs to escape the life that she is trapped in. Her English boyfriend, Jonathan Reese (David Brazil), is a sleazy and manipulative photographer who promises to take her to London, where she can start a new life as a model. Bunny is hit by a car and then rescued by the Mee Pok Man, who takes her to his home to nurse her back to health. He treats her as if she were his wife, even after she dies and her body decays.

The Mee Pok Man's world is the underbelly of Singapore, set apart from the glossy spaces that serve as the playground of cosmopolitan First World citizens. The visual contrast between the two worlds is regularly established by inserting into the narrative flow short scenes of Singapore's ultramodern mass rapid system, crowds of office workers thronging the financial district in Shenton Way,

and Orchard Road shimmering with Christmas lights and busy shoppers during the festive season. The Mee Pok Man's world, on the other hand, is rundown, its nightlife defined by old coffee shops, prostitution, drugs, gambling, karaoke lounges, and taxi-drivers who insist on taking couples to sleazy hotels. This is a cruel, violent, and criminal world that jars against the official images of a safe, sanitized, and First World city directed at tourists, investors, and foreign talent. Even the HDB apartment blocks are portrayed as shabby and isolating, subverting in this way the clean, green, wholesome, and happy heartlander images that the government directs at citizens in order to elicit a positive response to its record of good governance and material provision through its often draconian social policies.

It is through the main characters' marginality—their 'apartness' from mainstream society—that the alienating quality of the urban environment really shows up clearly. The Mee Pok Man is unambiguously an outsider who has withdrawn from the system in all respects except the hawker trade that he has inherited from his late father. At night, he wanders the quiet streets aimlessly, disconnected from the urban environment peopled in the daytime by producers and consumers. At home, he potters about, oblivious to the presenters on radio and television who mouth the official state rhetoric: A chirpy female radio presenter, for instance, flippantly advises a suicidal youth stressed out by school examinations to persevere since "in our realistic and pragmatic world only the toughest will survive." De explains:

> The effect of juxtaposing Mee Pok Man with these media messages is to underscore their externality to his ways of thinking and being. What the camera follows, instead, are his meanderings. We see Mee Pok Man standing or sitting in empty hallways, empty of a community because people are leading atomized lives of production-consumption. (De 2002, 206)

Bunny is also an outsider in the way that she seems to empathize intuitively with the Mee Pok Man and the disadvantaged in general (she gives part of her earnings to an orphanage); but she also stands ambiguously on the inside in the way that she, a victim of the system, has commodified and sold herself through prostitution. The distant prospect of starting a new life in London with her English boyfriend Jonathan presents Bunny with a fantasy of escape from her oppressed and exploited condition in Singapore, medi-

ated through the Hollywood model of *Pretty Woman* (1990), where a prostitute (Julia Roberts) is rescued from the streets by a wealthy capitalist (Richard Gere), and she then "rescues him back."

Smug assertions about Asian family values and filial piety in Singapore are problematized by Khoo's depiction of cold, exploitative, and ultimately dysfunctional families. The Mee Pok Man sustains a ritualistic relationship with his dead father: Every morning, he makes an offering of half-boiled eggs and a lit cigarette to a grim portrait of his father that hangs over the dinner table. Although he admits that he hates *mee pok* (a noodle dish) and his father hated *mee pok* too, he has little choice but to continue the trade of his parents and grandparents. Bunny is the female breadwinner of a fatherless household. With her earnings as a prostitute, she provides her grumbling mother with pocket money for gambling and her self-centered teenage brother with a stereo and other products for his amusement. It is only after the boy starts to read Bunny's diary that he realizes how much she has sacrificed for her family. Both the Mee Pok Man and Bunny find themselves trapped in a contemporary existence that is deadening, an idea that is expressed metaphorically and most grotesquely in the final scenes in the Mee Pok Man's apartment, where his father's ghost appears and Bunny's corpse decomposes gradually (see Figure 6-1). This, ironically, is when the Mee Pok Man comes closest to having his own family.

Figure 6-1: Still from *Mee Pok Man* (1995)

The forces of capitalism extend the logic of one-dimensional so-
ciety—and its dominant ideology of capitalist success, upward mo-
bility, competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and the fragility of the na-
tional interest—into the oppressive and even criminal practices of
patriarchy. Prostitution—the clearest example of the commodifica-
tion of human interaction, care, love, and sexuality—becomes, as
Marchetti argues, "a metaphor for the dubious underpinnings of
capitalism. Women, like goods, circulate to enrich men, and Sin-
gapore's economy enriches some at the expense of others" (Mar-
chetti 2006, 137). Prostitutes, in Khoo's cinematic world, are con-
stantly being discussed with the greatest disrespect by male
characters: Local girls are described as too difficult, white girls as
smelly, dark-skinned girls as not in demand, Malay and Indian girls
as sexier, and so on. Bunny too is objectified, degraded, and ex-
ploited, not only as a prostitute but also as her family's sole wage-
earner. This idea is foregrounded in the opening scene, where Khoo
juxtaposes images of butchered meat, food being greedily consumed
at a hawker center, flies hovering over piles of rubbish, and Bunny's
exposed genitalia. Bunny, manipulated and controlled by men such
as Kor, Reese, and her brother, labors under the tragic illusion that
she is "using men to achieve her hopes."

   The patriarchal system has emasculated the Mee Pok Man. He
is manipulated by a fellow worker who keeps borrowing money
without paying it back, beaten up by thugs, and insulted nearly all
his life, even by prostitutes who regard him as an "idiot" and a
"good-for-nothing." Most significantly, he is unable to attain the
male-ideal role of husband-father: As he wanders the streets at
night, he peers longingly into a bridal shop through heavy iron
grills that separate him from mannequins in white wedding dress-
es (see figure 6-2). He spends time in an abandoned school build-
ing and watches children at play in a way that emphasizes his own
naïve and child-like quality. Since the days when they were class-
mates in primary school, he has longed for Bunny, voyeuristically,
until an accident puts her in his care, away from society. As he
carries her dying body over the threshold of his apartment, he
makes her the wife that he could never have. Ironically, she dies
during their first and only sexual encounter: His love can be con-
summated only with a corpse. He becomes a husband only when
Bunny is completely objectified as a lifeless body—a fetish and an
object of necrophilia. As Tan, Lee, and Aw observe, "[n]ecrophilia

in the context of *Mee Pok Man* thus becomes a powerful, deadly metaphor for critiquing a society that cannot foster healthy human relations" (Tan, Lee, and Aw 2003). Throughout the film, he is also feminized, first as a preparer of food at work and at home, and second as a caregiver when he brings Bunny's dying body into his home. But the overwhelming emasculation and feminization of the Mee Pok Man serve to highlight the tragedy of a man who regains his masculinity by becoming possessive and competitive in the grotesque moment when he takes Bunny away from her family, Reese, and Kor, takes full ownership of her injured body, and kills her in the moment of sexual orgasm/conquest.

Figure 6-2: Still from *Mee Pok Man* (1995)

12 Storeys *(1997)*

The twelve storeys in the title refer to the number of floors in a typical HDB apartment block. It is in one such apartment block that the film's three tragic intercutting stories play out. In the first of these stories, Meng (Koh Boon Pin)—a civic-minded and patriotic schoolteacher who has bought into the Singapore dream of achievement and upward mobility—is left in charge of his younger sister Trixie (Lum May Yee) and brother Tee (Roderick Lim) when their working-class parents go away on holiday. In the second story, bucktoothed hawker Ah Gu (Jack Neo) struggles to save his marriage as his beautiful 'China bride' Lili (Chuan Yi Fong)—who

married him because she believed his wildly exaggerated promises of an affluent life in Singapore—insults him, refuses to bear his children, and looks for companionship outside their relationship. In the third story, San San (Lucilla Teoh)—an unattractive woman who has not made anything of her life—is tormented by the incessant berating of her recently deceased adoptive mother (Lok Yee Loy), and is able to exorcise this unpleasant memory only after she fulfills her mother's final wish and presents a jade bangle as a gift to Rachel (Neo Swee Lin), the daughter of her mother's former employer. The audience's voyeuristic gaze into the lives of these Singaporeans is directed by the spirit of a young man (Ritz Lim) who commits suicide by jumping off the twelfth storey at the very beginning of the film.

Khoo's filmmaking technique is 'non-mimetic,' particularly in the way it forces audiences to look differently at and to see alternatives to superficial realities and dominant ideologies. *12 Storeys*' intercutting, multilayered, converging, and diverging narratives break the continuity of the dominant ideology that structures the lives of these characters. The unusual angles adopted in the camerawork force audiences to look at familiar scenes of life in the heartlands from different and unusual perspectives and, as media student Jeffrey Low observes,

> act as an apt metaphor for the apparent deviations in ideology attempted in the film 'truth' as it attempts to critically examine the dominant ideology in the society. (Low 1999, 30)

De observes how, unlike Hollywood's practice of continuity editing, Khoo's "irrational cuts"

> underscore how minds and bodies grow dis-synchronous with the teleological rationality of subject-and-object formation in Singapore. Selectively combining the use of cuts with devices of continuity cinema such as suturing and long takes, the films alert the spectator both to the relentless hold this rationality exerts over the time and space of Singaporeans, and to the impossibility of maintaining this hold over people's minds and bodies. (De 2002, 203)

The Singapore system is shaped by the ideology of acquisitiveness, competitiveness, upward mobility, and a vulnerable nation's imperative to succeed in capitalist terms. Low argues that

> [a] system which claims an absolute truth and enforces it vigorously through its various agencies will necessarily result in tragedy for its mem-

bers who fail to meet its requirements. It will also always be faced with
an alterity whose fringes will always be present to disturb and threaten
that truth. (Low 1999, 37)

The film, focusing on these fringes of alterity, begins on a Sunday
morning with the chirpy voice of a DJ from a radio station whose
jingle, "Perfect 10: Singapore's Number One," slips easily from the
idea of "Singapore's Number One radio station" to the national
aspiration to be number one in everything ("Singapore *is* Number
One"). Even the song that plays on this station contains the lyrics
"You're my number one." The message is further propagated
through hegemonic figures such as Meng and the ghost of San
San's mother, who are constantly nagging their family members to
conform to the expectations of Singapore society. In this society,
most—including, ironically, hegemonic agents such as Meng—will
eventually fail and happiness is an unattainable dream. The alien-
ating effect of the dominant ideology takes concrete expression in
the HDB apartment block where these tragedies play out: The
opening and closing scenes give various shots of the block in a cold
blue light (see Figure 6-3), as if to suggest the atomization and
alienation of the working class from one another by an architecture
that divides and isolates, subverting the warm and wholesome im-
age of happy heartlanders well provided for by their government.
Student Angela Wu observes how

> Khoo's opening shots reduce the 3-room flats to depthless, standardized,
> assembly-line compartments, creating an atmosphere that is lifeless,
> cold, and dreary … A veneer of civilized society, symbolized by the
> clean, efficient, and modern HDB flat, hides troubling undercurrents
> that destabilize the idea of a decorous and wholesome society. (Wu 2005,
> 6-7)

Khoo subverts the notion of Asian family values so often advanced
chauvinistically against the so-called 'decadence' of the West. He
explores how family relationships are estranged under the demands
of a capitalist society. The handsome and talented but asthmatic
and alcohol-dependent young man's suicide is inexplicable, even to
his grieving parents, who know so little about him and can only
blame the bad company they think he kept when he was alive. San
San, unable to live up to the expectations of society, cannot shut
out the stream of abuse hurled at her by her adoptive mother, who
worked hard as a servant to be able to afford an HDB flat. Ah

Gu's fragile marriage is based on a materialistic transaction between a desperate man and a scheming China bride who gives up her country and true love for the prospects of an affluent life overseas. When she discovers Ah Gu's deception, she scornfully emasculates him and turns to adultery. Meng's responsibility as head of the household while his parents are away on holiday gives him the opportunity to take control of his siblings' lives, particularly that of his sister Trixie, to whom he is incestuously attracted. In failing to control her sexuality—he resorts to imposing an early curfew, interrogating (and thereby competing with) her sleazy boyfriend Eddy (Ronald Toh), and demanding a confession of how many boys she has slept with—the outwardly moralistic Meng breaks down as he realizes he cannot have her body: He stays up waiting for her to come home, watches pornography, gets drunk, goes berserk in a public playground, and is taken away by the police. This, artist Michael Lee observes, is a "visual exemplification of the violent return of the repressed" (Michael Lee 2000, 124).

Figure 6-3: Still from *12 Storeys* (1997)

In unmasking the hypocrisy behind self-righteously moralistic accounts of the Asian family, Khoo is also critiquing the patriarchal structure of society that gives rise to it, as well as the ideals of masculinity and femininity to which the characters tragically fail to measure up. Meng's masculinity is expressed in his rationalization of his personal life and responsibility to family, community,

and nation. As a schoolteacher, he is also an ideological instrument of the state. Ensuring that his reason prevails over his desires, Meng leads a disciplined, regimented, and systematic life, symbolized by his adherence to the clock, and expressed in early morning exercises that he does around the neighborhood, during which he conscientiously performs the Great Singapore Workout, part of a national campaign against obesity. Proudly wearing a T-shirt that proclaims "My block is the cleanest," he picks up a cigarette butt that his neighbor has improperly discarded and shakes his head in disgust at his neighbor's lack of civic consciousness. He works hard to support his family, paying for his sister's education, but feels utterly betrayed when she takes his support for granted and never seems to take her studies seriously. Just before the examinations, she tells him she wants to quit school and work as a sales assistant in a clothes store. For the sacrifices he has made, Meng insists on his family's gratitude in a way that, De observes, points to his self-interested motivations to advance his own life in this status-conscious society (De 2002, 212).

Meng's conservative, pro-establishment, and authoritarian values are in line with Asian or neo-Confucian values, and he moralizes continuously against premarital sex, smoking, and drinking, using spurious statistics to exaggerate his claims. In didactic mode, he relates how as a young man he was able to deflect the advances of his female schoolmates, thereby striking a favorable balance between phallic attractiveness and manly restraint (De 2002, 211). His brother and sister, however, neither respect nor obey him, making fun of his rigid and 'square' behavior behind his back, and responding to his nagging with snide and disrespectful remarks. But it is clear throughout the film that he can hardly control his own incestuous urges, competing for his sister's body against her rich but lowly educated boyfriend Eddy by resorting to self-righteous accusations of immorality expressed in bombastic English. But these incestuous urges come back at the end to destroy him, as he violently forces Trixie to list the names of boys she has slept with, and then exclaims in anguish, "What about me!" (see Figure 6-4). As Low argues, Khoo explores how people "seek to achieve that truth; and if they fail, how that truth destroys them as they have no legitimate place in this society" (Low 1999, 28).

Ah Gu, unlike Meng, starts out in the film as a failure according to standards set by "Singapore's Number One" society. Lacking

Figure 6-4: Still from *12 Storeys* (1997)

physical attractiveness and material prosperity, the hawker is unable
to find a Singaporean wife and instead obtains a wife from China
by exaggerating his achievements and promising her a lifestyle he
cannot deliver. Feeling utterly frustrated and trapped, Lili mocks
his physical appearance by insinuating that bucktoothed men have
small penises, withholds sex from him, and refuses to let him be-
come a father (see Figure 6-5); the televised government pro-fam-
ily campaigns in the background mockingly exaggerate his emas-
culation. While she cheats on him, Ah Gu stays at home to do the
housework. He tries to modify his body in order to please her
sexually, but an exercise bicycle and a cosmetic procedure to adjust
his teeth are unlikely to do much good. He fantasizes about a lov-
ing relationship. At the end, though, Ah Gu reasserts his masculin-
ity by resorting to the power relationship that is established, as De
observes, "over [Lili's] peripheral position in the global economy."
De suggests that the final scene—in which a sobbing Lili, who has
just given in to Ah Gu's sexual demands, masturbates to a photo
of her lover in China posing under a framed picture of Chairman
Mao—appears to lament the death of revolutionary opposition to
capitalism (De 2002, 215).

Lili is global capitalism's victim *and* opportunist. She leaves her
country and lover in pursuit of affluence, but is swallowed up by
the needs of her new husband, community, and government, in
spite of her resistance to and biting criticism of their flaws and
pretensions. She fully embraces the consumerist lifestyle, and there-
by rejects the communist regime from which she escapes, "dressing
and preening herself before the mirror to enhance her erotic val-

Figure 6-5: Still from *12 Storeys* (1997)

ue and mobility" (De 2002, 214). Trixie is also highly consumerist in her outlook but, unlike Lili, puts up no resistance to the system and is able to withdraw from its competitive and success-oriented logic just as long as she has someone—Meng or Eddy—to provide for her material needs. She wants only to shop for the latest fashions, go to the movies, party at nightclubs, and read her women's magazines. San San, lacking Trixie's youthful beauty, has been rejected by the system whose structural violence is expressed through the unrelenting verbal abuse that streams even from her dead adoptive mother's mouth (see Figure 6-6), as she is constantly found lacking in comparison with the idealized Rachel. But Rachel, who drives a BMW, parks it in a lot reserved for mobility-impaired drivers, leaves the responsibility of caring for her son to a Filipina domestic worker, and cannot appreciate the auspicious gift of a jade bangle that San San's adoptive mother has chosen to give her instead of San San. San San's utter failure is demonstrated by her lack of courage even to commit suicide and end her suffering.

The old woman's ghost, which could be read as the punishing 'spirit' of capitalism, is contrasted with the good spirit of a young man that draws the audience's attention to the three sets of lives. Spirit (as he is called in the end-credits) is analogous to Khoo himself as a filmmaker. Marchetti observes how

> the ghost remains a mute presence that simply uses his eyes, as Khoo uses his camera, to point to and point out what must be assumed to be most abominable. (Marchetti 2006, 145-46)
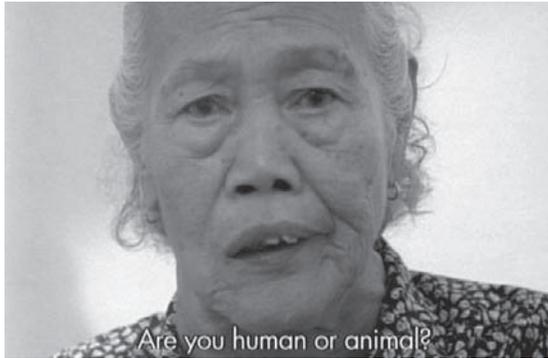
Figure 6-6: Still from *12 Storeys* (1997)

Along with the glimpse that the audience is provided of a video camera in Spirit's room and the fact that Khoo, like Spirit, has a taste for alcohol, this similarity points toward the potentially liberating role that, Khoo possibly believes, a filmmaker can play, but also the tragedy of not being able to succeed in that role. As Michael Lee observes, Spirit's

> gaze is a counter-ideological commentary on society's oppressive force[s] that have led to people needing to wear guises, [to] conceal their true identities, and to be torn between instincts and social standards. (Michael Lee 2000, 125)

In this brutally one-dimensional society, the spiritual (represented by Spirit and mediated by art and filmmaking) can be regarded not only as a revelation of repression, but also as a promise of recon-

Figure 6-7: Still from *12 Storeys* (1997)

ciliation and genuine human community. As De argues, Spirit—the outsider—is potentially the "redeemer of the fracturing community" (De 2002, 202). But tragically, the breakdown is so severe that no reconciliation is in the end possible, except for a final moment of grief and acceptance by San San when Spirit appears and puts a sympathetic arm around her shoulder (see Figure 6-7).

Zombie Dog a.k.a. Eat Shit Fuck & Die *(2004)*

A thematically related film is *Zombie Dog*, a 60-minute 'mockumentary' produced by Eric Khoo but directed by film critic Toh Hai Leong, probably with much input from Khoo. Toh also plays himself in the film, retaining his real-life persona, which exudes a forceful brashness, foul-mouthed iconoclasm, and passionate eccentricity. In *Zombie Dog*, Toh's filmmaking process is being documented in the fictitious film-within-a-film *Making of Zombie Dog: A Film by Jimmy Tai*. Toh presents himself, and is presented as, a maverick director struggling to get a no-budget pornographic 'snuff' film project off the ground in a country whose overly commercialized filmmaking industry has no place for the independent filmmaker. Refusing to conform to the "zombie definition of success," Toh's character, although broke, resists asking the Singapore Film Commission for financial assistance, in that way hoping to create art that is spontaneous, independent, uncensored, underground, passionate, and self-indulgent. To underscore this point, the film's soundtrack is made up of a pulsating mix of melodramatic musical effects, comically amateurish sound effects, local 'indie' rock music, pornographic moaning, and Toh's own ceaseless ranting. Toh's character regards himself as a "prophet [who is] never welcome in his own land," believing ironically that his kind of work would be commercially successful in other more progressive countries. Interspersed throughout the film also are self-consciously ironic insertions of advertisements, book plugs, and product placements—self-ironizing gestures that are a marked contrast to the commercial instincts that drive Jack Neo's approach to product integration (as described in Chapter 5).

By resorting to the metaphor of the zombie ("the walking dead"), Toh takes to the extreme the theme of Singaporeans alienated not only from society and their physical environment but also from their own humanity as they go through the motions of making a living

in a dull and monotonous city, disengaged, "brain-dead," and without any imagination. Even their interest in food, sex, and television is enacted in a banal fashion. Highlighting the popular observation that Singaporeans are at the bottom of global rankings when it comes to sex drive, Toh chastises his countrymen for "copulating without a sense of purpose," distracted by the stress and worry that accompany the drive to "keep up with the Joneses." Journalist Lim Li Min describes how *Zombie Dog* takes "sideswipes at the state's cookie-cutter mentality," quoting Toh's assertion that "*Zombie Dog* is a metaphor for how straitjacketed Singaporeans are" (L. M. Lim 2004). Film critic Ben Slater describes the film as "a vicious, hilarious and heart-breaking portrait of an excessively passionate man who doesn't fit easily into a harshly conservative society" (Slater 2004), and elsewhere as

> a really ground-breaking representation of Singapore's outcasts and rejects—people who are unable to fit into a society which demands a very sophisticated kind of conformity. (Slater 2005)

The figure of the outcast is embodied not only in Toh's character but also in the real-life, unknown bit-part actor Lim Poh Huat (the protagonist of yet another short film *Lim Poh Huat*, directed in the same year by Lee Wong). The simpleminded security guard is in real life a regular sperm donor, a fact that is highlighted in the film to demonstrate the double standards of a moralistic government that bans *Playboy* magazine in public, but legitimizes its use to further population policies. Lim is recruited to play the protagonist in *Zombie Dog*, a man who in his childhood enjoyed an incestuous relationship with his sister, killed his parents and fed them to dogs, and then killed his sister, eating her so she would become one with him. The adult protagonist takes in a pornographer as a tenant, is disturbed by the sexual noises coming from the next room, and then kills a prostitute whom he discovers sleeping in the pornographer's room. He has necrophilic sex with the corpse, then chops her up in his kitchen and cooks her up as a curried meal. One day, he is spotted by a blood-covered woman in the neighboring apartment and realizes that she, too, has been chopping up and cooking people in her kitchen. He marries his soul mate and they go on to run a highly successful restaurant preparing the "tastiest meat"—the human flesh of raped, killed, and cooked prostitutes.

The story and its affectations are clearly meant to shock in their grotesque and, as Slater (2005) describes, "horribly misogynistic" nature. While the idea of a commercially successful cannibalistic restaurant resonates well with the zombie metaphor and in turn with the way Singapore's commercial preoccupations have turned its people into soulless creatures of production and consumption, desensitized and uninterested in the human consequences of their actions, of greater interest perhaps is the way Toh himself takes on a zombie-like quality in the blasé and therefore chilling manner in which he describes the anal sex, incest, rape, necrophilia, body dismemberment, and cannibalism in his film. The audience is not allowed simply to dismiss Toh's pronouncements as the tongue-in-cheek or petulant or hypocritical ramblings of a madman; instead, they are forced to come to terms with a complex, often ironic, account of one-dimensionality where the "scruffy alternative [does not appear to be] very attractive" (International Film Festival Rotterdam 2004).

Toh seems also to be mocking "the way some filmmakers in Singapore portray love and passion in their films" (V. Tan 2005). Clearly, *Zombie Dog* is as much about art and filmmaking in Singapore as it is about the country's one-dimensional society and government. In this respect, it is most interesting to note how the film's producer Eric Khoo is 'inserted' into the film, apart from the work's resonance with the gruesome body-hacking in Khoo's short film *Pain*. For instance, a brief clip of San San attempting suicide in *12 Storeys* is inserted as Toh discusses the stresses of life in Singapore; and music from the *Mee Pok Man* soundtrack is liberally inserted into the film narrative. One wonders whether Toh the director is Khoo's self-parody at another level of reality, or his alter ego, or the radically insurgent filmmaker that he always wanted to be but could never bring himself to be. Khoo's self-identification with the comic-book superhero Spiderman—he describes himself as "Peter Parker without the superpowers" (Ong 2006c)—resonates strongly with this tension. Eric Khoo is to Toh Hai Leong what Peter Parker is to Spiderman.

One Leg Kicking *(2001)*

In the feature films that have been discussed so far, Khoo portrays the working-class heartlanders as leading utterly tragic lives. How-

ever, in the more commercially oriented *One Leg Kicking*, which Khoo co-directed with Wei Koh (in the credits, he strangely submerged his identity in the composite name 'Khookoh') and co-produced with Raintree Picture's Daniel Yun, not only do the heartlanders triumph in the end, but their antagonists—the cosmopolitans—are consistently depicted as manipulative, exploitative, and depraved.

The film is basically about two teams that compete in an amateur football league in Singapore. One team, named Kosmos (an obvious reference to cosmopolitans), is sponsored by the wealthy owner of a plumbing company, Sonny Lee (Lim Kay Tong), whose son Gavin (Chinese-American actor Robin Leong) is the team captain. The second team, named The Durians (referring to an Asian fruit with a legendary smell that many Westerners find intolerable), comprises blue-collared employees of Lee's company, including widower Tai Po (Gurmit Singh, whose well-known role as Phua Chu Kang is discussed in Chapter 4), hot-tempered ex-convict Handsome (Mark Lee), and tomboy Kim (Sharon Au), as well as their camped-up lounge-singer friend Vernon (Moe Alkaff). The narrative builds up to the final match between Gavin's photogenic team of skillful players and Tai Po's team of working-class misfits, the underdogs whose enthusiasm at first barely made up for their lack of talent. But winning the match is important to Tai Po most of all because it would enable him to reclaim his sense of self-worth. He feels that by not pursuing his youthful dream of becoming a national soccer player and by ending up instead as a plumber, he has failed not only his family but also himself. Against all odds, The Durians eventually win the final match against Kosmos, the favorites. The football field becomes the site of a larger ideological tournament between the 'authentically' local heartlanders faced with severe disadvantages and the brashly global cosmopolitans, a tournament that is emotively designed to result in an emphatic validation of the local, denoted in the film by the term "the people." The film also validates the local by highlighting the villainous natures of cosmopolitans as they humiliate, manipulate, and emasculate the working-class protagonist Tai Po.

The audience's sympathies are designed to lie strongly with Tai Po, whose low self-esteem and use of Singlish make him appear down-to-earth, authentic, part of the Singapore heartlands, and vulnerable, especially in his encounter with a schoolteacher (Hossan Leong) played grotesquely by an actor in drag (a maneuver that

resembles Jack Neo's portrayal of the Westernized Jeremiah Adolpher Lee as a cross-dresser, as discussed in Chapter 5). The teacher summons and humiliates Tai Po, whose daughter is performing badly in school, insisting that Tai Po speak proper English as he struggles to communicate with her. Outside the classroom, a large banner exhorts students to speak good English. In this encounter, a stark contrast is established between the arrogance, insensitivity, uppity mannerisms, affectation, bureaucratic discipline, and exaggerated enunciation of the schoolteacher on the one hand and, on the other, Tai Po's helplessness, big heart, and broken English. When the teacher calls his daughter "stupid," Tai Po barks fiercely at her for making his daughter "lose hope," at which point the students in the class burst out in applause, which presumably the audience is meant to join in.

Tai Po's boss, Sonny, takes every opportunity to insult his workers as stupid, cut their pay, and exploit them to provide free labor for his personal benefit. He tries to bribe The Durians with S$10,000 to ensure his team wins the tournament. Ironically, he explains the importance of football in terms of how it is "emblematic of life," proving why people like him are "Number One" and people like Tai Po remain losers in life. The film highlights Sonny's amoral, even immoral, behavior as he lavishes expensive gifts on his son's "sexy girlfriend" and finally takes her from his son.

Gavin, the boss's son, studied in "some big school in the US," speaks with an American accent, and has difficulty understanding the local accent. As the main antagonist, he mocks and bullies the local employees, who are depicted as completely helpless, though resentful, in his presence, not least because they are unable to communicate with him on his terms. This character is clearly calculated to draw, pleasurably, the hostility of heartland audiences toward 'foreign talent.' Tai Po's emasculation is effectively highlighted by Gavin's exaggerated manliness and egotism: Gavin drives a flashy sports car, wears a gold medallion, walks with an overconfident swagger, and treats his adoring women with great disrespect. Gavin also has a secret fetish for his Barbie doll, which he has named Trixie and which serves as a surrogate for his sister, Gwen (Fiona Xie), for whom he has incestuous desires. The doll is a reminder of Khoo's early short film *Barbie Digs Joe*, which also explores the moral emptiness of bourgeois life, and *12 Storeys*, where the theme

of sexual repression is explored in Meng's relationship with his sister Trixie.

Gavin's spoilt sister also speaks with an American accent and leads a hedonistic lifestyle which, in true bourgeois fashion, she resents; she demands independence from her father but also insists that she is as entitled to his wealth as her brother. In one scene, she lies seductively on a mat out in the garden dressed in a bikini, whilst nearby, her father's employees have been coerced into laboring to construct a swimming pool for the family. Providing a stark contrast is the tomboy Kim, an uncouth plumber by day and a karaoke hostess by night. And yet, Kim (whose name means 'gold' in Hokkien) is portrayed sympathetically as sensitive and romantic. Her simplicity, sincerity, decency, and low social status make her look more authentic and likable than the wealthy and Westernized characters who live a glitzy and glamorous lifestyle.

Khoo's treatment of Westernized and cosmopolitan Singaporeans in this film resembles very much that adopted by Jack Neo in his heartlander films. The stereotypes necessary for portraying the cosmopolitans as cruel, immoral, and ridiculous antagonists, and the heartlanders as the disadvantaged protagonists who heroically overcome the obstacles in order to secure success, all serve to gratify or simply pacify heartland audiences who might experience similar, if less dramatic, obstacles in their own lives. Like Neo's films too, *One Leg Kicking* appears to function as a hegemonic text, reaffirming faith in Singapore's capitalist system, where it would seem one could succeed if one tried hard enough and had enough faith in oneself. When The Durians go up to receive their trophy, the sponsor's representative congratulates the team members and declares "Power to the people!" (see Figure 6-8). But the slogan of telecommunications company StarHub—the fictitious sponsor of the tournament and real-life sponsor of the film—is "You have the power!" In the final scene, the audience discovers that members of The Durians have been given jobs selling telephone products for StarHub. What sounds at first like a critique of the capitalist exploitation of the working class ends up as a vindication of capitalist corporations that seamlessly appropriate a more radical language for their own profit-driven motives. As in Neo's films, the number of non-incidental product placements—blatant advertisements for film sponsors Tiger Beer, KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut, for example—is an immediate sign that the film does not rise above be-

ing a commodity of the culture industry, an anomaly where Eric Khoo's films are concerned.

Figure 6-8: Still from *One Leg Kicking* (2001)

Main Criticisms of Eric Khoo's Work

In many ways, Khoo is a public intellectual who, through his films, raises critical awareness—uncomfortable as this might be—among his audience of their own conditions of existence, or at least of other people's conditions of existence that they perhaps might be partly responsible for. De describes Khoo's work as an "ethical struggle for freedom," exploring "what is going wrong with the ways that people think, act, and learn to be Singaporean, and how one sets these right" (De 2002, 199, 201). Low regards Khoo as a "revolutionary" filmmaker in the way that his unusual techniques are able to force audiences to cast a critical gaze on everyday-life subjects, which goes "a long way in this process of a nation's self-definition" (Low 1999, 74). To Marchetti, though, Khoo's films

> offer fragmented, localized, and isolated points of resistance rather than call for any revolutionary change. Belief in universal emancipation gives way to poking fun at the PAP's campaign to get Singaporeans to smile or critiquing the obviously excessive aspects of capitalist consumerism in the institution of prostitution. (Marchetti 2006, 136).

Others have pointed out weaknesses in Khoo's films, besides *One Leg Kicking* which undermines its own critical potential by allowing itself to be compromised by the market. Films like *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* seem to thrive on a bourgeois fascination with—even

a fetish for—the underclass, expressed mainly through an aesthetic transformation of working-class suffering and alienation for the consumption of an art-house audience. Chua Beng Huat is critical not only of the cruel delight that Khoo seems to take in the plight of the working class, but also of the

> flatness of the characters in *12 Storeys* and the romanticisation of the outcast and the misfit in *Mee Pok Man* [that seem to be] drawn from the world of comic-strips … The medium cannot achieve the representation of embodied psychological dramas. (Chua with Yeo 2003, 182)

At the risk of essentializing class positions, Chua further postulates that

> [t]his absence of entry into the inner lives of the marginal people is, perhaps, the consequence of Khoo's own upper class background. Perhaps his fascination with the poor stems from a fascination with the Other rather than empathy for the Other, making his cinema disturbingly voyeuristic. (Chua with Yeo 2003, 181-82)

Even Jack Neo questions the authenticity of Khoo's depiction of the heartlands: "Look at Eric Khoo—he is Western-educated, he speaks English, he does not understand a word of Hokkien but *12 Storeys* is about HDB life" (quoted in Wu 2005, 16). Khoo seems to be very aware of this criticism and, in an interview with film critic Ong Sor Fern, asks exasperatedly, "Is Lee Ang gay? Is he a cowboy? Gimme a break" (Ong 2006c). Lee directed the critically acclaimed, Oscar-winning film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a gay love story involving two cowboys.

A second weakness, which De (2002) also acknowledges, is the way Khoo's often biting critique remains complicit with a controlling male gaze. Even though Khoo, in an interview with the author, protests that his women—Bunny, Lili, Trixie, and San San's adoptive mother—are depicted as much 'stronger' and 'smarter' than the male characters (Khoo 2005), these women are nevertheless presented as ultimately helpless victims in ways that reinforce patriarchal sensibilities and anxieties. These objectified, 'to be looked at,' and victimized female characters are controlled by the dominant male subject positions of spectator, filmmaker, and protagonist, as described by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975/2004). As De observes,

> [t]he films repeatedly depict men as the agents of the ethical drive and women only as possible followers. Thus, they raise the question if the filmmaker's critique of dominant knowledge is partially embroiled in the specular unification of a male cognizing gaze. (De 2002, 204)

To deal with the 'castration threat' that these 'strong' and 'smart' women pose by stepping out of line, Khoo's films fetishize and eroticize them often to the point of being monstrous: Bunny ends up as a 'wife' and decomposing necrophilic love object to the Mee Pok Man; Lili must ultimately submit to the discipline of Ah Gu's sex drive to satisfy her consumerist desires; Trixie continues to be a siren and object of male fantasy; and San San's adoptive mother is turned into a gratingly hateful memory before finally being silenced. But the grotesque forms in which these women return and resubmit to the natural order are anything but 'natural'; and it is these portrayals perhaps that constitute Khoo's most acute critique: one that denaturalizes, by grotesquely mimicking, the subjection of women in a patriarchal society.

In the short film *No Day Off* (2006), Khoo again brings the male controlling gaze upon a female character, in this case an Indonesian woman who leaves her family behind to find employment as a domestic worker in Singapore, where she suffers different types of abuse by her middle-class employers (who are artfully kept offscreen). Though once again framed as a victim, the woman is depicted in such grotesquely piteous ways as to denaturalize successfully the taken-for-granted power relations forged out of the complex dynamics between male and female, First World and Third World in Singapore. The effect is to shame Singaporean audiences who might not even realize the abuse they could be responsible for (including the common refusal to grant their maids a day off every week).

Be with Me *(2005)*

To some degree, many of the criticisms against Khoo's filmmaking seem to have been addressed in *Be with Me*, which Ong Sor Fern has described as the "most sophisticated piece of film-making to emerge from the Republic's budding film scene" (Ong 2005a). In this film about "love, hope, and destiny," the inspiring protagonist—Theresa Chan—is, in real life, a woman who has lived an extraordinary life despite being blind and deaf since childhood. The

film constantly slips between fact and fiction, drawing from Chan's life in a way that brings hope to the fictitious characters around her. Chan's character rises above the misogynistic treatment of women that Khoo has been criticized for—but tellingly perhaps, as Ong notes, the real-life heroine "is not his creation" (Ong 2005a).

There are several continuities between *Be with Me* and his more tragic first two feature films that make them feel like a trilogy ending on a triumphant note for the human spirit. *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* raise the possibility of escaping or transcending the one-dimensional world that their protagonists find themselves in, but both films close with an utter lack of human fulfillment, friendship, or love, only resignation or self-destruction. *Be with Me* shows the possibility of fulfillment and love in a world that can often be silent and dark, but the film continues to remind audiences that destiny can also bring cruel outcomes even for good people. Olivier Père, the artistic director of the Cannes Film Festival Directors' Fortnight, describes the film as the "cinematic equivalent of a hymn … a veritable song of hope; it reclaims the real meaning of the word 'humanism'" (translated and quoted in Zhao Wei Films n.d.).

Many of the central themes, character types, metaphors, and motifs, and much of the narrative logic from Khoo's previous body of work reemerge in *Be with Me* in much more complex and mature forms. Khoo continues to use the device of intercutting narrative strands in *Be with Me*, not only to tell three stories about love for the teenaged, middle-aged, and older generations, but also to allow for disjunctures and intermediations, providing textural and thematic convergences and contrasts to create range and depth. "Meant to Be" is the first of three narratives, and it features the story of how a recently widowed shopkeeper, unable to release the spirit of his wife because of his grief, eventually finds love and companionship in Theresa Chan's character, who comes to know him through the delicious food that he prepares and which his son, a social worker, brings to her. The old man is played by Chiew Sung Ching, who also acted as the lonely old man who kills himself at the end of Khoo's short film *Symphony 92.4 FM*. The intertextual reference presents the renewed vision of a human connection that can triumph over the deathly alienation of modern society. The second narrative, "Finding Love," is about a security guard (Seet Keng

Yew) who eats voraciously to escape his loneliness. He lives in an abusive all-male household, not unlike the one in Khoo's short film *Carcass*, and—like the Mee Pok Man and Tan Wee Meng in *Drive*—watches from afar an unsuspecting woman whom he loves, career woman Ann (Lynn Poh). The third narrative, "So In Love," features a short-lived romance between two schoolgirls—Jackie (Ezann Lee) and Sam (Samantha Tan)—and shows how Jackie tries in vain to rekindle their relationship after she discovers Sam with a boyfriend. Jackie jumps off a building and falls on the security guard, killing him as he makes his way to deliver a love letter to Ann that he finally plucked up the courage to write.

Khoo also continues to use certain dominant metaphors. Food, for instance, continues to represent different types of human deficiencies and dependencies, and modes of communication and interaction, as well as rituals and obsessions. As Ong Sor Fern observes, "[t]he Singaporean love of food unites the characters in gluttony, in emotional starvation, in nourished contentment" (Ong 2005a). Khoo also employs ghosts as a means of setting up an alternative realm of possibilities from which the inadequacies of the material world might be pointed out, critiqued, and even corrected. The potentially helpful presence of Spirit fails to reconnect the alienated residents in *12 Storeys*; however, in *Be with Me*, audiences catch a glimpse of San San, still being watched over by the benign Spirit, but now having a family of her own—she seems to be the only one who has managed to escape into happiness, at least of the kind defined by mainstream society. The ghost of the shopkeeper's wife is unable to move into the next world because her husband continues to grieve for her—he no longer opens his shop and still sets a place for her at the dinner table (see Figure 6-9). His son, a social worker who regularly visits Theresa Chan, translates her remarkable autobiography into Chinese and gives it to his father who, with the supernatural intervention of his ghost-wife, starts to read it and become intrigued by Chan. He soon starts to cook for Chan with a renewed zest for life and, when he eventually meets her and realizes that his life is worth living, he is finally able to find closure. In one of the most touching scenes in the film, the ghost-wife leaves him and gives him a long last look as if to say goodbye.

Be with Me more fully develops an aesthetic of silence that characterizes parts of Khoo's earlier films. *Symphony 92.4 FM* is mostly

Figure 6-9: Still from *Be with Me* (2005)

silent. The Mee Pok Man is a mostly mute character who wanders the deserted streets at night, imagines the joyful sounds of children playing in the quiet of abandoned school buildings, and escapes into the silence of his home, almost oblivious to the stream of national propaganda messages on radio and television. The death of San San's adoptive mother in *12 Storeys* creates a silence in the home that she cannot help but fill with memories of the dead woman's harangues. There is very little spoken dialogue in *Be with Me*. The security guard never says a word. Jackie and Sam communicate almost entirely by SMS text and e-mail, as audiences 'listen in' to the girls' conversations by reading off their mobile phone and computer screens. Theresa Chan's thoughts are conveyed through text that is slowly produced on a manual typewriter (see Figure 6-10) as well as subtitles that serve as a kind of silent 'voice-
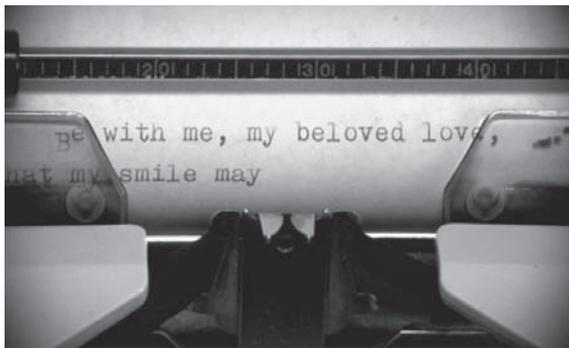
Figure 6-10: Still from *Be with Me* (2005)

over.' Ironically, in this very quiet film that sparingly blends ambi-
ent sounds with highly emotive music scored for piano and strings,
Chan—whose world is dark and silent—actually 'speaks' the most
number of lines. Khoo is perhaps suggesting that the film's silence
allows Chan's 'truth' to be heard.

The reemergence of themes, motifs, character types, narrative
devices, and aesthetic sensibilities is not simply an attempt to prof-
it from successful formulas, as might be the case with Jack Neo's
films. Khoo's films (with the exception perhaps of *One Leg Kicking*)
are by no means standardized products of the culture industry.
Instead, these reemergences show artistic development and a self-
conscious process of maturation toward a unique directorial voice.
These reemergences also make up a complex web of intertextual
references, forcing audiences to pay attention not only to the par-
ticular film that they are watching, but also to specific clues that
point to the rest of Khoo's work: Audiences derive pleasure from
decoding the many puzzles that Khoo embeds in his films.

Be with Me is not only a sincerely positive work that does not
pretend to give false hope in a one-dimensional society, but also—
for a critically acclaimed director—one that is courageous enough
to take up the themes of despair, hope, and love, all at the real risk
of slipping into easy sentimentality, triviality, and melodrama. In-
stead, the three narrative streams, demanding concentration from
the audience, provide a real sense of perspective and an opportu-
nity for deep and quiet reflection.

THE FILMS OF ROYSTON TAN: LOCAL NOTORIETY, INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM

Something of a mythology has already grown around the public figure of Royston Tan (b. 1976) barely even a decade into his career as a filmmaker. *Time Magazine* lists Tan among 20 Asian heroes under the age of 40, celebrating him as an "iconoclast" (Spaeth 2004). The foreign media often tries to fashion him as a rebel and an artistic freedom-fighter of sorts. Singaporean filmmaker Eric Khoo regards him as a "hero to the city's independent artists" (Khoo 2004). And Tan, also, positions himself as martyr for the cause of artistic freedom, vividly describing his brush with the censors in terms of being "stabbed really badly" (Ong and Young 2004) and having "my child [the heavily censored feature film *15*] … disfigured" (Lloyd-Smith 2004). He has said that he feels "like an outcast" (Walsh 2003), "constantly living with … rejection from people" (R. Tan 2005a). Described as an artist with a "strong social conscience" (Fawziah Selamat 2004), he has made films that attempt to give a voice to the marginalized in society (Khoo 2004) or to hold up "a mirror for them to reflect on their lives" (R. Tan 2005a).

"When I don't like something," Tan has said, "I will criticize it in my films" (R. Tan 2005a). Defiantly, he has asserted that he makes films without worrying about what the government wants: "I just do it … the more you don't want me to do it, the more I will do it to show it to you" (R. Tan 2002). Indeed, Arts Minister Lee Boon Yang has gone on record to criticize one of Tan's short films for attempting to "undermine the standing of a public institution" (Rose 2004), to wit the Board of Film Censors, lampooned in Tan's short film *Cut* (2004). Tan believes that he has been "blacklisted" by the authorities, watched closely by the film censors, and shunned by funding agencies in Singapore (Ong and Young 2004; R. Tan 2005b).

Tan, who "thinks in pictures, not words" (D. W. Tan 2006), has an intuitive eye for visual beauty, an innate sensitivity to music, a cheeky and flamboyant sense of humor, and most of all a talent

for putting together films that are simple yet challenging on so many levels. But he has also acknowledged how playing the rebel in strait-laced Singapore contributes to his meteoric success, half-joking that he "owe[s] the minister a favor … ever since he mentioned my name, there's been calls" (Lloyd-Smith 2004). Interestingly, journalist Tan Dawn Wei observes in an interview that Tan "relish[es] putting up a sideshow as the unwitting, anti-establishment hero" (D. W. Tan 2006). The international media and many within the local arts community have derived much gratification from the mythology that has grown around Tan: the "slow learner" and "late bloomer" who rose from humble beginnings to become a critically acclaimed filmmaker (Temasek Polytechnic 2004); and the rebel whose films win prestigious awards overseas but are vandalized in his own smugly conservative and censorious Singapore, a country whose contradictory aspirations to become a 'renaissance city' with thriving creative industries have made it the object of some international ridicule. As expatriate popular humor columnist and author Neil Humphreys observes, "The world is watching, remember, and it's laughing" (Humphreys 2003). Renaissance Singapore, eager to invest in a climate of creativity and to attract tourists, investors, and members of the global creative class, has undoubtedly seen a significant increase in state funding for the arts (MITA 2000).

To a considerable degree, Tan's international success as a Singaporean filmmaker has depended, and will probably continue to depend, on his ability to make iconoclastic films that are resistant to Singapore's glossy image as a safe and clean, blandly modern and superficially cosmopolitan global city, where the authentically local must either mimic or give way to the international, or be repackaged into a happy caricature of calm and contentment that is in line with nation building and its underlying politics of national identity and values. But Tan's relationship with the capitalist state is both antagonistic as well as interdependent. Tan admits that he devotes a large part of every year to commercial work—becoming a "prostitute to earn a living" (R. Tan 2005b)—and is utterly grateful for his large circle of friends who, every year, set aside some money to help support his filmmaking efforts (R. Tan 2005a). The success of his films has also had to depend in many ways on their ability to benefit from the administrative and economic establishments that make possible the kind of national arts funding and commercial arts market needed to sustain a local filmmaking in-

dustry. Similarly, for the *Renaissance City* proposals to come to any kind of fruition and thereby help to move the Singapore economy forward, the capitalist state will need talented people like Tan, whose local notoriety transforms into international acclaim. Mark Fong, an advertiser who works closely with Tan, asserts that

> We will have Royston in Singapore for only a few years more. There will come a time [when] the big bad world will come knocking and give him projects he can't refuse. He'll be a national treasure when he does that. (Quoted in D. W. Tan 2006)

According to Tan himself, production companies in the US have been courting his talents, and countries such as Canada, Australia, and France have already offered him citizenship (D. W. Tan 2006).

This chapter will provide a close reading of Tan's films in terms of both their capacity for contesting, even vandalizing, officially desirable images of Singapore—a modernized, cosmopolitan nation whose social foundations consist of happy Asian families—as well as their creative engagement with, even manipulation of, a system that is fundamentally authoritarian, capitalist, and bourgeois. The ostensibly antagonistic relationship between Tan and the censorious state is reassessed to be a complexly interdependent and mutually beneficial one.

Resisting Modernization, Aestheticizing the Past

Several of Tan's earlier works are set in pockets of 'old world' Singapore, in places that seem to represent for him an intimate but temporary refuge from the relentless and inflexible logic of modernization, and in particular the indiscriminate forces of urbanization. Tan has said,

> I always feel a great sense of loss in Singapore because it's constantly changing … that's why I try to immortalize as many things as I can in film. (R. Tan 2005a)

Postcolonial Singapore has been driven by an obsessive need to be regarded by the world community as thoroughly modern and developed. Demolishing the old (the Third World, the working-class, the unsightly, the unhygienic, the unsafe, the unfashionable, the not-yet-best-in-the-world) in order to build over it with the new (the

First World, the upgraded middle-class, the spectacular, the clean-and-green, the secure, the trendy, the best-in-the-world) has been part of an unending project of nation building. In such a world, the new quickly becomes old, and so the work of transformation is ceaseless. Where once, it would seem, places were deeply emotive and symbolic markers of personal and social meanings, histories, and attachments, rapid modernization has made every marker utterly transient and forgettable. As artist Ho Tzu Nyen argues:

> By the 1990s, the bulldozing stage of Singapore's urban revolution was in transition to a new process—that of perpetual makeover … It is as though the lack of physical space, which makes limitless development impossible, needs to be compensated [for] by a process of spatial intensification, whereby pre-existing structures are endlessly modified and adjusted. Nothing can be left alone … This process of spatial intensification is accompanied by a kind of temporal compression, whereby the lifespans of things and buildings are abridged. Everything comes with an expiry date … (T. N. Ho 2003, 25)

Film producer Juan Foo laments how rapid change is making it "increasingly difficult to have continuity and consistency of the cinematic landscapes that are depicted in Singapore film," important because they serve as recognizable locales—the "elusive 'essence' of the city"—that are integral to storytelling (Foo 2003, 31).

4A Florence Close (1998) is a short, silent, and mainly black-and-white autobiographical film whose title refers to the address of the house that Tan grew up in and where large family gatherings took place every weekend before financial troubles forced his family to move out. In the final moments of the film, Tan and his family members look longingly at the house they are about to leave behind. The film ends with the caption, "Thanks for all the memories. I wonder if houses have feelings. If they do, I wonder what they will be telling me." This personal experience of place and loss is also a feature of several of his other films, in which he literally inserts himself as a filmmaker whose art serves to preserve. In an interview with the author, Tan revealed that

> [e]very film that I have done is a very good visual library for me to remember things, people. And I have a very strong attachment towards places—old places, old coffee shops, old cinemas—and I like to immortalize everything in my film. (R. Tan 2005a)

In the short film *Hock Hiap Leong* (2001), Tan uses the film medium to philosophize about and immortalize a 55-year-old coffee shop

on Armenian Street shortly before it is, in real life, demolished in the name of urban renewal. Tan suggests in a tone closer to regret than bitterness that Singaporeans are robbed of meaningful places like this coffee shop as they are erased by the indiscriminate forces of progress and development. The coffee shop itself is heavily invested with hyperbolic meaning: The male protagonist (Jeremy Pang) reflects on the way "every single item seems to have its own story to tell" and identifies the place with "one's true self," "the true soul and humanity." The authenticity of the coffee shop lies in the memories deeply embedded in every detail of its physical construction—the cups, the coffee bags, the neatly folded plastic bags—lovingly captured in closeup shots and long takes that set up a rich dialectic between the frenzied rhythms of the coffee shop and the philosophical languor that contemplates each particularity. The authenticity lies in the artistry of the food, which is skillfully though routinely prepared by the cooks. And it lies in the society of strangers, whose anonymity is liberating but still paradoxically intimate. In the frenzy of the coffee shop, time seems to stand still, but in fact ticks away to mark the impending end of an era.

And then suddenly, the film bursts into a flamboyant song-and-dance segment: brightly colored sequined outfits; cross-dressing divas reminiscent of old Bugis Street, once famous for its tranvestites; feather-boa, lip-synching choreography to a Ge Lan hit "I Love Cha Cha" from the film *Mambo Girl* (1957)—all come together in an explosion of camped-up aesthetics, transporting everyone to a more playful and indulgent time in the 1950s and 1960s (see Figure 7-1). Mismatched colors, grotesque exaggeration, stylized gestures, and gender transgressions all participate in a playful dance of defiance against the looming sense of a distant bulldozer powered by the engine of modernization and bureaucratic seriousness, ready to flatten another part of old Singapore into the fast-spreading one-dimensional society. And then the daydream abruptly comes to an end. But the human capacity for remembering and (if memory fails) imagination can promise at least a temporary escape from the estrangement characteristic of modern life.

This sentiment seems to be replayed in Tan's more experimental short film *The Blind Trilogy* (2004), which comprises three evocative works shown simultaneously on three different screens that feature a blind woman (Paige Chua) listening to sounds of nature in a leafy park, an elderly man (Soh Beow Koon) standing in the middle of

Figure 7-1: Still from *Hock Hiap Leong* (2001)

Singapore's old parliamentary chambers listening to echoes of speeches from the past, and a woman (Lucilla Teoh, who also played San San in Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys*, discussed in Chapter 6) standing in the now-disused Capitol cinema listening to echoes of traditional Chinese music and film soundtracks. Such places are steeped in rich historical and personal meanings, and Tan seems to be urging audiences to close their eyes and savor the intoxicating auditory flavors.

In Tan's short film *The Old Man and the River* (2003), a story based on the life of his uncle, he inscribes an elderly Hokkien-speaking road sweeper's personal memories and aspirations onto the broader outlines of Singapore's modern history. As the old man (Chia Tiong Guan) accompanies his young grandson (Chia Yi Qin) on a boat ride down the Singapore River—a familiar signifier of commerce as the lifeblood of Singapore's success—he meditates, in a voice-over narrative, on its material and metaphorical centrality. Tan presents, in stylized sequence, images of dilapidated godowns from another era, refurbished warehouses that now house popular entertainment spots, and plush high-rise hotel and shopping complexes that line the riverside: The ride down the river is a ride through time.

Although the old man's personal history—how he came to Singapore from China and worked hard to earn a living as a coolie—is very much a part of the river's history, his measured and reflective articulations in Hokkien seem to convey the sense that he is a mere spectator who can only watch the remarkable trans-

formation of Singapore's physical landscape, a reflection of its socioeconomic progress from "third world to first" (K. Y. Lee 2000). Time has left him behind to marvel in awe at how different today is from yesterday. The old man explains that the physical residues from the past are valuable because they give him the opportunity to "reminisce" and the younger generation a chance "to understand how our forefathers lived." His dialect, Hokkien, has itself been a victim of Singapore's modernization drive, which has included out-lawing the use of non-Mandarin Chinese dialects in the education system and in public broadcasting—ostensibly because of the belief that a strong command of Mandarin will enable internationally oriented Singaporeans to engage economically with the awakening giant China.

But the film is also a story about enduring love between the old man and his wife. "The love of a couple will withstand the test of time," he explains as the boat passes buildings that seem to have changed partners over the decades as the unsentimental process of urban renewal brings down one building and erects another, regard-less of their prior relationships. The river, too, seems to have changed partners—from immigrant workers of the past like himself to affluent revelers of the present. The "modern generations," the old man observes, "can never understand" the value, even the pos-sibility, of fidelity, rootedness, and a sense of home in a world in flux. He gazes at photographs of his youth while listening to a Hokkien opera melody: "In an ever-changing world, my heart still longs for the sight of home."

Like *Hock Hiap Leong*, *The Old Man and the River* dwells—in an almost zen-like fashion—on the little things: The drops from a tap, the statuesque poses and stark portraiture of ordinary people, and the sepia-toned images from another world are all anachronistic insertions into the efficient flow of contemporary experience that seem to represent a futile resistance to the passing of time and rapid change. The old man directly addresses his stories and reflec-tions to his nephew Tan, the filmmaker whose mission has been to document history as a means of preserving the past from being ravaged by the destructive forces of progress. The final scene takes place in a temple where the old man teaches his grandson how to pray, almost as if to say that hope for the future depends on hav-ing the ability to bridge the gap between the future and the spiri-tuality of the past, now threatened by rapid change.

But although the old man takes something of a critical position toward the rapid change of modernization, he—and perhaps Tan too—is nevertheless complicit with the larger forces that have driven these developments. The old man encourages his grandson to take advantage of the new opportunities that progress has presented to today's Singaporeans and to study hard in order to become a "useful citizen." In the concluding temple scene, he prays, above all, for the nation's "prosperity and peace," and only then for the happiness and prosperity of his family.

Tan constructs this film using archival footage of immigrant laborers—Singapore's forefathers—working by the riverside, the same footage that has frequently been used in 'official history' materials presented in the National Education program packaged for schools and public education more generally. Visually, the film communicates an idiom similar to that in many officially commissioned productions, including even the patriotic music video *One People, One Nation, One Singapore*, which begins with black-and-white images of laborers who "built a nation with our hands." In fact, the film's beautiful cinematography juxtaposing images of old and ultra-modern Singapore could easily serve the purposes of Singapore's tourism promotion efforts (see Figure 7-2), which have frequently advertised the modern city's ability to offer convenience to the affluent traveler as well as an aestheticized experience of its traditional Asian heritage that can be enjoyed from a safe and sanitized vantage point. The old man's boat ride can, in real life, be experienced on one of the many safe and sanitized commercial rides tailored for tourists.

Figure 7-2: Still from *The Old Man and the River* (2003)

The short film was, in fact, commissioned by the state-linked National Heritage Board, and it currently enjoys an hourly screening every day at the Singapore History Museum, alongside other video productions to propagate public awareness of national vulnerabilities and confidence in the government's ability to overcome them. The appeal of *The Old Man and the River*, and indeed of *Hock Hiap Leong*, has much to do with both films' natural alignment with the local heritage and the nostalgia industry. These films critique the modernized and globalized present, but do so by producing an aestheticized image of the past for the consumption of indulgent modern Singaporeans who really have no intention whatsoever of 'going back' to the hard life of labor by the river, or to the dirty and smelly coffee shops that have been replaced by brightly lit and characterless air-conditioned 'food courts.'

Globalization of Talent and Standards: Local vs. Foreign

Especially since the mid-1980s, Singapore has been strategizing to become a global city through which goods, services, money, people, ideas, and tastes may flow in complex, sometimes indiscriminate, ways. Singaporeans have had to come to terms with, on the one hand, the desperate need to expand the country's scarce resources and limited markets and, on the other, the nationalistic tendencies of a people who feel that their identity, value system, and personal life chances are increasingly coming under threat from foreign (read mostly as 'Western') influences. The government's overall strategy has been to make Singapore attractive to so-called 'foreign talent,' a policy that has met with much unhappiness among Singaporeans who believe they are greatly disadvantaged in the workplace, where even 'second-rate' foreign talent is hired on disproportionately favorable terms at the expense of local talent, a dynamic that has been well-explored in Jack Neo's feature film *I Not Stupid* (2002), discussed in Chapter 5.

In the pair of short films *New York Girl* (2005) and *Careless Whisperer* (2005), Tan also plays on the popular sentiments that arise from the debates surrounding foreign talent and global standards in Singapore. The title *New York Girl* refers to Karen (Karen Khoo), a Chinese actress who comes to Singapore from America for an audition interview. Karen rambles on throughout the course of the

film, and reveals hilarious ironies and self-contradictions that serve to gratify audiences looking for just the kind of dramatized evidence that would confirm their prejudices against foreigners who are fake, superficial, dishonest, and certainly interested only in taking talent-starved Singapore for an expensive ride.

Karen's eagerness to become an actress (a job that requires one to pretend to be someone else) and her many poor attempts to demonstrate different accents—British, French, Japanese, Singlish—during the audition point toward her superficiality. In fact, at the start of her audition, she admits knowing that "if you have an accent, you can come to Singapore and do whatever you want, and you'll definitely get it." Her own American accent is inconsistent and phony, and it certainly grates on the ear, particularly when she disparages other people who try to put on accents but, in her opinion, fail at it. Tan himself has admitted that he finds "educated people" who like to "twang and slang when they talk" to be "very irritating" (R. Tan 2005b, 2005a). Karen also manages to disparage other Asians who have attempted to break into Hollywood: Lucy Liu is "slitty-eyed," Jacky Chan is a "performing monkey," and Singaporean actress Fann Wong needs to improve her English ("English is the first language in Singapore, right?"). To avoid being permanently typecast in America as an Asian prostitute or waitress, the New York girl comes to Singapore:

> I wanna do big things … but there's no point if you go to America and you do that little bit, but the thing is I have to start somewhere, so that's why I'm here in Singapore.

New York Girl works by getting the strongly opinionated Karen to contradict herself, and demonstrate her own hypocrisy and superficial self-knowledge. She despises people who learn accents from watching television; but in an unstable American accent, she proudly shows off her knowledge of celebrity gossip and soap opera story lines that she learnt from television. One moment, she feigns disgust at how soap opera actors make artificial transitions from one emotion to another as if programmed to do so like machines; another moment, she passionately declares, "Act, act, act … that's all I ever want to do with my life." In fact, the entire audition is a one-woman melodramatic soap opera act, in which she switches consciously and unconsciously from one accent to another, and then builds to a teary climax when she reveals that her ambition to suc-

ceed as a great actress is driven by a desire to look after her mother's well-being … but also to alleviate unhappiness and suffering in the world! She wants to be an "Asian Wonder Woman": The image of an Asian woman bound up in a kitschy costume constructed from the red, white, blue, stars, and stripes of the American flag suggests a ridiculous rootlessness and depthlessness that Tan appears to be critiquing in the film (see Figure 7-3).

Figure 7-3: Still from *New York Girl* (2005)

Careless Whisperer begins with a campy prologue in which the audience is told that

> what many Singaporeans think is the proper way of speaking English, the fake Caucasian slang [meaning accent], has been officially included in the official list of mental diseases [compiled by the fictitious "Singapore Institute for Mental Hygiene"].

In the scene, a whip-cracking dominatrix dressed as a nurse decides if the accents of two men strapped to chairs are acceptable, and then uses corrective chemicals to treat the one with a fake Caucasian accent. The scene—which presumably reflects Tan's own views about local authenticity and global fakeness—switches abruptly to the main part of the story about Patrick (Patrick Khoo), a secu-

rity guard who falls in love with Pinky (Lee Liping Jane), whom he meets at work. She hardly notices him, but her effect on him is like a chemical reaction that Patrick cannot ignore—his world is full of imaginary butterflies. His friends all goad him on to court Pinky by singing her a song. He practices his barely audible singing everywhere, and then meets up with Pinky at a park to serenade her. She is unimpressed, insults him, and leaves in a disgusted huff. Disappointed, Patrick bursts into a camped-up song-and-dance number: "If you can only see, deep inside of me, you'll never have to fear, my love."

It would seem at first that Tan is performing a simple critique of superficial people who judge others on surface qualities and talents when what should really matter is what lies "deep inside of me," the authentic self. In real life, the actor Patrick Khoo had auditioned to take part in the *Singapore Idol* competition, the local version (as discussed in Chapter 3) of the phenomenally successful US television program *American Idol*. The audition episodes of *Singapore Idol* featured Patrick, an earnest young man whose rendition of George Michael's "Careless Whisper" was too soft to even be heard by the much-displeased Singaporean judges. Like the grotesque William Hung in *American Idol*, Patrick—dubbed the Careless Whisperer—functioned in *Singapore Idol* as a shameless target of ridicule and an 'alternative' contestant that anti-*Idol* viewers could back and through whom they would unwittingly lend support to the moneymaking show.

Pinky represents the disgusted judges (and also viewers) on *Singapore Idol*, and Patrick's falling in love (chemical reaction and butterfly hallucinations) represents the way many Singaporeans, egged on by their friends and family, lost their sense of reality when the opportunity to become a pop star was presented to them through the competition: As the narrator explains, "Like any victim hit by the cupid's arrow, love pushes you forward sometimes where you do not want to go." Delusional Singaporeans were being set up for a fall—invited to come on television to be humiliated for the cruel pleasure of audiences who mocked and laughed, guilt-free, from the safety of their homes. The film could be read as a critique of the way that Singapore, lacking creativity, uncritically mimics foreign (or, in this case, American) values, standards, and models of commercial success—"Singapore's very own *American Idol*!"—at the expense of its own people's well-being and authentic concerns. Tell-

ingly, the film contains a brief segment that makes literal reference to an actual television advertisement in Singapore for a New Zealand brand of milk powder that memorably stated how New Zealand had as many cows as Singapore had people. Singaporeans, Tan seems to be saying, are easily led by their nose-rings, unthinkingly embracing false notions of global standards to which all must conform, and through which heartless cruelty might be inflicted on their own countrymen for profit.

Taken together, *Careless Whisperer* and *New York Girl* might be making a comment about the way 'genuine' and 'sincere' Singaporeans have to measure up to insensitive global standards that overlook their authentically good qualities, while foreigners with the right qualities, no matter how fake or superficial, will be highly regarded in Singapore and given the top jobs. In an ironic gesture, Karen's audition, with all its flaws and contradictions, ends successfully as she performs the same song that Patrick sings at the end of his disastrous 'audition' for Pinky's affections: "If you can only see, deep inside of me, you'll never have to fear, my love." Patrick, the loser, really means what he sings, but Karen, who puts on a show, succeeds in impressing her prospective employers, proving that "if you have an accent, you can come to Singapore and do whatever you want, and you'll definitely get it."

While the two films are critical of a tendency in Singapore to value the superficial foreign over the authentic local, they are nevertheless complicit in sustaining some of these prejudices. For instance, *Careless Whisperer* could be interpreted as a second mockery, continuing to exploit the ridiculously entertaining Patrick, his grotesque lack of talent, and his unbelievable inability to recognize this lack. The spectacle of William Hung was profitable for the American popular culture industry—just as the (mimicked) spectacle of careless whisperer Patrick was able to manufacture the necessary interest to sustain viewership figures for *Singapore Idol*, and then continue to generate interest in Tan's film, which features Patrick. *Careless Whisperer* criticizes, and yet also relies for its appeal on, the way Singaporeans derive pleasure from ridiculing the local 'freak' for foolishly daring to measure himself by internationally 'unrealistic' standards. Tan describes his motivation in suspiciously simple terms, saying that the Careless Whisperer's "singing moved me in a very personal way and I wanted to show that ordinary people can also be celebrities" (S. Loh 2004). And yet his parody

of *Singapore Idol*—a somewhat postmodern exercise in what cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon has described as "complicitous critique" (Hutcheon 1989)—both distances itself *and* quotes from, criticizes *and* reinstalls (perhaps even gains from) the powerful exploitative logic of the singing competition, all in a thoroughly self-conscious way.

Human Relationships and the Family

An important part of the PAP government's nation-building efforts has been the attempt to forge national values out of an imagined, even invented, Asian cultural heritage. Top-down efforts to 'preserve' the 'positive' aspects of traditional Asian culture—aspects that support the modern capitalist economy organized by an authoritarian administration—have taken the form of a Speak Mandarin campaign, a Confucianization campaign, and an Asian values campaign, among others. Moral panics have regularly been raised—often initiated by the government itself—over the danger of losing 'authentic' cultural and moral bearings within the inescapable conditions of globalization, but mainly Westernization. This has been part of a strategy to promote values conducive to capitalism, and to discard values that threaten or challenge the authoritarian culture (including the PAP government's moral authority) that supports capitalist institutions, practices, and interests. Beneath the rhetoric, there is nothing particularly 'Asian' about these values.

Since the early 1990s, the government has formally upheld the family as the basic unit of society through its officially codified Shared Values. In the 1980s, Singapore's 'miracle' growth as an Asian 'tiger economy' was often explained in cultural terms: The patriarchal Asian family, in which respect for authority and community were nurtured, promoted cohesion, diligence, and thrift—all conducive to economic growth and development. Over the decades, projecting an image of a strong community- and family-centered Singaporean society, and contrasting this with images of a degenerate 'West' where community and the family institution were described as suffering a decline, enabled the government to establish Singapore's moral superiority, and therefore its own moral authority to govern with strong and wide powers. At the same time, any internal or external pressures for political liberalization were con-

veniently dismissed along with other 'undesirable' influences of the West. To maintain its moral authority and prevent the erosion of the image of stable Asian communities and families in Singapore, the government—it could reasonably be assumed—would welcome works of art and popular culture that depict Singaporean communities and families in a positive light. Popular sitcoms such as *Under One Roof* do so, as discussed in Chapter 4. But if there are depictions of unstable or unhappy communities and families in Singapore, then the explanations for these should point toward the negative influences of the West, and certainly never the consequences of the government's own modernization policies.

Several of Tan's films appear to challenge—without blaming 'Westernization'—the image of stable and happy Asian families, presenting tragic accounts of modern families that cannot adequately deal with intergenerational problems, largely the problem of communication. More generally, human relationships in Tan's films often suffer from communication breakdown, irreconcilable differences, separation, and an unfulfilled longing for reconnection. In *24 Hrs* (2002), for instance, Tan conveys disengagement through the polyphonic interplay of multiple media of communication: written English text on the left side of the screen, Korean advertisements (images and muffled sound) on a television set on the right side of the screen, Korean voice-overs at the start and end of the film, and evocative guitar and violin music throughout. In this story of hopeless love, a strong emotional connection between an English speaker (presumably Tan himself) and a Korean speaker cannot survive the failure of verbal communication: "I wish you understand my language. You did not understand a word at all." This disengagement leads to frustration, then resignation, then separation, all within the course of a 24-hour meeting. Another short film, *Monkeylove* (2005), depicts a heartbroken man dressed as a monkey (the late Hiroaki Muragishi) living on the snowy streets and in the back alleys of a Japanese mountainside town, pining for his lover, whose name and face he cannot even remember (see Figure 7-4). All he has left of this nebulous yet compelling memory is a 'made-in-China' cigarette lighter. In one scene, the audience discovers that the lighter was given to him by an encaged Royston Tan dressed in his signature rabbit costume. Tan self-consciously inserts himself into the film's narrative as both the object of the

monkey's longing as well as a sympathetic filmmaker attempting to capture this longing on film.

Figure 7-4: Still from *Monkeylove* (2005)

In his experimental short film *Jesses* (1999), the manic title character (Sean Lam), wearing a gas mask, runs around the city frantically and frenetically in search of his missing yellow shirt—the only colored object in this black-and-white film. Tan seems to be arguing that contemporary life, saturated with materialism and pragmatism, dehumanizes and decenters the individual to the point of obsession, desperation, and madness. The audience can barely discern the subject as he moves at accelerated speed within a convoluted world of metal pipes and cables, encountering not people but undressed dolls animated by a carousel. Curators Michael Lee and Tang Ling Nah observe that this film

> reflects an extremely violent response to the loss of material attachment. More significantly, it suggests the instinct of human beings to seek interpersonal connections, and when they fail to do so, to substitute with material pursuits or to connect through the use of objects. (Lee and Tang 2003, 11-12)

Clearly, the fetishized yellow shirt stands for the absence of any meaningful purpose in a life that is motivated almost entirely by the relentless pursuit of a vacuous goal.

Tan has observed that

in Singapore, everyone is so detached from their close ones; we create a little fence to protect ourselves, and the danger is that we don't know what we are protecting ourselves against. (R. Tan 2005a)

Several of his films deal with the theme of non-communication and estrangement within the family. In *Sons* (2000), Tan presents what appears to be an irreparable relationship between a working-class father (Chai Cheng Duan) and his adult son (Joseph Sim), both of whom experience hardship in their lives. Father and son occupy a common space, but they seem to live in separate worlds. They strike statuesque poses, often staring out into nothing, never looking at or speaking to each other. While long takes suggest the slow and agonizing passing of time, closeup and medium-range shots present meticulously composed and crowded frames to suggest claustrophobia and a profound sense that there is no way out. The evocative and highly stylized film combines nostalgic visuals—an old-fashioned house constructed in the Peranakan style (Peranakans are descended from early Chinese settlers in the Malay archipelago, many of whom married native Malays), all washed in blue-grey tones—and emotive background music dominated by the *erhu* (Chinese stringed instrument) as well as the father's poetically narrated Hokkien voice-over.

In a confessional tone, the father confides in the audience and relates his feelings of guilt, regret, and grief, taking much of the blame for the way things have turned out, but not giving excuses to exonerate himself. Over funereal images of an older generation burying their young, the father's voice laments, "I will never know my son" and "a broken mirror cannot be mended" (see Figure 7-5). Nevertheless, he is taunted by memories of a happier past—the only non-static images in the film are of his son, then a young boy (Maximillian Er) in school uniform running carefree with a kite flying joyously in the air. Every attempt that the father makes to reconcile with his son fails. Every morning, he makes his son breakfast; his son walks right past him without even a greeting. He lovingly prepares dinner; his son comes home late and eats instant noodles. As tears stream from the eyes of the sleeping son, the father watches helplessly, without even the faintest idea of what might be troubling his son so much. The title of the film, *Sons*, takes the plural form to indicate that the father was once also a son who could not relate to his own father. The film seems to theorize the

Figure 7-5: Still from *Sons* (2000)

father-son relationship in terms of human estrangement, a tragi-
cally proportioned cycle from which there seems to be no escape.

Tan dedicates this film to his "beloved father"; to his mother, he
dedicates another very emotional film, *Mother* (2002). In this film,
a montage of scenes from a grainy home video with a Mandarin
voice-over read by an adult male persona (Darren Thng) presents
a complex mother-son relationship. Basically, this is the voice of a
grown-up son who reflects on his childhood relationship with his
mother as he makes his way home years after running away from
her to start a new life. The son's confessional words, addressed to
his mother but meant for audiences' ears, form a curious mixture
of sadness and self-indulgence, but not necessarily of regret or apol-
ogy for how he once behaved. He remembers his mother as some-
one who protected him from the criticism and accusations of oth-
ers, as someone who encouraged him in spite of his failures, but
also as someone who embarrassed him by the clothes she wore and
the house they lived in (see Figure 7-6). In his fatherless childhood,
mother and home are depicted as simple, pure, safe, even redemp-
tive, but too plain and suffocating for him. In a classic transition
from village to city, he leaves home to lead a hedonistic life filled
with drugs and sexual liberality. The protagonist's mother, he claims,
was in denial about his vaguely implied homosexuality, unable to
accept that he was "different from other boys." Upon his return,
he tells his mother that "the world I know is different from
yours."

The coupling of a self-sacrificial mother and ungrateful son has
universal resonance. The deliberately simple and repetitive rhe-

You celebrated my birthday every year.

Figure 7-6: Still from *Mother* (2002)

torical structure in the narration not only gives the film a poetic and reflective quality, but also sets up an effective contradiction between mother and son, a contradiction that does not resolve even with the homecoming, when he says, with a tinge of tragedy in his voice, that he had "seen all that I needed to see, but I did not see you Mum." Although both *Sons* and *Mother* might seem to challenge positive images of the Asian family in Singapore, the tone of regret in these two cautionary tales (more acute in *Sons* than in *Mother*) could at the same time be conveying to the audience the importance of trying to overcome intergenerational estrangement within the family so as to attain higher levels of human understanding and happiness. The two films are part of a film showcase that Tan is regularly invited to present at local schools as part of their assembly programs. At every session, tearful schoolchildren are visibly moved by these films that seem to connect emotionally with their own experiences at home. One of the participants at a 'cinema-therapy' workshop organized in Singapore for family life education explained how watching *Sons* during the workshop gave him new insight into his own father's world, so much so that he began after that to spend more time communicating with his father "instead of assuming he does not care" (Raman 2006).

Tan's second feature film, *4:30* (2006), a film that critic Ong Sor Fern believes "marks a maturation in Tan's storytelling" (Ong 2006b), continues to explore fractured family relationships, but in a way

that relies much less on sentimentality. The film, with its minimal dialogue, is about an eleven-year-old latchkey child, Xiao Wu (Xiao Li Yuan), who is left at home in a rundown apartment with an adult male Korean tenant, Jung (Kim Young Jun), while his mother is away in Beijing on business. Every morning at 4:30, Xiao Wu compulsively gets up to snoop around and steal from Jung's bedroom, eventually discovering that the lonely Korean tenant has come to Singapore in order to commit suicide. Xiao Wu's obsession with the frequently inebriated man—and the many attention-seeking pranks that Xiao Wu plays throughout the day—reflects his yearning for human contact, perhaps even for a father figure in the daily absence of familial love and any kind of compassion from the adult world. Xiao Wu and Jung—different in age and culture— share a basic loneliness augmented by the alienating structures of urban living (see Figure 7-7).

Figure 7-7: Still from *4:30* (2006)

4:30 is a much quieter and more sophisticatedly structured film than Tan's *15*, a feature film (2003) that is based on his first short film (2002). The feature version is about friendships among five fifteen-year-old boys—Shaun (Shaun Tan), Vynn (Vynn Soh), Melvin (Melvin Chen), Erick (Erick), and Armani (Melvin Lee)—who are always getting into trouble with the school authorities and the law. Like *Sons* and *Mother*, *15* appears to contain loosely autobiographical elements. In a short voice-over at the beginning of the film, Tan himself explains how

> I only wanted to make a film about their lives. However, during the process of filming, I reconcile with a part of myself that was forgotten.

In *15*, Tan explores the complex interplay between violent behavior and a sense of vulnerability, between toughness and tenderness, as the three boys grapple with questions of friendship, loyalty, and betrayal. Alienated from the school system, the boys—covered in tattoos and body piercing—turn to one another for support, spouting a heady mix of vulgarities and gangster chants. Theirs is a world of neglectful and abusive parents, petty theft, pornography, prostitution, gang fights, and drug trafficking—a world that stands in stark contrast to the disciplined society and clean-and-green city that the authorities anxiously project to Singaporean voters and foreign tourists, investors, and talent.

In the first segment, Melvin and Vynn decide to perform in their school concert, ostensibly to make a mockery of the event by singing in Hokkien and swearing at the school principal. This is their way of shouting out their frustration, so as to be heard by a mainstream system that has silenced them by labeling them as failures and delinquents, as people for whom there is no place in the official rhetoric of success and orderliness. While rehearsing their gangster chants, they worry about the prospect of messing up the performance and being compared unfavorably with the more academically able students in the school. Here is an ambivalence that results from being both apart from and yet a part of the system and its harsh and compelling logic. In another segment, Shaun and Erick confront some English-speaking students who are abusing a stray cat: "Your education hasn't given you any ethics?" The students reply:

> At least we speak better English! Chinese hooligans … These are the kind of people the government spend millions on courtesy campaigns for. And it all goes to waste!

The exchange leads to a gang fight in an underground tunnel and one of the students is taught a severe lesson for daring to insult Shaun and Erick.

The veneer of toughness hides a basic insecurity; this toughness works as a safety net to protect the boys from the kind of humiliation they have had to face as failures in the system. When confronted with the very real prospect of failing his mathematics test and being chased out of his own home as a result, Melvin contemplates suicide, an idea he gets from the proliferation in Singapore of student suicides that he hears about and sees with his own

eyes. He does in fact fail the test, and is chased out of the house. Vynn gives him shelter and consolation, and learns how Melvin longs for a warm and loving family. Another character, Armani, also plans to commit suicide, and enlists the help of Shaun and Erick to find the ideal building from which to jump. He wants "the whole of Singapore to know of my death and see how I die," an ironic plea for a dramatic death that will get him noticed in a one-dimensional society whose regimented and competitive system has killed off the anarchic spirit of youth.

15 captures simple moments that lead the audience to sympathize with these boys, not as violent thugs but as vulnerable teenagers who only have one another for emotional support. Shaun asks if he can hug Vynn, and the boys fall asleep in each other's arms. Melvin carefully soothes Vynn's back after he gets a painful tattoo on it (see Figure 7-8). Melvin cannot hold back his tears when Vynn spends what little money he has on a birthday cake for Melvin. Melvin rests his head on Vynn's shoulder as they travel by train. They talk coyly about each other's sexual experiences. Shaun and Erick have a penis-size competition to decide whose turn it is to smuggle in some drugs from Malaysia. They both simulate sexual activity by sandwiching a blow-up doll. In a drug-induced state, they gently blow smoke into each other's mouths. The homoerotic subtext is clear and poignant, even though Tan, in an interview with the author, explains that these references are not intended to be sexual but are really just depictions of the "beautiful" situation of "two souls getting connected with each other" (R. Tan 2005a).

Figure 7-8: Still from *15* (feature film) (2003)

The film also succeeds in providing the audience with an op-
portunity to view the lives of these boys through subcultural lens-
es. The use of MTV-style cartoons and Playstation graphics during
the fight segments gives the audience an insight into the way teen-
agers might understand and respond to violence. The grungy cuts
from one scene to another—and in fact the loosely organized nar-
rative structure itself—also reflect the short-term orientation of
teenagers, and why they might regard regimented school life as
boring. The music and dance styles, including J-pop, set to gangster
chants also take the audience directly into the world of the Singa-
porean teenager.

Like *Sons* and *Mother*, *15* presents a challenge to the ideal image
of Singaporean society, showing up the hidden and grungier side
of a system that prides itself on meritocracy and academic excel-
lence of international standing. The rigid, stressful, narrowly aca-
demic, and unforgiving education system—that only now is in the
process of changing—has for decades been the site of alienation
for a number of young people who fall into a vicious cycle of fail-
ure, crime, and possibly suicide. Jack Neo's *I Not Stupid* (2002) and
I Not Stupid Too (2006), discussed in Chapter 5, also explore this
theme, but through a satirical mode that differs profoundly from
Royston Tan's. *15* exposes the "hidden underclass" that writer Kyle
Minor has described as the "undereducated Mandarin-speaking
caste, separated from the English-speakers in a bizarre 'merit-based'
intellectual apartheid" (Minor 2004). This is a side of Singapore
that the authorities would rather people did not see. But Tan insists
on vandalizing Singapore's smug public image by revealing how
his fifteen-year-olds have vandalized the polite society that ignores
them. To the government's complaints that he is "showing Singa-
pore's dirty laundry for all the world to see," Tan has responded,
"if you [the government] clean the linen, you won't have to see it
anymore," a challenge to the government's carefully cultivated re-
cord of achievement (quoted in Mollman 2003).

When Tan made the feature-length version of *15* in 2003, the
state censors—Tan has claimed—called for the removal of 27 ob-
jectionable elements in the film (including a closeup of a boy's 17-
centimeter penis). The Media Development Authority, however,
claims that there were only nine cuts, citing the promotion of gang-
ster activity as the main justification for censorship. Perhaps the
censors agreed with the advice of the police that hearing gangster

chants in a cinema would spark conflicts among real-life rival gangs, and therefore be a threat to national security (*Guardian Unlimited* 2004). Perhaps the censors believed that the film promoted suicide as a valid, easy, romanticized, and appealing way out for youths in trouble. Perhaps the censors believed that the film would not only promote sympathy for disruptive youth, but also glamorize truancy, swearing, violence, drug abuse, and self-mutilation in a wholesome Asian city state where a sense of moral righteousness underpins the moral authority of the government to rule with wide and deep powers. Tan was giving a voice to the marginalized in an affluent society whose government has denied that anyone or any group has ever been deliberately marginalized.

Social and Political Activism

In an interview with journalist Tan Dawn Wei, Royston Tan expresses his concern about the next generation of Singaporeans, whom he regards as robotic and not able "to think for themselves," admitting that he "was a converted robot and … know[s] how it feels" (D. W. Tan 2006). Elsewhere, citing cyberpunk fiction writer William Gibson's description of Singapore as "Disneyland with the death penalty" (Gibson 1993), Tan shudders at the thought of just how engineered Singaporeans have become, to the point of losing their "primary human instincts" (R. Tan 2005b). Like Disneyland, Singapore achieves happiness for its people by creating theme-park lives where danger and success are stage-managed like roller-coaster rides, and where a consumerist obsession for the surface and the material removes the drive to think more deeply, critically, and politically. Politics, it seems, are redundant—even dangerous—in utopia. Those who cannot conform are either silenced or spoken for by technocrats who try to recast them into the narrative of this utopian fiction. Described as an artist with a "strong social conscience" (Fawziah Selamat 2004) and a "hero to the city's independent artists" (Khoo 2004), the non-conformist Tan has used his filmmaking talents for social and political activism, helping to raise awareness of discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS in the television documentary *48 on AIDS* (2002) and advocating artistic freedom in his satirical short film *Cut* (2004).

Funded, supported, and broadcast by Channel NewsAsia, *48 on AIDS* is Tan's documentary-style film in which 48 people filmed in black-and-white at 48 different locations give their views on AIDS and people who are HIV-positive. Those interviewed include Singaporean celebrities, social workers, HIV/AIDS patients, and people who know or live with them. As a public education film meant for television broadcast, *48 on AIDS* articulates the facts and fictions that have evolved around the disease, particularly through the views and prejudices that circulate in society. More important than the way the film lays out the facts, however, is the way in which it puts a human face to the disease: people who are deeply affected by the disease and people who are taking active steps to control it. This humanization is significant in the way it sensitizes audiences to the deeply human dimensions of the HIV/AIDS tragedy. The film also raises the profile of people who are driven by compassion and determination to deal with this highly complex problem. The film can inspire audiences to reexamine their prejudices, come forward to help in the effort, and find support and resources to deal with HIV/AIDS at many different levels. In this sense, the film can be considered a work of social activism.

Stylistically, the film also manages literally to "put a face to AIDS" by keeping to static, mostly closeup portrait and statuesque shots of interviewees usually in contemplative poses, and sometimes with their own thoughts expressed in a voice-over. The long takes force the audience to dwell on every word that is spoken. The reflective style also manages to convey the dignity, strength, and determination with which these interviewees come forward to talk about this very personal and also controversial issue. The entire film is in black-and-white, except for the words "AIDS" and "virus," which are presented in red to signify the topical centrality of the disease as well as its dangers. With the introduction of each new interviewee, a vertical light moves across the screen from left to right, or right to left, as if to 'scan' them as one might scan people for diseases.

Like many of Tan's films, *48 on AIDS* feels like a series of extremely well-composed photographs, placed in dramatic sequence. In framing his subjects, Tan very skillfully captures highly suggestive details that resonate with the ideas or sentiments that are being articulated. For instance, a woman admitting that she would

be scared to let a person with AIDS stay with her, stands next to
stacked-up rows of durians (a prickly Asian fruit) for sale (see Fig-
ure 7-9): The durians not only look like cartoon images of an army
of deadly viruses, they can also signal danger to those rushing to
enjoy the sweet flesh contained within the thorny shell—a reference
to unprotected sex, infection, and death.

The topic of AIDS scares me.

Figure 7-9: Still from *48 on AIDS* (2002)

The film is critical—and therefore political—on two main fronts.
The first identifies society's ignorance and prejudices that continue
to condemn people with HIV/AIDS as wrongdoers who are being
punished for their transgressions, as sinful people who have too
much sex or the wrong kind of sex and, in both cases, sex with
too many different people. The fact that there are 'innocent' victims
of HIV/AIDS does not necessarily reduce the tendency to blame.
The film makes a statement against society's tendency to impose
a 'death sentence' on those who have contracted HIV/AIDS, or
worse, to make the remainder of their lives a virtual death.

The second criticism, less strident perhaps than the first, points
to the government's failure to help make affordable for Singaporeans
with HIV/AIDS the exorbitant anti-retroviral HIV medication
needed to extend their lives. The multinational pharmaceutical
manufacturers, understandably driven by the profit motive, keep
the prices of these drugs high, but no subsidy is provided by the
government. The only way some patients can afford the medication

is to smuggle in generic drugs from neighboring, usually less-developed, countries where they are locally produced at affordable prices. One interviewee in the film, whose entire family of four has been infected with AIDS, hopes that the "government can assist us in some ways." A second interviewee declares in helpless frustration,

> I hold a good job, I don't have any bad habits, I love my family, I love my wife, but when I'm sick, why isn't the government providing me with ample assistance?

Tan, here, gives voice to the marginalized: the innocent victims whose fates cannot be so easily explained away as moral retribution, whose genuine need for help cannot simply be denied by recourse to moralistic justifications based on inhumane notions of personal responsibility. The film calls into question the 'community' that 'Asian' Singapore values and its government upholds—one built not on compassion, but on judgmental cruelty.

Singapore's evolving arts community has had to work around state controls exercised through selective funding support, straightforward censorship, and even a Films Act (Chapter 107) that criminalizes makers of "party political films," a frighteningly vague category. Tan criticizes the practice and institution of censorship in his film *Cut*, a satirical work that showcases his unusually sarcastic and hilarious side. The film begins with a prudishly dressed film censor (Neo Swee Lin) picking out phallic-shaped vegetables at a supermarket, which suggests perhaps that censors are sexually repressed individuals who hypocritically take out their frustrations on others through their censorious behavior. A passionate film buff (Jonathan Lim) bumps into her, and immediately interrogates and accuses her as she tries to get her shopping done. In a witty, sarcastic, and rapid-fire style, the Singlish-speaking man recites a litany of films that have suffered from censorship in Singapore, managing also to work in some familiar arguments against censorship as well as rebuttals to arguments in favor of censorship. The film buff claims that the Singapore censors cut out scenes that are vital to the integrity of the films, including award-winning and critically acclaimed ones. They also censor scenes that are important to the coherence of the narrative and vital to the genre, for instance, scary and gory scenes in horror films. The censors, moreover, do a very poor job of editing the films, which adversely affects

aesthetic enjoyment. He asks why Singaporeans cannot be expect-
ed to take responsibility for their own viewing: "Don't like, don't
watch *lah*!"

The film buff then deals with the 'bad influence arguments,' by
asking if the censor thinks that he would turn into a lesbian if he
watched lesbians kissing on film. He also asks if she would turn
into a lesbian if she, as a censor, had to watch such scenes. The
argument then turns to the question of "who looks after [the cen-
sors'] moral welfare?" since "we are very fortunate to have [them]
to protect us from the evils of the arts." He asks how censors cope
with the hatred that so many Singaporeans direct toward them, but
then points out that the video piracy business in neighboring Ma-
laysia is booming because Singaporeans have to look north for their
uncut entertainment.

As she wheels her trolley toward her car, the verbal sarcasm and
wit suddenly turn into an explosion of camp—reminiscent of *Hock
Hiap Leong*—that adopts, as a mode of comic resistance to the
power of bureaucratic seriousness and self-importance, an over-the-
top expression of transgressions in taste, propriety, and gender. The
camped-up musical segment is performed in the car park at a point
in the road where the word "STOP" is painted (see Figure 7-10),
indicating how the Singapore censors have hindered the progress
of the arts community. Garishly costumed dancers and scantily
dressed "go-go boys" join well-known members of the Singapore
arts community in cameo parts to perform this medley of familiar
songs whose lyrics have been reworked to criticize the practice of
censorship in Singapore. For instance, the words of the patriotic
song "We Are Singapore" are reworked as:

> They said in time that Singaporeans make their own decisions
> They were wrong, they were wrong
> They said in *Newsweek* our public is discerning in its viewing
> Wait long long, wait long long
> We've built a nation, quick to judge
> But when it comes to morals we need that formal nudge …

And the ABBA hit "Thank You for the Music" is reworked as

> Thank you, Board of Censors, I really owe you
> How I wish, they all could know you
> Know how hard you've struggled
> To keep my conscience so free, choosing for me
> Without your slice of advice, what are we?

> So I say thank you, Board of Censors
> For giving your PG [Parental Guidance rating].

Cut is clearly borne out of the filmmaker's frustration at the way the Board of Film Censors mangled his award-winning feature film *15*—"I channeled my anger and frustration into [*Cut*] … if you can't solve a problem you have to laugh it off" (quoted in Rose 2004). Tan, speaking through the film buff character in *Cut*, rants about the inconsistency between wanting to develop the local arts scene and subjecting local films to the worst levels of censorship (Ong and Young 2004).

> How about our Singaporean film *15* directed by that street gang leader Royston Tan? Cannot remember right? 27 cuts! I'm so proud of you, your highest record so far.

According to Tan, "trying to enact censorship out of paranoia does more harm than good. Censorship closes the door on debate" (quoted in *Taipei Times* 2004). Through biting sarcasm and a momentary release of erotic energies from the constraints of bureaucratic seriousness, *Cut* can be read as the filmmaker's act of revenge. The film is also highly cathartic for the arts community, helping to vent its collective frustrations and to purge its emotional tensions. Tan—in a caption placed after the end-credits—claims that 2,000 people participated in the film, and indeed the thunderous applause that the author observed after its screening at the opening of the 2004 Singapore International Film Festival attested to the emotional connection it enjoys with frustrated artists in Singapore. In this way, the film has managed to help build social capital within the arts community, with Tan conspicuously at the forefront.

Figure 7-10: Still from *Cut* (2004)

Resistance, Complicity, Collaboration, Co-optation?

Royston Tan, in an interview with the author, claims that

> I really never try to oppose the government in any way because I think
> I'm not intelligent enough to do so. Honestly speaking, I'm just voicing
> out certain things that I feel. But I do agree that when you try to make
> things difficult for me to survive as an artist, I produce the most amazing
> piece of work, and that can be seen in films like *Cut*. (R. Tan 2005a)

Cut is perhaps Tan's only film that confronts a specific government
policy, but this is achieved through the use of sarcasm, parody, and
camp aesthetics. Queer theorist Fabio Cleto describes how the "fun
and exclusiveness" of camp, as demonstrated in *Cut* and *Hock Hiap
Leong*, are constituted by "[r]epresentational excess, heterogeneity,
and *gratuitousness* of reference" (Cleto 1999, 3). But this exclusive
inwardness does not prevent *Cut* from rendering the powerful help-
less in the face of collective taunting. Instead of laughing it off and
showing himself to be much bigger than the joke, the arts minister
stated that he was not amused by this irresponsible gesture, a move
that drew even more critical laughter. Tan's film allows him to play
the 'court jester' who is unafraid to speak the truth to those in
power—he has claimed that he "would rather be punished for tell-
ing the truth, than not telling it and being a hypocrite" (quoted in
Lloyd-Smith 2004). As a resistant film, *Cut* has—through its satiri-
cal edge—produced a cathartic effect that might actually result in
conservative outcomes: By helping to purge his audiences' frustra-
tions with censorship, the film actually enables them to leave the
cinema feeling more able psychologically to cope with—rather than
to resist through action—the political constraints they face.

His other films have also challenged official images of Singapore
as sanitized, safe, orderly, community-oriented, family-centered,
modern, progressive, cosmopolitan, and therefore tourist-friendly,
seeking instead to foreground more authentically local experiences
that might not be so glossy or pleasant. Some of these films defy
the blandness and predictability of Singapore's modernity with
playfulness, irreverence, and imagination. Some of these films try
to give voice to the marginalized in Singapore society, and can
therefore be considered a form of activism for social justice. Tan
has said that filmmaking in Singapore should concentrate on the
problems of identity, but "it remains to be seen whether we … have

the courage and open-mindedness to look beyond petty issues like maintaining our image" (quoted in *SGezine* 2003).

Yet, it would be incomplete to describe Tan only as an artist who stands against the grain of his society and its politics. His films have in some ways been complicit with the institutions and the processes that he wants to critique. For instance, *The Old Man and the River* was commissioned by the state as part of its effort in the areas of heritage, National Education, and tourism promotion. Tan has also produced, in the grungy style of *15*, a highly didactic advertisement for the national anti-drug abuse campaign. As a filmmaker who is gifted with the ability to connect with his audiences, Tan often speaks in the very same bourgeois idioms that Singaporean and overseas art film-lovers find so appealing. His films aestheticize the past, marginality, alterity, estrangement, and suffering, as much as they foreground them for challenging official images. For instance, he believes that he has become "the official spokesman for *bengs* and *lians*" (the male and female members of a mostly Chinese youth subculture usually associated with a garish fashion sense and a profanity-ridden lingo), and that Singapore "should have a museum for the culture of *ah bengs* and *lians*" (R. Tan 2005a)—a bourgeois sentiment that delights in the Otherness of the subaltern. It is certainly not out of the question to consider whether his controversial treatment of marginalized subjects is exploitative, even as Tan explains in an interview with the author that

> [i]f ever I have a secret hidden agenda, that would be to make this film a mirror for them to reflect on their lives. I do not want to tell them [the fifteen-year-old subjects] what is right or what is wrong, but just provid[e] what they have experienced on screen to let them decide for themselves. (R. Tan 2005a)

From the state's point of view, Tan's notoriety in Singapore translates into celebrity overseas in ways that might serve, ironically, to make Singapore more exciting and attractive to tourists, investors, and the creative class, and also to promote globally the Singapore brand of arts products, thereby helping the national economy to succeed. Singapore's National Arts Council did, after all, name Tan Young Artist of the Year in 2002. But Tan's notoriety stems also from his creative opposition to a secure, sanitized, and successful image of Singapore that the government relies on as evidence of

its effectiveness and therefore as justification for its nearly five de-
cades in power. As far as the government's political legitimacy is
concerned, therefore, Tan's films serve as both opportunity and
threat. Tan's international reputation, also, has benefited from the
notoriety that state censorship has endowed him with. Thus far, he
has succeeded in making himself useful to the Singapore economy
as an internationally recognized filmmaker with more than 50 awards
to his name, and in distinguishing himself as a talented artist with
a social conscience and the political will to resist the banal and
unjust.

The tensions that characterize the antagonistic yet interdependent
relationship between Royston Tan and the capitalist state must
surely be confusing, frustrating, grudging, and yet exciting for both
Tan and the bureaucrats who have to deal with him—and these
are just the kind of stimulating tensions that are potentially produc-
tive for Singapore's creative industries. In fact, Tan's third feature
film, *881* (2007), illustrates how the convergence of interests among
'adversaries' can lead to interesting, strongly local, offbeat, inter-
nationally appealing, and profitable collaborations. The five Singa-
porean partners co-investing in this film are MediaCorp's Raintree
Pictures (which is moving toward the production of regional and
global films, as discussed in Chapter 2), Eric Khoo's Zhao Wei Films
(which has been nurturing Tan for years), the Media Development
Authority (a state organ to which the Board of Film Censors be-
longs), postproduction company Infinite Frameworks, and video
entertainment distributor Scorpio East.

881 is a musical that tells the story of "The Papaya Sisters,"
who perform at the very popular *getai* (Hokkien for 'song stage')
concerts held on makeshift stages all around the Singapore heart-
lands during the Chinese 'ghost month.' Camp aesthetics—remi-
niscent of *Hock Hiap Leong* and *Cut*—are clearly in evidence as Tan
delights in the "very fanciful, strange and bizarre costumes," de-
scribing his film as "a celebration of tackiness and tacky music and
tacky fashion" (Tan, quoted in Channel NewsAsia 2007a). Tan notes,
somewhat gleefully, how *getai* concerts are often regarded as "slea-
zy" and "very low class," just the kind of setting that collides with
the postcolonial ultramodernity that Singapore officials want to as-
sociate with their hygienic global-city ideal-image (see Figure 7-11).
The official press release even describes how the "pomp and pag-
eantry is a respite from the emptiness and dreariness of [The Pa-

paya Sisters'] own lives" (Media Development Authority 2007). The press release also describes the film as a "cross between *Dancer in the Dark* and *Moulin Rouge*," a typically commercial strategy to foreground the mimetic aspects of the film as a recognizable 'brand' for international audiences who only want to see more of what they already know. But to sustain a mass audience's interest, the film must also present itself in novel terms that disguise the fakeness of its difference. To satisfy the international commercial art cinema's appetite for what film scholars Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar

Figure 7-11: Promotional poster for *881* (2007)

describe as the "'international food court' principle of identifying films by nation" (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 218), Raintree Pictures is more than happy to oblige with a healthy serving of self-exoti-

cization: Its CEO, Daniel Yun, is confident that the film "will be exotically appealing to a lot of people around the world" (Channel NewsAsia 2007b).

881 is the result of hegemonic struggles, as the competing parties (Royston Tan and the five co-investors) buy into a project that promises to meet the needs of each and leverage on one another's resources, without too much compromise. For instance, what Tan regards proudly as a queerly iconoclastic style that cheekily foregrounds the fringes of society, Yun sees as imagery that enables Singapore to package itself as an oriental product for the consumption of a fascinated audience of international commercial art cinema, and the Media Development Authority regards as Singapore's chance of finally breaking through to win an Oscar for best foreign-language film (Chan, B. 2007). While Gramscian interpretations would regard this collaboration as an 'unstable equilibrium' that requires constant ideological work to hold together, the Frankfurt School approach usefully presents the real tendency for this equilibrium to be absorbed into the logic of the culture industry in a one-dimensional society. In an interview with journalist Jeanine Tan, who described *881* a week after its release as "unabashedly commercial," it is clear that Royston Tan had his eye on the prospect of joining Jack Neo in the "exclusive 'million dollar club' of local directors" (Jeanine Tan 2007).

CONCLUSION

Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensional man thesis is a useful starting and ending point for marking out the analytical limits within which might be forged a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Singapore as an advanced capitalist society administered by an authoritarian state that has been mainly responsible for ideologically creating two antagonistic subject positions: a conservative majority of mainly Chinese-speaking working-class citizens (who have come to be labeled 'heartlanders') and a class of 'cosmopolitan' Singaporeans, and foreign investors, creative talent, and tourists on whom the aspiring global city relies to upgrade its economy.

   This book has attempted to locate locally made films and television programs within the culture industry, an increasingly important economic sector of this one-dimensional society. Although produced for mass consumption, films and television programs can—particularly in the newer intellectual, artistic, and political spaces opened up by a creative economy driven by critical thinking and innovation—still bear some elements of autonomous art which, according to Marcuse, is the Great Refusal that protests against what is, through a vision of what could or ought to be. Great art can liberate sensuousness and the erotic energies within a social order governed by technological rationality, preserve the idea of autonomy through its aesthetic form, and articulate and advance critical and revolutionary possibilities in a globalized capitalist system within which the indigenous and the national are rigidly defined and subjugated. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, however, appears to present a more pessimistic vision of how easily art can be integrated into one-dimensional society mainly through its culture industry. And in Singapore's advanced and globalized industrial society, the culture industry—even the creative economy—has become a dominant component of the country's economic development and a powerful system by which art is fundamentally transformed into highly commercialized products that support the capitalist system at so many intricate levels, not least of which is the masking of its inherent tensions and contradictions. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner observes how

> today, art's power of transcendence and negation is being dissolved, and art is being integrated into the one-dimensional society. Hence, what was once a subversive force is now "a cog in the culture machine" and an adornment to the society … Whereas art once elicited a certain respect which called for attention and critical response, today it is reduced to a familiar commodity/artifact which is part of everyday experience, which adorns and entertains but does not challenge or transcend the given society … Mass culture, in this view, forms a totality which reinforces conventional values and promotes conformist behaviour, thus becoming an increasingly important instrument of socialization. (Kellner 1984, 256)

This book has suggested that the *Singapore Idol* competition, television sitcoms and dramas, and the films of Jack Neo are typically commercial products of Singapore's culture industry, that they serve also to socialize audiences into accepting conventional values and behaving in a conformist way. *Singapore Idol*, a node in a complex global network of commercial interests, exploited contestants and audiences in order to produce a popular show loaded with lucrative advertising opportunities, a show that served as a national focus group of audiences who were not paid but instead chose to pay (through weekly telephone votes) to register their views about 'the next big thing' in an enduringly monotonous pop industry. Meanwhile, the weekly episodes—basically also monotonous—managed to extract emotional investment from audiences; and the record industry, through the judges' comments, subtly shaped their tastes to ensure that the Idol who emerged from the assembly line would be the Idol that the most number of fans would spend their money on. All the while, the show disseminated and thereby entrenched commonsense beliefs about meritocracy, democracy, the nation, and multiracialism, secured partly through the stereotyping of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Singapore's most commercially successful sitcom, *Under One Roof*, portrays family life and neighborliness in terms of a superficial understanding of human relationships and multiracialism in Singapore. The family values being promoted are deeply patriarchal ones, and the multiracial harmony being showcased is based on stereotypical notions of race and a latent sense of racial hierarchy. The subversive potential of sitcoms like *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (*PCK*) and Jack Neo's more satirical comedies, although gratifyingly cheeky at times, has nevertheless failed to escape the format of light entertainment that ultimately provides simple resolutions for every

complication that it raises, resolutions that serve to maintain and further entrench the status quo. Audiences, even according to the critical theory paradigm, are not necessarily cultural dupes who unknowingly absorb the messages disseminated through mass entertainment; but the real power of the culture industry resides in the way audiences often consciously accept the mind-numbing flow of standardized and mimetic shows, consenting to their own imbecilic subjugation for the sake of superficial pleasure at the end of a long workday and in preparation for the next.

Neo's films also demonstrate how profit-making concerns can push filmmakers to compromise the artistic integrity of their work, which allows the films to serve almost as extended advertisements for consumer products manufactured by the films' sponsors. These highly mimetic films, products of the culture industry, circulate profitably in the larger economic system, spinning off demand for and production of other consumer goods, and disseminating ultimately pro-establishment messages that help to entrench the hegemonic system in spite of the crisis tendencies that emerge from latent tensions and contradictions in the system.

While Marcuse certainly allowed for the possibility of counter-tendencies within this one-dimensional society model, it is really the Gramscian work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall that presents a useful model for identifying in popular culture the ongoing hegemonic struggles that exist in dynamic tension between the idealized poles of pure consent and total encapsulation at one end, and at the other end the pure opposition that might be idealized as pure autonomy. This approach is especially appropriate in the context of the Singapore government's conscious efforts to nurture a creative economy, promoting policies that aim to develop values such as risk-taking, critical thinking, creativity, openness, diversity, and liberalization. The articulation of 'creativity' with long-standing Old Economy concerns about urbanization (a clean, safe, and functional First World city), modernization (harnessing imagined 'traditional' Asian cultures to the needs of capitalism), and the dominance of technical rationality (technocratic-administrative control and policy-making) opens up new struggles and reopens old ones. Similarly, the express need for a climate of 'openness' creates new complications and contradictions within the thinking and policies surrounding social stability that have over the decades endeavored

to strike a politically and ideologically managed balance between stereotyped ethnic, class, gender, sexual, and youth identities; a Singaporean national identity; and a more cosmopolitan and global identity.

As deepening and more frequent cycles of economic crisis begin to erode the authoritarian government's political legitimacy, whose primary basis has been its widely believed claim to be chiefly responsible for delivering security and affluence, new economic strategies are learnt and developed: For instance, Singaporeans are told that their nation must fully connect with the global economy and be even more attractive to foreign capital and talent. These arguments, resonating strongly with those put forth by economist and urban studies theorist Richard Florida, suggest that Singapore must be more cosmopolitan and tolerant of diversity to succeed economically. But most Singaporeans, weaned on the discourse of nation, ethnicity, and Asian morality, do not completely embrace the changes that are brought by globalization, always presented to them as a *fait accompli*. To make sense of and thereby control the situation, the government has simplified the Singaporean nation by fracturing it into two ideal-typical categories: the cosmopolitans and the heartlanders. Ideologically, the government has negotiated an uneasy articulation of the languages of economic pragmatism on the one hand and moral authority on the other, as demonstrated most acutely in the fiery public debates over whether the government should allow casinos to be built in Singapore. This uneasy articulation is a weak hinge that presents the most promising opportunity for negotiation, opposition, and change, an opportunity that has not escaped the attention of the Singapore filmmakers and television producers discussed in this book.

In this more dynamic environment, it is easier to argue that television programs and films are neither purely the result of a disorganized and reorganized working-class culture that serves only to sustain the capitalist system (the first analytical limit) nor purely the result of autonomous artistic practices that preserve a totally independent sphere of art from which utopias and alternative conditions of life can be imagined free of the laws of politics, the market, and morality (the second analytical limit). Between these two limits, popular culture is the site of complex ideological articulations, which are constantly being assembled, dismantled, and

reassembled. This book has critically analyzed Singapore films and television programs within this more dynamic space, but not without taking the two analytical limits seriously.

For instance, the producers of *PCK* have yielded to the government's demands that Chu Kang—as a national role model—should speak standard English so that Singaporeans who follow his example can communicate more effectively in the international arenas; but they have argued for some degree of artistic realism that resists fully educating the working-class protagonist to speak perfect English: His continued jesting in Singlish has been an affront to the seriousness of bureaucratic control and national economic policy. The producers of *PCK* have also presented the image of a happy extended family living under one roof in line with government policies; but against the government's population policies, Chu Kang and Rosie have for many years been written as a childless couple, and therefore a poor role model for young Singaporean couples, who are expected to reproduce for the nation's economy. But *PCK*'s immense popularity with the heartlanders has also relied on the gratifying resort to stereotypes of class—emasculating, in fact feminizing, the middle-class architect Chu Beng and ridiculing his over-the-top wife and her utterly bourgeois pretensions—all in a racially homogeneous universe. At the end of each episode, the typical and rather formulaic problems that arise from class differences are easily resolved and Asian family values prevail all over again.

Jack Neo's films disarticulate the commonsense, but often grudgingly accepted, connections between economic success, globalization, and foreign talent. Through the use of unflattering stereotypes, he foregrounds the unfair advantages that foreigners and Westernized English-speaking Singaporeans seem to enjoy over the 'silent majority,' imagined as consisting of Chinese-educated and Chinese-speaking Singaporeans. Along with other unflattering stereotypes of the minority races, Neo's mimetic character portrayals present a superficial reflection of society based on taken-for-granted prejudices, and in this way provide the cultural resources for imagining the Chinese-speaking into a community—superior but marginalized in a world that is fast losing its moral and cultural bearings. As a result, Neo can be regarded as an organic intellectual who critiques a system that appears to be disadvantageous to the Chinese-speaking community, which he represents and from which he has emerged.

And yet, Neo has also been co-opted by the state as a useful celebrity and 'community leader' of sorts who is able to not only consolidate the Chinese-speaking community but help keep it under control. A central message in many of Neo's films, after all, is that the Chinese-speaking, although disadvantaged by the system, can still succeed in the capitalist economy with hard work, perseverance, and adaptability—Neo's films give them hope and a renewed faith in an essentially meritocratic system in spite of its biases, and are in that way part of the state's ideological instruments. Neo has also not been averse to capitalizing on the market, playing skillfully according to its rules in order to become a commercial success and a model citizen for Singapore's creative economy. Neo is, in fact, the most commercially successful filmmaker in Singapore and Raintree Picture's "money-making machine" (Yun, quoted in Ong 2007b); and it is no wonder then that he has also been bestowed national honors and praised by two prime ministers.

More resistant to the hegemonic formations of advanced capitalist Singapore have been the films of Eric Khoo and Royston Tan. Prior to the more life-affirming *Be with Me*, a film that interweaves fictional narratives around the real-life experiences and remarkable achievements of a courageous deaf and blind protagonist, Khoo's films were mostly constructed around dark and tragic themes of human alienation, repression, and self-destruction. As an English-speaking, overseas-educated filmmaker from an upper-class background, Khoo is the opposite of Jack Neo. His films about the pathetic lives of heartlanders excluded from or struggling to fit into the Singapore dream of personal achievement, competitiveness, upward mobility, and possessive individualism are based on the viewpoint of an 'outsider'; and indeed, Khoo is often criticized for fetishizing the miserable lives of the working class who slowly suffocate in their public housing estates and for commodifying their suffering for the consumption of fascinated bourgeois art-house audiences on festival circuits around the world. Nevertheless, even as Khoo comes close to being complicit with the logic of capitalism through which he achieves critical and perhaps even commercial success internationally, his films do collectively present perhaps the most intelligent and aesthetically sophisticated filmic critique of Singapore's one-dimensionality, forcing audiences to confront the oppressions and repressions that ordinary people often struggle with in a consumerist, image-conscious, face-saving, patriarchal, despir-

itualized, and cruel society where human relationships have become transactional, familial love has been replaced by ritual, and everyone is a time bomb waiting to explode. By retrieving and projecting this level of reality, which usually lies hidden and unacknowledged beneath the official veneer of happy heartlanders well-provided for by their government, Khoo is very clearly a social critic who negates the "happy consciousness" that Marcuse (1964/2002) observed in societies that are satisfied by the uncritical and absolute belief that the system delivers the goods.

Royston Tan's films have been more varied than Khoo's or Neo's. Many of the earlier short films especially are soaked in nostalgic sentimentality and driven by a mission to capture in his art the fast-disappearing landscape of Singapore as it races ahead toward becoming a global city. The sense of loss extends also to the mainly expressive and communicative difficulties that Singaporeans face in negotiating their human relationships, particularly within the family. But the film that Tan is probably best-known for is *15*, a notably jarring feature film (originally a short film) that digs beneath the veneer of an orderly Confucian society of high achievers to reveal a rarely acknowledged underclass of violent youth gang members whose lifestyle of aimlessness, brutality, obscenity, drugs, tattoos, and body piercing does not fit the officially favored image of polite society. Like several of Khoo's films, *15* calls into question the triumphal and moralistic accounts offered by officialdom of the government's historic role in providing all Singaporeans with everything they could possibly want, accounts that feed into the one-dimensional society that Singapore has become. By forcing audiences to confront the hidden realities of their comfortable existence, Tan, like Khoo, negates the smug, affirmative, and conformist society that he finds himself in. Tan is also well-known for his short film *Cut*, a cheekily satirical and unrestrainedly campy musical short film that he made in response to the excessive censorship that *15* suffered at the hands of Singapore's censorship board. Both films, and the stuffy reaction of Singapore's bureaucratic authorities, have endowed Tan with a notoriety from which his career has probably profited as he continues to receive international attention as an antiestablishment hero and, more importantly, the critical acclaim that continues to open up new opportunities for his filmmaking. To the authorities, Tan's notoriety is also a reason for his international celebrity, which helps to attract some international attention for

the 'Singapore brand' of arts and cultural products. His international celebrity also creates the impression that Singapore is a culturally exciting place, attractive to tourists, investors, and the creative class. Tan's relationship with the authorities has therefore been complex: both antagonistic and mutually dependent.

Although it is certainly productive, especially in the present political and socioeconomic climate in Singapore, to adopt a Gramscian analytical framework that identifies ideological struggles (oppositions, resistances, negotiations, articulations, rearticulations, and so on) in the selected television programs and films, this book nevertheless maintains the importance of a Marcusean one-dimensional society analysis as theoretical limits to emphasize the power of authoritarian modes of capitalism to subsume works of art and popular culture even as they attempt consciously—even at times successfully—to negate and oppose the dominant hegemonic formations. Jack Neo's films, even as they attempt to criticize negative social values and government policies, and even as they draw critical attention to the plight of the Chinese-speaking heartlander in global-city Singapore, remain fettered to commercial interests in terms of both their formulaic appeal to the masses and their blatant advertising of consumer products aimed at the mass audience. The films' characteristic happy endings in fact perform the hegemonic work of renewing an uncritical faith in the system. Eric Khoo's and Royston Tan's films, even as they break the surface of taken-for-granted realities in Singapore in order to force their audiences to confront the hidden oppression, repression, marginalization, and alienation in the family, neighborhood, and society in general, are at least partly complicit in the processes of the global culture industry in the way they aestheticize and then commodify these hidden exploitations for the consumption of an international bourgeois art-house market. Tan's antiestablishment image is also commodifiable both as a way of commanding international interest in his work and as a signal to tourists, investors, and the creative class that Singapore is no longer the boring and suffocating cultural desert that it was once known to be. This second function is most useful for achieving the government's 'renaissance city' aspirations.

In one-dimensional Singapore, real critical thinking in art and popular culture constantly faces the serious threat of being neutered, absorbed into the system, and transformed into docile commodities

that serve that system and recirculate in the economy as attractive products marginally (even artificially) differentiated through an antiestablishment chic. The arts in Renaissance Singapore are like graffiti in the public and corporate spaces that have been officially designated as places where rebellious young Singaporeans can express their 'deviance'—where graffiti as resistance is transformed into graffiti as cathartic, even funky, and sometimes lucrative modes of self-expression.

Other Lines of Resistance

In focusing on the 'big three' Singaporean filmmakers to illustrate the possibility of cinematic resistance within a potentially irresistible one-dimensional society, this book might have inadvertently downplayed the resistant possibilities of less well-known Singaporean filmmakers working within and outside Singapore. Many of these filmmakers are young graduates of the polytechnics that offer professional filmmaking diploma programs. In 2007, New York University's Tisch School of the Arts opened a campus in Singapore to offer a Masters in Fine Arts film production course. Film editor and screenwriter John Tintori, who chairs the program, expects "about 300 films coming out of Tisch every year, which go to film festivals around the world" (quoted in Davie 2007). In recent years especially, filmmaking and film appreciation have become increasingly popular at all levels in high-tech Singapore. At the amateur level, mainstream schools are introducing filmmaking and film appreciation not only as extracurricular activity, but also as a high value-adding part of their classroom pedagogy and curriculum. These efforts are complemented by the work of private organizations such as the Asian Film Archive (a Singapore-based nonprofit organization) and Objectifs (a visual arts center run commercially) that organize classes and workshops on film and media literacy and production. National short-filmmaking competitions are regularly attracting entries from students and the general public, and winning films are sometimes aired on television.

As the film culture and industry look set to flourish in Singapore, filmmakers, audiences, production companies, and policy-makers will each develop more complex vocabularies for creating, interpreting, profiting from, and controlling the output; and this will very

possibly open up new and ingenious spaces for alternative and re-
sistant expressions. This book will conclude with an analysis of two
Singaporean documentary filmmakers, Tan Pin Pin and Martyn
See, in an effort to identify the possibilities and limitations of some
of these new spaces. Tan adopts a nuanced, ironic, and rather slip-
pery style, while See makes boldly resistant statements that provoke
government action.

Tan Pin Pin: Singapore GaGa *(2005)*

In a videotaped interview featured in the DVD release of *Singapore
GaGa* (2005), its director Tan Pin Pin explains that she made the
55-minute documentary because she wanted to fill a "vacuum" that
she felt existed when "people talked about Singapore [in] very na-
tionalist, big picture terms." Missing from this national talk have
been the very personal and eccentric perspectives that should be
no less valid than official rhetoric about what it means to be Sin-
gaporean. Tan explains that she "made the film to give myself a
sense of ownership of the country … to reclaim it for ourselves."
The film does this work of "reclaiming" by including and focusing
on the heterogeneous voices of "marginalized" and "forgotten"
Singaporeans whom Tan regards as no less "resilient" or "patri-
otic" in spirit than mainstream Singaporeans, even though they
might have experienced a "sense of abandonment, of not belong-
ing." These are people, she explains, who are "committed to what
they do even though what they do may not seem important to
other people."

  The characters in her documentary, for whom Tan appears to
have much respect and affection, include a wheelchair-bound lady
who sells packets of tissue paper at the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT)
stations, grabbing the attention of fast-paced commuters by singing
a catchy folksy jingle that she wrote herself. They include an old
man who regards himself as a "national treasure" as he performs
his "one-man band" routine in a busy underpass. They include
Margaret Leng Tan, a world-renowned avant-garde pianist from
Singapore who had to go overseas to make it big and then wait
many years before she could finally be embraced by Singapore so-
ciety (see Figure 8-1). They include radio newsreaders who present
the news every night in Chinese dialects that the government has
discouraged for decades in order to promote Mandarin as a more
useful language in the light of a rising China. They also include

female students at a *madrasah* (Islamic school) who, even as they modestly cover their heads in *tudung* (headscarves), are fully capable of having fun at their school sports day, cheering heartily and singing patriotic Singapore songs in Arabic and English. By featuring such subjects, Tan draws the audience's attention not only to the subjects' marginal position in society, but also to a taken-for-granted image of Singapore that is narrowly obsessed with able-bodied productivity, with world-class arts performances, with the local as second-rate (redeemed only if they can acquire foreign branding), with eliminating diversity for social management and economic advantage, and with 'racial' minorities as always potentially 'un-Singaporean.'

Figure 8-1: Still from *Singapore GaGa* (2005)

A sensitive and skillful documentary filmmaker, Tan is able to create subtle and satisfying moments of irony that constitute a good-natured critique, nowhere crude, dogmatic, or exploitative. For instance, in one scene, a Chinese taxi driver listening to the news on radio read in the Fujian (Chinese) dialect drives through Serangoon Road, where hoards of male migrant workers from South Asia congregate in the evenings. The scene challenges the official image of Singapore society as Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (Sharon Siddique 1989), a sterile but durable model that is far too simplistic to capture the fluid and hybrid nature of cultural flows and formations in this global city.

In another scene, Tan interviews the voice talent behind train announcements that Singaporean commuters know so well even though her diction sounds very little like Singlish, the colloquial vernacular that the government has actively discouraged for the global city that needs to connect efficiently with the global network. The voice talent explains to Tan how "it's good for them [commuters] to know there is a voice that comes on air and gives them instructions." The critique of a people so attuned to obeying "properly enunciated" instructions that are already fused into the "air" they breathe is subtle, kindly, and just a little irreverent. In yet another scene, Tan captures an old lady who asks the "national treasure" if he has a busker's license to perform; his assurances of having been issued one by the National Arts Council are met with skepticism by the lady, who walks away muttering to herself.

In the final moments of the film, Tan presents scenes of Singapore's National Day Parade, an annual ritual and a multimillion-dollar public spectacle consisting of a military parade, large-scale coordinated dance sequences, and fireworks displays—all of which are assembled to arouse nationalistic and patriotic feelings in an otherwise disenchanted and overworked citizen-workforce. In the film, the scenes of this grand national ceremony cut abruptly to a closing shot of a lone busker, mostly ignored by passersby, singing the evergreen country song "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" by Freddy Fender:

> Wasted days and wasted nights / I have left for you behind / For you don't belong to me / Your heart belongs to someone else / Why should I keep loving you / when I know that you're not true / and why should I call your name / when you're the blame for making me blue.

The irony is difficult to miss, but it is benign and somewhat thought-provoking.

Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore GaGa*—described on the DVD cover as a "city symphony … [in which] everyday sounds are spun into aural treasures"—adds richer harmonies and textures to an otherwise flat rendering of Singapore identity scored and conducted according to a technocratic and strategic rationality. The film also manages to introduce moments of dissonance that excite rather than assault. In presenting alternative voices, the film strongly resists the dominating and totalizing tendencies of a one-dimensional society.

Martyn See: Singapore Rebel *(2005)*

In the various efforts to enrich Singapore's film and cinema culture, state support and funding have undoubtedly been necessary. The film industry, after all, has become an important component of the creative economy on which some of Singapore's economic hopes are pinned. But at the same time that the state raises the level of arts funding, it also attempts to increase its control over the processes and products of this renascent industry, mainly through well-established practices of censorship, but also through film legislation that allows for the criminalization of filmmakers who threaten the government's political legitimacy. The Films Act (Chapter 107)—as amended in 1998—allows for anyone found guilty of importing, making, distributing, or exhibiting "party political films" to be fined up to S$100,000 or imprisoned for up to two years. The Act defines party political films as "an advertisement made by or on behalf of any political party in Singapore or any body whose objects relate wholly or mainly to politics in Singapore, or any branch of such party or body," but it goes further to include films that are "directed towards any political end in Singapore." This second aspect remains frighteningly vague even as the law specifies as illegal those films that can influence voting behavior, or that are partisan or biased with respect to their portrayals of the government (and its policies), parliamentarians, political parties (including opposition parties and their politicians), and any controversial matter of public importance.

The ambiguity of the Films Act can be daunting, especially for filmmakers who are socially and politically critical. Even without being didactic or specifying a particular agenda for change, any film that makes its audience reexamine and reconsider the status quo is surely "directed towards a political end" and might indirectly even affect the way audiences exercise their democratic vote. There is, in practice, no clear line to demarcate a "party political film." In fact, art often challenges audiences to look beneath the surface realities of their daily lives for hidden repressions, oppressions, and exclusions; and beyond the seemingly natural and unchangeable present to alternative realms of human possibility. And perhaps, the tedium, frustrations, tensions, and contradictions of today might be transcended through a heightened capacity for imagining a better tomorrow. By setting up a critical distance from

the 'practical' world, and by offering a glimpse of human freedom through the analogy of autonomous art's obedience only to its own laws, the exemplars of art are always vulnerable to political coercion since the political status quo is intrinsically threatened by it.

Filmmakers who perform a valuable role as social conscience might be seriously stifled just by the knowledge that the Films Act can, with a little bureaucratic imagination, be used against any film that—as a work of art—empowers its audience to be more reflective and critical in identifying the obstacles to a more just, free, and equal society where they and others can lead happier, more rational, and more fulfilled lives. Blogger Alex Au notes how "anything can be political once the PAP government doesn't like it" (Au 2005). The wording of the Films Act is so arbitrary that it becomes open to abuse.

In 2005, following pressure by the Board of Film Censors, a 26-minute documentary film by Martyn See called *Singapore Rebel* was withdrawn from the Singapore International Film Festival. The film is about Singapore Democratic Party leader Chee Soon Juan's efforts to campaign for freedom in Singapore, including the freedom of assembly. Through taped interviews with Chee surrounded by his three very young children (see Figure 8-2) and footage of his public appearances, which include shots of him being taken away in a police van during a public rally, the film presents the opposition leader as a passionate and articulate hero able to stand up to a strong government not known for tolerating opposition. See creates a sense of irony by juxtaposing scenes of the government's heavy-handed treatment of opposition and captions of the prime minister's speeches that contain phrases such as "open, multiracial and cosmopolitan society," "people should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply to be different," "recognise many paths of success," "must give people a second chance," and "open and inclusive Singapore." See's film not only presented the government's words and deeds as contradictory but, by portraying Chee as a perfectly reasonable family man who conveyed his political convictions through measured tones, was actually able to counter the state-directed mass media's depiction of Chee as a public enemy. In an interview, See explained how his film aimed to "politicize younger Singaporeans" whom he regarded as "totally apathetic towards political issues" (Brownlow 2006).

The ability to get Singaporeans to stop fearing, ridiculing, and in some cases even hating Chee probably explains the heavy-handed treatment of the film by the censors and of the filmmaker by police investigators. See was investigated by the police, who also confiscated his camera and documentary footage. Subsequently, Tan Pin Pin (his colleague) and political blogger Jacob George (his friend) were also questioned.

Figure 8-2: Still from *Singapore Rebel* (2005)

Singapore Rebel cannot be listed among the best of Singapore films. Its production values are not high. The tone of the film is patchy and uneven, but not in a way that might contribute effectively to an aesthetic of 'verisimilitude' that is wholly appropriate to documentary filmmaking. And perhaps most strikingly, the film fails to present audiences with a deeper and more critical understanding of the enigmatic figure of Chee Soon Juan, beyond the superficial caricature of a lone crusader standing against the intimidating forces of an authoritarian government and the political apathy of citizens who refuse—or fear the consequences of reclaiming—their democratic rights. The attempt to humanize a public figure demonized in no small part by the state-directed mass media at best serves to rehabilitate the misunderstood man. However, *Singapore Rebel* provides no deeper or more nuanced insights about Chee or the prospects of political opposition in Singapore, which are surely very complex matters that more critical filmmaking can foreground for

closer reflection, and do so in sophisticated ways that elude the literalness of the law and its prosaic application.

After more than a year, the investigations ended quietly with a stern warning issued to See; but the act of censorship created enormous local and international interest in See's film, which has been widely available online and screened to members of the European Parliament and to audiences at 'human rights' film festivals in various countries around the world. Several reports and commentaries written about Singapore in the international media have made reference to the film. *Singapore Rebel* has become a spectacle of political repression in Singapore, and has achieved audiences and a 'success' that are well beyond what the film's own merits probably deserve. Censorship has seriously backfired, having turned a mediocre film into an icon of freedom, a relatively unknown filmmaker into a martyr, and the perception of inconsistencies in the application of the law into a sign of political hypocrisy. But worse, it also led to an embarrassing situation for the censors themselves when Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew rather cavalierly said in an interview with *Time*, "Well, if you had asked me, I would have said, to hell with it. But the censor, the enforcer, he will continue until he is told the law has changed. And it will change" (Elliott, Abdoolcarim, and Elegant 2005). Amidst the echoes of Lee's unexpected claims about loosening the censorship structures, *Singapore Rebel* has become implicated in a much larger discourse on Singapore's authoritarian government, freedom of expression, the prospects of liberalization, and democratic pressures from the international 'community.'

APPENDIX A: CITED TELEVISION PROGRAMS AND EPISODES

Under One Roof (1994-2003)

"Burn Old Flame, Burn." *Under One Roof*. Andrea Teo (executive producer and director) and Angelena Loh (writer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1-4). 2000. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

"Daisy and the Deadline." *Under One Roof*. Andrea Teo (executive producer and director) and Seah Chang Un (writer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1-4). 2000. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

"Mat Rock and Mee Rebus." *Under One Roof*. Andrea Teo (executive producer and director) and Simmon Tan (writer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1-4). 2000. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

"Of Parrots and Parades." *Under One Roof*. Jennifer Tan (director), Anne Fenn (writer), Andrea Teo (supervising executive producer), and Seah Wee Thye (executive producer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1-4). 2000. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd (1997-2007)

"French Connection." *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*. Eunice Tan (executive producer and director) and Ong Su Mann (writer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1 and 2). 1999. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

"Saving Pte Phua." *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*. Colin Cairnes (director), Seah Chang Un (writer), Esan Sivalingam (writer), and Jennifer Tan (executive producer). *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd: The Third Season*. 2001. Vol. 11. MediaCorp Studios. VCDs, distributed by Berjaya HVN (S) Pte Ltd.

"The Smell of Money." *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*. Jennifer Tan (director), Eunice Tan (executive producer and director), and Simmon Tan (writer). Special box-set edition (featuring episodes from Seasons 1 and 2). 1999. Television Corporation of Singapore. VCDs, marketed and distributed by Videovan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

"What If…" *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*. Colin Cairnes (director and producer), Jennifer Tan (executive producer), Tan Wei Lyn (writer), Lillian Wang (writer), and Stella Wee (writer). *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd: The Third Season*. 2001. Vol. 13. MediaCorp Studios. VCDs, distributed by Berjaya HVN (S) Pte Ltd.

MediaCorp TV (Channel 5)

@ Moulmein High (2001-2003)
Achar! (2003-2005)
First Touch (2001-2003)
Growing Up (1996-2001)
Heartlanders (2002-2005)
Living with Lydia (2001-2004)
Mr Kiasu (2001-2002)
Oh Carol! (2002-2003)
Triple Nine (1995-1999)

SPH MediaWorks Ltd (Channel i)

Ah Girl! (2001-2003)

APPENDIX B: CITED FILMS BY JACK NEO, ERIC KHOO, AND ROYSTON TAN

Jack Neo

Homerun. 2003. Jack Neo (director, writer, and actor), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Titus Ho (producer), and Chan Pui Yin (producer). DVD, distributed by VideoVan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

I Do, I Do. 2005. Jack Neo (director, executive producer, producer, writer, and actor), Lim Boon Hwee (director), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Asun Mawardi (executive producer and producer), Jareuk Kaljareuk (executive producer), Titus Ho (producer), Chan Pui Yin (producer), Seah Saw Yam (producer), and Boris Boo (writer). DVD, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

I Not Stupid. 2002. Jack Neo (director, writer, and actor), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Chan Pui Yin (producer), and David Leong (producer). DVD, distributed by VideoVan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

I Not Stupid Too. 2006. Jack Neo (director, writer, and actor), Daniel Yun (Executive producer), Chan Pui Yin (producer), Seah Saw Yam (producer), and Rebecca Leow (writer). DVD, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

Just Follow Law. 2007. Jack Neo (director, producer, and writer), Irene Kng (Executive producer), Teck Lim (executive producer), Sok Mien Koo (producer), Simon Leong (producer), Hazel Wong (producer), Sek Yieng Bon (writer), Boris Boo (writer), Wei Lyn Tan (writer), and Michael Woo (writer). DVD, distributed by InnoForm Media Pte Ltd.

Liang Po Po: The Movie. 1999. Jack Neo (writer and actor), Bee Lian Teng (director), Eric Khoo (executive producer), Daniel Yun (executive producer), and David Leong (producer). VCD, distributed by VideoVan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

Money No Enough. 1998. Jack Neo (writer and actor), Tay Teck Lock (director), Hsiao Yu-Hua (executive producer), and J. P. Tan (producer). DVD, distributed by Alliance Entertainment Singapore Pte Ltd.

One More Chance. 2005. Jack Neo (director and writer), Michael Woo (director), Toh Lan Sin (director), Irene Kng (executive producer), Boris Boo (producer and writer), Simon Leong (producer), Hazel Wong (producer), and Ho Hee Ann (writer). DVD, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

That One Not Enough. 1999. Jack Neo (director, writer, and actor), Meileen Choo (producer), and Mark Lee (writer). VCD, distributed by VideoVan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

The Best Bet. 2004. Jack Neo (director and writer), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Titus Ho (producer), Chan Pui Yin (producer), and Boris Boo (writer). DVD, distributed by VideoVan Entertainment Industries Pte Ltd.

Eric Khoo

12 Storeys. 1997. Eric Khoo (director and writer), James Toh (executive producer and writer), Jimmy Wee (executive producer), Jacqueline Khoo (executive producer), Brian Hong (producer), and Ho Yoke Weng (director of photography). DVD, *The Eric Khoo Box Set*, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

August. 1991. Eric Khoo (director, writer, and cinematographer). Screener.

Barbie Digs Joe. 1990. Eric Khoo (director). Screener.

Be with Me. 2005. Eric Khoo (director and writer), James Toh (executive producer), Jacqueline Khoo (executive producer), Freddie Yeo (executive producer), Brian Hong (producer), Wong Kim Hoh (writer), and Adrian Tan (director of photography). DVD, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

Carcass. 1992. Eric Khoo (director and writer) and Nazir Hussain (director and writer). Screener.

Home Video. 2000. Eric Khoo (director). Screener.

Mee Pok Man. 1995. Eric Khoo (director), Jacqueline Khoo (producer), Foong Yu Lei (writer), and Ho Yoke Weng (director of photography). DVD, *The Eric Khoo Box Set*, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

No Day Off. 2006. Eric Khoo (director). Screener.

One Leg Kicking. 2001. Eric Khoo (director and executive producer), Wei Koh (director and writer), James Toh (executive producer), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Jacqueline Khoo (producer), Mabelyn Ow (producer), and David Park (director of photography). DVD, distributed by Alliance Entertainment Singapore Pte Ltd.

Pain. 1994. Eric Khoo (director, producer, writer, and cinematographer). Screener.

"Sex, Lies, and … " Episode in Television Corporation of Singapore television series *Drive*. 1998. Eric Khoo (director and executive producer), Brian Hong (producer), Deni Yeow (writer), and Nic Low (director of photography). Screener.

Symphony 92.4 FM. 1993. Eric Khoo (director). Screener.

When the Magic Dies. 1985. Eric Khoo (director), S. C. Chiew (writer), and Paul Fan (director of photography). Screener.

Zombie Dog a.k.a. Eat Shit Fuck & *Die*. 2004. Eric Khoo (producer), Toh Hai Leong (director), and Tan Fong Cheng (producer). Screener.

Royston Tan

15 (feature film). 2003. Royston Tan (director, writer, and editor), Eric Khoo (producer), and Tan Fong Cheng (producer). DVD, distributed by Force Entertainment (Australia).

15 (short film). 2002. Royston Tan (director, writer, and executive producer) and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography and executive producer). Screener.

24 Hrs. 2002. Royston Tan (director, producer, and writer). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

4:30. 2006. Royston Tan (director and writer), Eric Khoo (executive producer), Jacqueline Khoo (executive producer), Gary Goh (producer), James Toh (producer), Makota Ueda (producer), Liam Yeo (writer), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). DVD, distributed by InnoForm Media Pte Ltd.

48 on AIDS. 2002. Royston Tan (director and producer), Ong Hee Yah (executive producer), and Mohd Sharif Bangi (director of photography). Screener.

4A Florence Close. 1998. Royston Tan (director). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

881. 2007. Royston Tan (director and writer), Daniel Yun (executive producer), Erik Khoo (executive producer), John Ho (executive producer), Mike Wiluan (executive producer), Gary Goh (producer), James Toh (producer), Chan Pui Yin (producer), Seah Saw Yam (producer), Freddie Yeo (producer), Tan Fong Cheng (producer), Ang Hwee Sim (producer), and Daniel Low (director of photography). DVD, distributed by Scorpio East Entertainment Pte Ltd.

Careless Whisperer. 2005. Royston Tan (director, writer, and executive producer), Mabelyn Ow (executive producer), Gary Goh (producer), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

Cut. 2004. Royston Tan (director, writer, and executive producer), Mabelyn Ow (executive producer), Jonathan Lim (lyricist), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Screener.

Hock Hiap Leong. 2001. Royston Tan (director, producer, and writer) and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

Jesses. 1999. Royston Tan (director, editor, and director of photography) and King Li (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

Monkeylove. 2005. Royston Tan (director, writer, editor, and director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

Mother. 2002. Royston Tan (director, producer, and writer) and Pereira (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

New York Girl. 2005. Royston Tan (director and executive producer), Mabelyn Ow (executive producer), Gary Goh (producer), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

Sons. 2000. Royston Tan (director, producer, and writer) and Michael Chua (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

The Blind Trilogy. 2004. Royston Tan (director), Mabelyn Ow (producer), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Included in *Royston's Shorts* (DVD, produced as part of the Asian Film Archive Collection by the Asian Film Archive, 2006).

The Old Man and the River. 2003. Royston Tan (director and writer), Mabelyn Ow (producer), and Lim Ching Leong (director of photography). Screener.

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INDEX