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AND REFLECTIONS  
ON THE AESTHETIC  
PRODUCTION IN SINGAPORE**

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‘Origin is the goal.’

Karl Kraus, *Worte in Versen*, vol. 1

As we look at our cityscape, created since the years of independence, first from the British, and then from Malaysia, we are struck by two seemingly contrasting cityscapes. One is the ‘international’ modern style (what I think of as the bland, decontextualised and dehistoricised modernity) of our socialist-style public housing, and the buildings constructed in the 1970s, such as the High Street Centre and the Hilton Hotel, and the other is the presence of what can be described as kitsch-conservation projects as manifested by Peranakan Place, the colonialist nostalgia of Raffles Hotel and, most recently, the Chinatown conservation area.<sup>1</sup>

How are we to account for the contrasting aspects of our cityscape? The first-generation political leadership of post-colonial Singapore did not have time for kitsch conservation projects; that was the result of a more wealthy Singapore, from about 1980 onwards, that had started to think of ‘Asian values’, grounding national identity in something more than the obvious marks of consumerism that started to quite marked by the late 1970s, and finally, what a ‘Global City’ needed to do to become a first-rank hub of capitalist flows – the answer to that last question was to become a ‘Global City of the Arts’.

Thinking through the two aspects of our cityscape mentioned above are important, I think, for they may help us understand the art and aesthetic production that has developed in the 1980s-1990s. I thus will try to think through the nature of the kitsch in our cityscape, and then speculate on the sort of genealogies of artistic creations it contributed towards.

### **Progress, modernity and the modern Asian-Singaporean city**

To begin with, I shall need a definition of 'kitsch'. For this discussion, I shall use a definition offered to us by Matei Calinescu in his now-classic *Five Faces of Modernity*: 'No matter how we classify its contexts of usage, kitsch always implies the notion of *aesthetic inadequacy*'; Calinescu also speaks of 'the *parody of aesthetic consciousness*'.<sup>2</sup> To this critic, 'kitsch is meant to offer instant satisfaction of the most superficial aesthetic needs or whims of a wide public'.<sup>3</sup> Further, kitsch itself, as a cultural-artistic phenomenon, is the product of industrial society (it is *modern*), and is our time linked to commercialism and mass standardisation. As we can see, Calinescu draws from Theodor W. Adorno's perspectives on high art and the culture industry.

At the same time, kitsch can be fun—when it is self-conscious, when it becomes a style, it becomes 'camp'. This is Micheal Chiang and Dick Lee at their best, such as in the musical *Beautyworld*. The willingness to 'conserve' old buildings – and later the willingness to do 'adaptive reuse' of buildings—seemed to suggest that both 'fun' and the complexity of life in the old city, whatever its faults, seemed desirable. Some continuity with the past was valid.

One may wonder how the situation came about that the austere and relentlessly modernizing and pragmatic (or rational-instrumentalist) People's Action Government (PAP) would have time for the frivolities in our built environment of the enclosed Bugis Junction, for example, with its enclosed old streets such as Malay Street and its shophouses, when it has put some 80 per cent of the population into flats that look like they would fit into pre-1989 East Berlin. Of course, the boxes of modernist architecture now have add-ons (little neo-classical triangles and metal scaffolding that don't really give you shade), courtesy of interim- and full-upgrading, that approximate the style of many condominium projects.

The PAP's utopian ideals in the 1960s and the 1970s were rather literal in following the etymology of the word 'utopia': *topos*, for 'place'; *u*, for 'no'; and thus 'nowhere'. To be modern, to go beyond what they saw as our Malayan primordial racialised/ethnicised past of conflict and Chinese-inflected communism, to break the traditional family orientation of Chinese businesses, one had to be committed to 'modernisation' and ditch the not-so-good present and past; one had to become 'nowhere' and 'no place'. Singapore had to be dehistoricised and decontextualised; cultural roots had to be axed; and we had to become a society that wanted 'progress and prosperity for our nation', as the National Pledge goes. While many people have described the PAP as 'conservative', the reality is that those of us sitting in this room have experienced a *radical* experiment in socio-cultural engineering.

In the 1960s – unlike what we would see from the 1980s to the 1990s – there was no approving talk of 'Asian modernity' or 'Asian values'; the latter were the retrograde values the PAP then thought arrested the ideals of universal progress that all seemed desirous of in the 1960s.

Indeed, the 1960s were earmarked by the United Nations to be a ‘decade of development’, a goal that Singapore was ‘in sync’ with.

At the same time, while we wanted to be part of progress, to be part of the process of Enlightenment, we didn’t want the more liberal-humanistic aspects of modern life, as it had developed in the West – and indeed, in places like China, with its May 4<sup>th</sup> background of modernising reform, inspired by Western ideals.

The PAP rejected all the soft, aesthetic aspects of ‘modernity’—which is not surprising, as culturally sensitive modernists were inclined to be self-reflexively critical—and instead chose instead what can be described as the ‘bourgeois idea of modernity’, that which was ‘a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism’.<sup>4</sup> The most obvious manifestation of this pragmatic modernity was in its cityscape.

The 1950’s colonial Master Plan for the city, which demarcated city and rural areas, was ditched, and the entire island became a city, increasingly dominated by the faceless and humourless public housing blocks that looked as they had been moved from UK Council housing estates. As we know, all the kampungs had to go – the then-Prime Minister thought that their way of life held the young back.

The architect and critic Rem Koolhaas has famously described our modernity thus:

In Singapore – modernization in its pure form – the forces of modernity are enlisted against the demands of modernism. Singapore’s modernism ... has adopted only the mechanistic, rationalistic program and developed it to an unprecedented perfection in a climate of streamlined ‘smoothness’ generated by shedding modernism’s artistic, irrational, uncontrollable, subversive ambitions – revolution without agony.<sup>5</sup>

While we can – and should – take issue with Koolhaas’s implication that Singapore did not have any artistic modernism, we can accept his general description of the logic that underlay the PAP’s statist modernity up to the late 1970s.

Then conservation, as already indicated, became possible from the 1980s. You can think of numerous examples – apart from what I’ve already mentioned, there’s Clarke Quay, Robertson Quay, and the Civic District, with the Singapore Art Museum (the restored, old St Joseph’s Institution), the Asian Civilisations Museum (the restored Tao Nan School), the Asian Civilisations Museum extension (the restored Empress Place building, the former Colonial Secretariat) and the hotel that has ‘grown-up’ around and on top of the old Rendezvous restaurant opposite the Cathay building. We also know that there are plans afoot for the ‘upgrading’ of MacDonald House.

We can ask if these recent urban developments reflect an architectural postmodernist sensibility, in the sense that architect Charles Jencks would define it:

A Post-Modernist building is doubly coded – part Modern and part something else: vernacular, revivalist, local, commercial, metaphorical, or contextual. ... It is also doubly coded in the sense that it seeks to speak on two levels at once: to a concerned minority of architects, an elite who recognize the subtle distinctions of a fast-changing language, and to the inhabitants, users, or passersby, who want only to understand to enjoy it.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, one doubts it. It's not clear to those who look at the new urban developments whether there are really deep gestures towards history, fun, the local and thus local identity. The developments are too serious and commanding—they represent a more obviously aestheticised version of the 1970's notion of 'progress'. They are pastiche cultural fragments that have only a very fragmented sense of the local. It is, if this can be said, 'bad' kitsch. It is a sort of a bad parody of a parody of aesthetic consciousness. The kitsch we have is an extension of the serious and bland consumerist logic of a focused modernity that will seriously use whatever is available for economic development. It is the old modernising impulse now commodifying what's left of the markers of old Singapore. It certainly never becomes a real style – it is never camp. Of course, kitsch, in any case, almost entirely lacks historical depth or context (hotels in Las Vegas come to mind here); the thing here, however, is that our kitsch claims *real* history, *real* identity and location, and *real* fun. It is not self-aware of itself as kitsch.

We can examine Singapore Tourism Board's document, *Enhancing the Chinatown Experience*, to flesh out some of the claims just made. The opening section of the document claims that the revamp of Chinatown will preserve 'a legacy [that] has become part of national heritage speaking not only of Chinese Singaporeans but also of the unique multi-cultural interaction with other races' (p. 2). It then proceeds to caution that this historic area is declining: 'If nothing is done, Chinatown will lose its soul and its unique irreplaceable ability to serve as a fount of history, culture and heritage that enables Singaporeans to hark back into the past.... There are cultural and emotional reasons lessons they need to learn in order to have the strength to tackle the challenges of the future with the fortitude of the pioneers' (p. 5). Chinatown has become somewhat of a ghost town, after the inhabitants there were slowly moved out to HDB estates – while there are now areas with fancy restaurants and expensive office space, it is quite dead at night.

What are the solutions to this desire for 'real' history, and not kitsch nostalgia? I will look at the main project that is being proposed as the centre of this conservation—the 'Village Theatre':

The Village Theatre will be an integrated complex housing a traditional theatre, a Chinese temple, a teahouse, retail outlets and restaurants. It will be a place to shop, drink, eat, learn, be entertained and be revitalised. There will be an open courtyard with an outdoor stage for street opera. Sharing this common courtyard is the Chinese temple. The courtyard can be used for Chinese New Year plant sales or by residents for their *taiji*, *qigong* and *wushu* classes. Religious festivals and events can also be held here (p. 6).

It's been pointed out that such a Chinese 'village' complex has never existed in Singapore – but the planners did go to China to find out what it 'really' should be. That aside, the passage entirely lacks irony. It is *seriously* kitsch in its parody of kitsch-ness—it proposes that this complex can serve both tourist and nation-building needs: learning, shopping and praying: they all can go hand in hand. A 'real' fake temple will exist for 'real' religious festivals, presumably for the really real tourists to take their authentic photos of the shopping-eating-praying-learning natives. Forget about Walter Benjamin's notion of the mechanical reproduction of auratic art – original 'aura' is not taken as a useful concept here to begin with.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the Tourism Board and not the Urban Redevelopment Authority or National Heritage Board are in charge of this project speaks volumes.

### **The possible causes of bland aesthetic production**

Why have we arrived where we are now—with the above-described Chinatown scenario, for instance? There are two possible reasons for our predicament.

The first may be that our high-cultural resources and folk art—the bases for cultural and cultural-identity development—were perhaps limited to begin with. Many of us are, after all, the descendents of largely immigrant and displaced peoples who were fleeing floods in southern China, or who were brought in from south India to work in the colonial plantations. While such elements have now been taken on board to support the narrative of the 'Singapore Story',<sup>8</sup> there clearly is historical veracity behind it. The consequence of this is that there is less to commodify into spectacular kitsch than in other societies, a situation made more difficult by the state domination of cultural resources. One need only reflect upon the somewhat emotionally ineffective Merlion in relation to the ultra-successful kitsch of the USA's Disneyland, or Japanese 'cuteness' in cultural products like the *Pokemon* or 'Hello Kitty' phenomena, and the sort of loyalty they foster.

The other reason is related to the first: our economic success was wrought at the expense of things cultural—broadly defined as the arts, intellectual life, folk or popular culture.

One could therefore argue, in relation to the above, that the odd urban kitsch that has resulted in the city-state is really an extension of the earlier, more-austere wish to instrumentally use culture for nation-building in a pragmatic-scientific manner. The very state itself, in the economic success that has been wrought, does not have the resources *itself* to create 'good' kitsch.

There must be an initial desire in the first place to have art—and art for the masses—for its own sake for ‘good’ kitsch to come about. Thus, in the 1980s, when a desire for aesthetics, locality and culture in the built environment and society arises, we find that the resources for sensitive urban conservation are thin.

At the same time, we should not underestimate the affectivity of state-sponsored kitsch that has developed—it could be argued that the most successful form of this particular aesthetic is the National Day spectacles that have emerged since the late 1980s. (This is in contrast to the stricter, more militarised parades of the 1960s and 1970s, and the multi-cultural display of Asian dances and so forth done by schoolchildren.) Kuo Pao Kun calls this ‘The theatre that governs’, and observes that ‘We cannot be cynical about this. ... I think this kind of national propaganda is not only inevitable but sometimes quite necessary.’<sup>9</sup> While some may scoff at some of the extreme kitsch that has appeared here in the late 1990s—‘Merli’, the Merlion comes to mind, as part of a pageant of four mythical creatures on a mythical isle—the spectacles put up in recent years are extremely popular. It is possible that these spectacles are now an accompaniment of what might be called an ‘emerging-middle-class’ national identity that revolves around the issue of consumption.

The difficulty here, for a city that desires to be a Global City for the Arts, is that the middle-class aesthetic that is oriented towards kitsch—as opposed, say, to a more ascetic notion of aesthetics—is that it may be a ‘middle-of-the road hedonism, perfectly illustrated by the “principle of mediocrity” that always obtains in kitsch’.<sup>10</sup> What aesthetic production and cultural products then come to mainly represent then is consumption. This in itself isn’t a problem because an aesthetic product or work of art can be many things; the problems arises when making a cultural product for consumption becomes the *dominant* or perhaps even *sole* reason for aesthetic production, one in which consumption is transformed into a regulating social ideal. What makes such a practice of aesthetic production worse, in the case of Singapore, is that the state’s and in fact society’s cultural resources, after some thirty-five years of homogenising modernisation, may be exhausted; the question is now how we foster the arts given the particular context that marks our economic success as a society.

### **Statist and non-statist aesthetic production**

The particular urbanscape and also experience of this urban environment that has been expanded since the late 1960s or early 1970s must surely affect our aesthetic production (broadly defined) to a greater or lesser extent, though I am not claiming that I think that they are modern the only causes that are pertinent to us. Nevertheless, with the above analysis in mind, I will in this concluding section, briefly try to construct two genealogies of aesthetic production, one the government’s own aesthetic production, and the other various artists’ reactions to it.

### ***The State's Aesthetic Production***

The 1960s-1980 are marked by the rise of a severe modernist urban aesthetic, as seen in the HDB high-rises that succeeded the low-rise Singapore Improvement Trust flats that still can be seen in Tiong Bahru, for instance. Then there are the tall financial buildings that start to rise at Shenton Way. Taken in toto, this urban environment is the manifestation of a local economy that is lowly starting to be part of global economy—in 1972, S. Rajaratnam speaks of Singapore as a Global City: by 'linking up with international and multinational corporations, Singapore not only becomes a component of [the] world economy, but ... catch[es] up or at least keep[s] apace with the most advanced ... societies.<sup>11</sup>

The abstract modernism of artists such as Thomas Yeo was the suitable accompaniment to the early industrialisation of the post-colonial city-state. We have to note, though, that despite the severe industrial-modern aesthetic that was dominant, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, by the mid-1970s, had come out with the Merlion symbol, which starts to take an increasing importance as an official symbol of the city-state itself. But it could be observed that the early kitsch that the Merlion represented was only an exception that proved the rule of a severe statist aesthetic.

The 1980s mark a shift in both the way culture is managed and notions of Singapore as an urban centre. The 'Asian values' discourse begins, originally as consideration of the modern relevance of Confucian values; this coincidentally or otherwise accompanies the state's greater openness to conserving parts of the old city. Peranakan Place comes about, though it is criticised as the creation of a Hollywood set; later conservations projects such as that along Tanjong Pagar Road occurred. 'History' and 'rooted identity' become possible as artistic themes because in some ways, the government itself starts to validate their importance.

The National Day Parades start to change shape as well, leading to the Orchard Road street parties of the late 1980s; they presage the attempts to have an even more 'hip' National Day celebrations that can motivate a 'creative' society as represented by by the 2000 'Carnival@TheBay'. The government, then, partially abandons a more severe, decontextualised aesthetic; but by this time, the culture of the young nation is already reshaped.

### ***Non-State Aesthetic Production***

It can be argued that production in the arts and related cultural fields in Singapore since the 1980s, when the economy effectively 'takes off', question the complete validity of the cultural and urban decontextualisation along with the historical erasure that has been part-and-parcel of the modernisation programme. Basically, art and aesthetic production from the 1980s start to contend that there is more to the city-state's cultural landscape than is seen on its pristine surface.



Theatre developed, often in an unprecedented multilingual and multicultural format, asserting the need for place and diverse-if-linked identities in a seemingly monolithic Singapore that had its cultural roots axed. Max Le Blond's *General Hospital, or Nurse Angamuthu's Romance* (1981)—an adaptation of Peter Nichol's *National Health*—put local English on the stage for the first, and in that way helped authorise the representation of the 'local', one at odds with the desired universal purity for the still-new nation. Kuo Pao Kun's Chinese-language plays in the 1980's also explicitly dealt with the destruction of the old, colonial-Asian city (*Kopitiam [The Coffeeshop]* [1986]) and the problem of cultural identity under erasure (*The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* [1987]).

Contemporary art practices in the form of installation sculpture and socially responsive public art that disrupted an established and somewhat bland abstract modernism (that itself was an earlier adaptation from Euro-America) exploded among the younger artists associated with a group called the Artists Village, started in 1988 in what was then a still a rural part of the island called Sembawang.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the artists linked with performance and visual artist Tang Da Wu (then newly returned from a long sojourn in England, and later the winner of the Fukuoka Cultural Prize of 1999), the dominant personality in the Village, installed themselves in the disappearing rural landscape indicates that the newer art practices were part of a reaction to the new urbanscape that had sought to eradicate previous identities. We can see that social and collective memory and local cultural identities became central thematics in the arts.

Nineteen eighty-eight was an interesting year, for it was a year in which the contemporary art show *Trimurti* was mounted by S. Chandrasekeran, Goh Ee Choo and Salleh Japar (part of their goal was to assert that while art was 'universal', it 'is also an expression of race, a culture, [and] a nation. ... There is a need to show that different things can exist together harmoniously and in perfect equilibrium'<sup>13</sup>), the Practice Theatre Ensemble did Kuo Paok Kun's groundbreaking multilingual *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, and the Artists' Village started.

By the late 1990s, out of the still-existing cultural diversity in the midst of a homogenising modernity, TheatreWork's Ong Keng Sen attempted to envision 'The New Asia' in the form of his *Asian Lear* (1996 and 1999), with funding from the Japan Foundation Asia Center, while The Necessary Stage maintained their ongoing experiments in what Artistic Director Alvin Tan choses to call 'intra-cultural theatre'.

More recently, film has developed as an embryonic art form. Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995) was the first recent major attempt at making local art film, followed by his *Twelve Storeys* (1997). Both of these films, it is generally acknowledged, have tried to probe 'deeper under the surface of the country's conspicuous wealth and success, focusing on the forgotten, the hidden, the problematic and bizarre aspects of Singapore life.'<sup>14</sup>

Singapore's built environment appears, in both of Khoo's films, as a disjunctive and claustrophobic space to which individuals have to adjust to emotionally—generally unsuccessfully. They attempt to get away from the cliched blandness of efficient Singapore, within which intimacy and individual autonomy seem restricted.

Other attempts to show stories at odds with the pristine surface of the Lion City followed, the most successful being the low-budget comedy *Money No Enough* (1998), which despite its relatively low production values was the second-highest grossing film in 1998, behind *Titanic*. The film questioned the *arriviste* materialism in Singapore life, and like *Twelve Stories* got past the state censors with the use of the proscribed Hokkien-Chinese. The protagonists emerge as authentic figures from the so-called 'HDB Heartland', showing how the Chinese-speaking could suffer in the city the 'English-educated,' as they were called until the 1990s, created. There was also Kelvin Tong's and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* (1999), which was about alienated Heartlander youth. The HDB estate and the less-salubrious bits of the city are themselves part of the subject of the film.

## Conclusion

What I have attempted thus far only represents tentative attempts to think of the socio-cultural context of the modern society created since the 1960s within which aesthetic production takes place within in Singapore. I think what can be seen is that there is a realisation by artists that while the 'global' dimension of modern life is important, the 'local' must be come to terms with as well. One may say that there is a double consciousness here of being 'local-global' inside a state-oriented local-globalism with a more specifically economic outlook.

Why such aesthetic concerns and developments may be important for us as a society is that they may help Singapore work out new cultural identity directions that will not be nullified by the global packaging of lifestyles that continues to gain strength, given a Southeast Asia weakened by the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the downturn in the US economy since 2001. The PAP government itself now asserts that the passive citizens of a Singapore Inc. that produced within the homogenised urban environment of the 1970s are no longer desirable. In the place of an earlier imposed and bland modernity and urbanism is now an articulated desire for 'messy' creativity, that which will be less conformist and that which can fuel Singapore's ambition to be an IT hub. We must wait and see what sort of contemporary urban culture that embraces diversity and Asian-ness while comfortable with its Asian Western-ness will emerge.

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<sup>1</sup> The proposal for Chinatown's conservation can be found in Singapore Tourism Board, *Enhancing the Chinatown Experience* (Singapore: Singapore Tourism Board, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 236, 241.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis ... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa', in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, ed. Jennifer Sigler (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 1995), 1041. All subsequent page references will be given within brackets in the main text.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Jencks, with a contribution by William Chaitkin, *Current Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), p. 158.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; London: Fontana, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, C.F. Yong, *Tan Kah-kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), and also Yong's *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Kuo Pao Kun, 'Uprooted and Searching', in *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*, eds. John O'Toole and Kate Donelan (Brisbane: IDEA Publications, 1999), p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 244.

<sup>11</sup> S. Rajaratnam, *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches of S. Rajaratnam*, eds. Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> This area is now a public housing estate.

<sup>13</sup> S. Chandrasekeran, Goh Ee Choo and Salleh Japar, 'Trimurti, 1988 Statements and Documentation', in *Trimurti and Ten Years After*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum and the National Heritage Board, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 109.