

CONSUMING THE NATION: NATIONAL DAY PARADES IN SINGAPORE

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THE NATION AS COMMODITY

By suspending belief in their subject of study, and adopting a methodological distance from it, most social researchers are deconstructionists at heart if not in name. The idea of 'the nation' has now been deconstructed, principally by scholars such as Ernest Gellner (1964), Benedict Anderson (1983), and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983). The sense of nations as historical contingencies and cultural constructions forces us to acknowledge the artificiality or constructedness of nationality.

If individuals find the 'nation' too abstract an idea to imagine or too distant from everyday life to identify with, then governments and political leaders will turn to more concrete symbols to personify, reify and objectify the nation (Kertzer 1988: 6). The nation is concretized very much as material object; flag, food, product or visual icon. National élites are at the same time cultural producers involved in the business of concocting things that provide a focus of national belongingness with which a collectivity can readily identify.

The nation is therefore a commodity to be consumed (Foster 1991: 248). The logic of commodity form applies here: states establish cultural industries like a Ministry of Culture to promote, invent or revive objects, images and acts that are said to represent the nation. These commodities are packaged and marketed to domestic consumers in order to inculcate a sense of nationality so that the nation as 'imagined community' is also a community of consumption, united by the partaking of these same cultural products.

Since national identity is very often forged by recalling glories of past history and a sense of primordialism, a range of heritage culture, from architectural styles to folk traditions, are deployed to commodify the nation. Museums, in particular, have become part of an heritage industry in which the language of 'preservation' and 'conservation' objectifies the nation as both commodity and property of a collectivity (Dominguez 1986). A commercial economy reinforces the logic of commodification of the nation, and this is most clearly seen in the case of tourism. The uniqueness of certain landscapes or monuments is mined for economic and symbolic gain. Tourist attractions are thus invested with nationalist meanings (Leong 1989; Sears 1989).

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The marketing of time and space, history and geography in the service of national and commercial interests has been accelerated by new technologies of mass dissemination. The nation as commodity is made consumable on a global scale. Thus, international art exhibitions provide the context for national promotion: 'Five Thousand Years of Korean Art', 'Treasures of Indonesia', 'Festival of India', 'Dutch Masters', and so on. In the case of both national tourism and national exhibitions, 'in order to establish their status within the international community, individual nations are compelled to dramatize conventionalized versions of their national images, asserting past glories and amplifying stereotypical differences' (Wallis 1994: 271).

Taking this perspective of the nation as a commodity manufactured for consumers, I will examine the making of the Singapore nation through the annual National Day parades. The National Day parade is packaged and marketed for the largest possible number of Singaporeans. Although the costs of the parade run up to a hefty sum, the expected returns are obviously not economic, but socio-psychological. Given the accounting mentality of state élites, who expect monetary or tangible returns for every public expenditure and who take great pains to avoid any budgetary deficit, the commodification of National Day is calculated with intangible gains in mind: identification with the nation, pride and loyalty to the country, a sense of what it means to be 'Singaporean'.

COMMODYFYING NATIONAL DAY

The National Day celebration is a highly ritualized and stylized event. It is produced with the same kind of detail, scale, skill and intended audience as the making of a Hollywood blockbuster movie. Since 1991, it typically requires eight months of preparation, from the first blueprint meeting to the full dress rehearsal. Projects and proposals are put forth in the same manner an advertising company tries to sell its idea to a business client: through multi-media presentations, elaborate visual graphics and a tea party.

Like an epic movie, the National Day event emphasizes scale: the greater the participant rate, the grander is the event perceived to be. This focus on scale means that there are no stars in this event; everyone is an anonymous extra in a crowded scene. But everyone is also an unpaid extra. The People's Association (an organizational arm of the dominant political party) uses its network institutions like community centers and resident committees to draw volunteers to dance, perform, march, raise placards, be cheerleaders, or enact any role in the parade. The Ministry of Education on an annual basis gets about fifteen schools to 'release' students to participate, and the Armed Forces fields some 500 soldiers to set the props for the *mise en scène*. While the military men in 1995 took two solid weeks to set the stage and spectator stands, some 12,000 participants (marchers, performers, dancers, cheerleaders, and so on) had to undergo six hours of rehearsals every Sunday for six months prior to the actual event (Lee 1995).

The intricacy and elaborateness of the planning and rehearsal of the parade are matched by the magnitude of absolute numbers to which the parade is targeted. Here, a range of strategies – spatial, populist and

technological – have been tried and tested throughout the years. Conventionally, the parade is localised in a sports field (*padang*) within the city district. The spatial experiment began on the tenth anniversary (1975), when the celebration was decentralised into ‘pocket parades’ held simultaneously at thirteen population concentrations. The intended aim was to bring the parades ‘closer to the people’, to instill a sense of ‘democratic’ and ‘grassroots’ celebration. However, because of the economic costs of duplicating parades, the difficulty of coordination, and the obstacles posed for live television broadcasting, this spatial attempt to reach the masses proved to be less than effective. Since 1984, parades have reverted to their centralized locus.

For thirty years, National Day parades have been dominated by militaristic elements (an issue which I will elaborate below). Military music tends to be solemn, very much like the background of a funeral procession, and military marches are deadly serious in the emphasis on drill, regimentation, discipline and order. By contrast, modern consumption practices centre around the pursuit of pleasure (Campbell 1995: 117). Elements of play and entertainment lie at the heart of popular culture. The consumption imperative obliges state élites to make concessions in order to win popular consent. In the modern age, hegemony is achieved not just through efficiency (by an élite skilled in the business of government administration), but also by appeasement (élites, however stoic they may be, must concede something to the hedonism of their subjects).

Accordingly, National Day parades since the 1980s have been commodified as partly entertainment. In an ocular age dominated by mass media, entertainment takes on the proportion of a spectacle (MacAloon 1984; Chaney 1993: 12). Here, ‘spectacle’ has specific features, being ‘a large-scale, extravagant cultural production that is replete with striking visual imagery and dramatic action and that is watched by a mass audience’ (Manning 1992: 291). The visual extravagance of National Day celebrations is made evident by laser displays, military stunts, fireworks, and floats. Since the mid 1980s, flashcard displays that form colourful patterns, logos and images have become a regular part of the National Day itinerary.

The populist attempt to engage Singaporeans to participate in National Day celebrations includes the admission of popular cultural items. In 1986, a local rock group was allowed to perform during part of the spectacle. In 1989, students sang ‘La Bamba’, choreographed steps of Michael Jackson’s ‘moon-walking’ and also break-danced. However, given the pervasive anti-Western xenophobia of state elites, and the apparent contradiction of ‘Western’ pop and the commemoration of things ‘national’, such items were subsequently banished or relegated to the end-of-the-day bash when a tamed version of carnival provides relief from the regimentation of the parade.

Another populist strategy to engage the masses is the introduction of songs: ‘There’s a Part for Everyone’ (1984), ‘Stand up for Singapore’ (1985), ‘Count on me, Singapore’ (1986), ‘We Are Singapore’ (1987), and ‘We Are the People of Singapore’ (1989). In 1994, a National Day concert called ‘Rhythm of the Nation’ plugged into the media star system to make the celebration ‘pop’. Idols of consumption such as local singers and soccer stars sang patriotic songs to the tune of pop melodies (Subramaniam 1994). Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, some Members of Parliament and government officials took to the stage in the finale, singing ‘We Are

Singapore'. For state élites, who are typically unrelenting in their policy decisions, strait-laced in their exhortatory speeches and austere in their sartorial codes to relax publicly in a moment of fun was a rare sight, a spectacle in its own right.

If consumption in the current age incorporates elements of play and compels even élites to engage in some minimal level of indulgence in the spirit of populism, then media technology reinforces such tendencies and transforms the event into a global commodity. Starting in 1994, tele-visual broadcasting of National Day celebrations was beamed 'live' into personal computers through the internet. Although the event is relayed on the global web of electronic networks, its intended audience consists mostly of Singaporean students studying in Australian, American, Canadian and British universities. One student from Ohio State University reportedly said, 'We're a small group of Singaporeans here but we're interested in watching the parade through the internet. We are patriotic guys' (*The Straits Times*, 4 August 1994).

THE KHAKI NATION

National Day in Singapore is commemorated through a series of events: a parade, post-parade party, fairs at community centers, dinners at electorate constituencies, and some cultural performances. However, none of these public ceremonies in any sense constitutes a 'carnival'. Carnivals like the Roman Saturnalia, the Feast of Fools, Mardi Gras, and Southeast Asian water festivals are marked by a spirit of licentiousness and rituals of inversion, which add a politically radical edge to their impact (Babcock 1978; Ladurie 1979; Bakhtin 1984).

Since community centers, resident committees and electorate constituencies are para-political organisations established by the dominant ruling party, fairs and dinners held at such locations are starchy events and formal occasions. In school, principals read the Ministry of Education message on character building and good citizenship to students. All these rituals constitute 'structure' rather than 'anti-structure' (Turner 1974). Even the post-parade party is orchestrated, closely supervised and delimited: there is a conspicuous absence of camp parody of the Mardi Gras sort and, within an hour, the crowd is made to disperse (*The Straits Times*, 11 August 1994).

By far the most significant part of National Day celebration is the parade, significant in terms of the numbers involved, visual spectacle, media focus and extent of preparation. And the parade is overwhelmingly military in emphasis. Indeed, all National Day parades have been a military enterprise, planned annually by colonels and lieutenant-colonels, led by sergeant majors, marched, staged, performed and de-staged by soldiers. Even the glossy souvenir programme is produced by the Ministry of Defence.

The sequence of each National Day parade follows the logic of military protocol: a school choir sings; hundreds of provost guards march; ministers arrive; spectators stand as the prime minister appears; guards salute as the president arrives with a fanfare; the national anthem is played; the president inspects the guards; the show begins with gun salutes, military stunts, fly-past,

drive-past, and march-past. In this schema, the highlights are always some military display, while civilians and students trail behind in the last half-hour of floats, show and dance.

Artillery units and armoured regiments rumble the streets with their tanks, mortars, guns, missiles, armoured vehicles and jeeps. In the 1990 drive-past, there were 250 vehicles from the army, police and defence forces. Here there is a demonstration of the state's monopoly of force. The military emphasis of the parade dramatizes the power dimension of the state, particularly with reference to violence.

Although a sense of oneness is promulgated in the celebration of Singapore's National Day, the parade institutionalizes separation and hierarchy. The ritual dramatizes roles in clearly differentiated ways: there are officials, participants and spectators. Officials and authorities are not the participants in the marching contingents or the dancing troupes. They are the reviewers, and their position of dominance is marked off from subordinates by an elevated position or platform from which they can look down upon people and comfortably observe the event. And within this viewing stand, there are finer distinctions of status and power spatially given in the seating arrangements.

If the parade were a carnival, the distinctions between reviewer, spectator and contingent would either dissolve or be reversed. If it were a festival, there would not be any clear line between participant and observer. Clearly, the National Day parade is not a fiesta of the masses, but a display of power and dramatization of hierarchy. Whereas a carnival or festival is a fluctuating and diffuse nucleus of individuals who enter and leave as they please, the National Day parade is a centralised unit ordered and orchestrated temporally from beginning to end and spatially from one corner of the stadium to another.

The rigid hierarchy of the event is further exemplified by the rank-order of the marching contingents: commando battalions, infantry regiments, police force, civil defence brigades, and uniformed school groups (national cadet corps, national police cadet corps). The uniformed school groups are miniature versions of the defence forces. Throughout the parade, the music played is militaristic: infantry brass bands, school military bands and police pipers. The civilian contingents tend to be represented mostly by civil servants and statutory board employees. Private organizations are led by males who are identified by their military designation as reservists.

The military drill and march symbolize the nation in its orderliness, discipline and obedience under a controlling center. In the parade, everyone has to obey the commands of the grand marshal, everything has to be coordinated, every soldier must march or move in turn with the music, following choreographed steps and sequences. Their unique identities submerged and drowned in uniform, the soldiers assume the psyche of a collective conscience as they parade in a series of formations that are artfully coordinated.

The militaristic elements, the rank-ordered hierarchy, and the orderliness and regimentation of the event render the National Day parade similar to the May Day ceremony in Moscow's Red Square before the Kremlin, Nazi Germany's military processions, and official rituals in Beijing, Hanoi and

Vientiane under communist rule (Scott 1990: 58). In Scott's aptly-phrased words, the parade is

a living tableau of centralized discipline and control. Its logic assumes, by definition, a unified intelligence at the center which directs all movements of the "body" ... The leaders stand above and to the side while, at their direction, their subordinates, ranged in order of precedence from most to least, marching in the same direction and in time to the same music, pass by in review. In its entirety, the scene visibly and forcibly conveys unity and discipline under a single purposeful authority. ... Any evidence of the disorder, divisions, indiscipline, and of everyday informality is banished from the public stage (Scott 1990: 60).

The resemblance of Singapore's National Day parades to state rituals in fascist and communist regimes is in large part a consequence of the military dominance of the parade. The military presence has been clearly felt since the first anniversary of Singapore's independence when the theme was 'national pride and confidence in the future' (1966). Militarization has continued to be tied up with the themes of subsequent anniversaries: 'rugged and vigorous Singapore' (1967), 'youth and ruggedness' (1968), 'work for security and prosperity' (1970), and 'total defence' (1985).

Why does the defence force occupy center stage in National Day parades? The answer to this question depends very much on the intended audience of such spectacles. Devashayam (1990: 50) argues that National Day represents a symbolic dialogue with Malaysia. In a sense, National Day in Singapore does not connote independence or liberation from colonial rule. The 9th of August 1965 was the day Singapore was expelled from the Malaysian Federation. Given this inauspicious expulsion, the display of military might in National Day parades calls Malaysia's bluff.

While boasting the strength of its weaponry and defence forces to neighbouring countries signals the viability of the Singaporean nation in the face of adversity, and conveys the message that Singapore is like a small but poisonous fish in the Southeast Asian seas, such military exhibitionism is also targeted to the local population, not only as visual entertainment of the *Top Gun* and *Star Wars* epic film variety, but also as reassurance of safety under the current political leadership. How far this reassurance is realistic or not is a moot point, but military exhibitionism usually indicates anxiety rather than security. It is precisely because Singaporeans are still not courteous that courtesy campaigns have been waged for more than twenty years to drum into people the need for behavioural change. So too, thirty years of annual displays of the defence forces serve to instill confidence where this is waning or lacking.

In sum, the militarization of National Day parades renders the parade a ritual of power and hierarchy, dramatizes the state's monopoly of force, personifies the nation by underscoring values of order, discipline and regimentation, and reassures the populace in the face of anxiety. In addition, the militarization of the parade masculinizes the nation. 'National service' in Singapore is clearly a gendered term referring to the military conscription of male youths of eighteen years of age. All males in Singapore, save the infirm,

the aged and the handicapped, are known as either active soldiers (those in current service) or 'operationally ready national servicemen' (those in reserve).

There is no feminine analogue to 'national service'; if there were, the most likely candidates would be a contingent of pregnant women marching in university gowns and mortarboards. Graduate mothers who procreate in line with the eugenic policy that the more educated a woman is, the more children she should have, would be deemed to have executed their duties and responsibilities of 'national service'.

CONSUMING NATIONAL DAY

How do individuals consume National Day? What are the levels of participation? How do they feel about such a celebration? Short of a representative sample survey, I will rely on various indicators – anecdotes, press reports, attendance numbers and other sources component – to generate a qualitative profile of the range of consumption experiences.

Audience enthusiasm is indicated by the scrambling for tickets to observe the parade. In 1994, thousands camped overnight at five distribution centers, some as early as noon on the day before to line up for tickets. July 1994 was also the period of the World Cup soccer finals between Sweden and Bulgaria, and some brought portable television sets while camping out in the queue for tickets. In the early morning, lines one kilometre long were formed and individuals came with relatives to maximize their entitlement of four tickets per person. The crowds here were potentially more riotous and disruptive than the actual spectators at the parade. Less than two hours was all it took to dole out the tickets (Pereira 1994).

Available figures, while based on estimates and uneven on categorical counts, are nevertheless impressive. In 1966, there were 23,000 participants. In 1969, there were 30,000 participants. In 1986, there were 70,000 people at the National Stadium (although no distinction was made between participant and spectator). In 1994, there were 60,000 spectators at the National Stadium. This quantitative estimate is a rough index of the intensity of audience euphoria, similar to that of a rock concert, a religious mass movement, or a major soccer match. Typically, there is much clapping, cheering, singing, and shouting of 'Singapore! Singapore!'. The nation is personified in the chants of 'Happy Birthday Singapore!' and 'My Singapore!'. Such objectification of an abstraction makes for ready identification with and acceptance of the symbol of 'nation'.

The scale of the spectacle induces audiences to recognise, even if some do not always accept, the deeper significance of the National Day parade. Since consumption generates common bonds and collective identities, the nation commodified and consumed becomes an imagined community of consumption. Shared mass consumption of the nation anchors the collectivity into a sense of nationhood. The majority of the National Day audience thus tend to be celebrants and believers of the myth of the Singapore nation.

This consumption community is not bounded by geographical borders. Singaporeans living in Osaka, Melbourne, Myanmar, Guangzhou and elsewhere observed National Day with a birthday cake, a flag ceremony,

singing of the national anthem, a fancy meal and an obligatory lucky draw (Tan 1994). The consumption community is also not limited to live spectators, but includes home-viewers who watch the parade on television or personal computers. One university student said that she was so moved by the event that she cried and wrote a letter to her overseas pen-pal about how proud she was of being a Singaporean. A more cynical interviewee conceded that he felt patriotic at least once a year during these celebrations.

A newspaper journalist wrote a confession about her conversion, 'How I was converted from cynic to proud Singaporean' (Nirmala 1994): 'I had seen the parade three times before and yet, I felt the goose-bumps. The Singapore spirit had hit me. Yesterday, this cynic became a convert. A cynic, who has toyed with the idea of working and living abroad, wondered why she wanted to walk away from a country that has so much to offer.'

Each year, the English press publishes visuals of happy faces of participants and spectators, and interviews with a range of Singaporeans about the parade. Here I cite a few examples from that range (10 August 1995):

The daring air display item told me that in Singapore, the sky is the limit. Then I heard the rumble of the tanks and it sounded as if thousands of soldiers were about to rush in and fight for my country. After that the guns on the tanks turned at the same time and same angle to salute the President. I have never seen something so well coordinated (18-year-old male student).

Seeing the army contingent reminded me of my three sons going for national service. The mobile column reminded me of the colonial days when my husband was with the police force and used to go for parades in Johor (65-year-old grandmother).

This is the first time I've been to a National Day Parade. I'm so touched, I could cry (17-year-old female student).

This was my 13th National Day parade (30th) and it was as wonderful as my first. When we sang our national songs, I could feel the oneness, the warmth and togetherness. There we were, sitting, sweating and singing together. I was just overwhelmed with pride (33-year-old woman).

THE REPRESSED CONSUMERS

Although the above responses demonstrate the emotive intensity of some audience members responding to the National Day parade, they are not to be taken as representing the unanimous consensus of a national collectivity. Just as pop fans who are moved by the melody or tune of a song need not comprehend the literal and symbolic meanings of its lyrics, so too national fans entranced at the specific moment by the mobilizing power of a ceremonial ritual need not at other times express loyalty or patriotism (Street 1986). If consumption produces identities and imagined unities, these are produced at

the point of the consumption experience; lingering effects of such identities and unities are a matter of empirical problematic.

Moreover, there is no known society so homogeneous and its members so docile that hegemonic rule is complete. There are back-stages, 'hidden transcripts' and pockets of resistance that elude official control and public knowledge (Scott 1990). In particular, the media in Singapore are unlikely to give voice to dissenting individuals and alternative views. One has to read between the lines to tease out an unknown number of repressed consumers.

In the report on overseas Singaporeans celebrating National Day abroad, an incidental reference was made to a lucky draw at the end of all the rituals of flag and anthem observances (Tan 1994). Lucky draws can be said to be a typical 'Singaporean' way of enticing consumers to buy a product and luring individuals to participate in some official function. In the latter context, the lucky draw always takes place at the end of the event after all the ceremonial rituals have been performed; this is to make the participants stay till the end.

This issue raises questions about the extent of voluntarism and the motive for participation, and these have consequences for the reception of the event. In National Day parades, not all school children willingly sacrifice their time but are cajoled into doing so by teachers, and in return they chalk up points for their extra-curricular grades in their report cards. Similarly army boys are compelled to represent their units, to put up the stages, to marshal the crowds or to clean up the aftermath in exchange for relief of guard duties in their barracks and bonus rest-days.

Among spectators, the motive for attending the parade may be less than patriotic. Each spectator gets a parade kit that varies annually in content, from candies to torch-lights, souvenirs and miscellaneous paraphernalia. These free items attract children who tend to be easily irritated by the inconvenience of the parade: the long lines to get to the seats in the stadium, obstruction of viewing by big-sized adults, the uncertainty of rain but certainty of humidity, and the need to comply with the orders of the parade commander to remain still, stand or otherwise sit.

In the case of adults, the urge to queue is part of the Singaporean *kiasu* character. *Kiasu*, which literally means 'afraid to lose out to another person', is a form of competitive self-aggrandizement based principally on an assumption that the object of desire is finite and limited. Carried to the extreme, the *kiasu* habit confuses ends with means: one may join a queue without knowing what it is for, but nevertheless one assumes that since so many people are in the line, it must be for something highly desirable. So Singaporeans queue endlessly for free gifts, for homes, for buffet spreads, for school enrolment, for stocks and shares, and for National Day parades. If the object of the queue (to partake in the essence of nationality offered by the parade) is subordinated by the desire to get the tickets just because everyone is getting them, then the spirit of the parade tends to be missed. Nevertheless, the *kiasu* act of queuing in such a manner is 'doing Singapore', ethno-methodologically speaking.

In addition to the involuntary engagement of some National Day participants, and the confused motivations of spectators, there are groups of Singaporeans who escape media attention by virtue of their absence or their flight. These people take the National Day as nothing more than a public

holiday, an opportunity to travel abroad, especially when there is a long weekend. They are the resistant consumers insofar as they escape the onslaught of nationalist images by fleeing abroad. Others prefer shopping to watching the parade. But in shopping, they paradoxically 'do Singapore' in two senses; firstly since shopping is widely acknowledged as a Singapore activity of consumption, and also since shopping at this time of the year is to participate in the 'Singapore Sale', an event concocted by the tourist authorities in order to boost retail sales.

Contestations over the meaning of National Day have taken place in the letters ('Forum') page of the news media (*The Straits Times*, 3 September 1994, 15 September 1994, 8 September 1995). The debates concerned the representation of the national flag. One reader wrote that hanging the flag on the patio or window-sill of an apartment is an expression of patriotism. Noting that half of the population, especially those living in private housing, did not display flags, he concluded that these Singaporeans had no love for their country and urged the government to penalise these delinquents. In rebuttal, a second reader charged that patriotic fervour could not be gauged by the flying of the flag in one's apartment.

The polysemic meanings of the national flag clearly depend on the context of consumption. Part of the meaning of the flag is circumscribed by the state, which stipulates the time of the year the flag can be displayed. The differentials in flag display in public housing estates depend on the location of apartment blocks. Residents of blocks that flank the main street are given free flags, while residents of older housing estates and of blocks tucked away in obscure corners do not receive the flags free. Those who belong to and participate in the para-political institutions of the dominant political party (PAP), like community centers and resident committees, also receive the flags as gifts.

Because the ruling political party in Singapore is a dominant party, and claims to represent 'Singapore', there is a conflation between Singapore and the PAP. By association, the Singapore flag takes on the meaning of the PAP too. The differential distribution of flags based on support for PAP institutions reinforces this conflation. Thus, Singaporeans who resist the flag do so in order to dissociate themselves from others who are PAP supporters or sycophants (*The Straits Times*, 3 September 1994). Those who are able to differentiate between loyalty to the nation and loyalty to the PAP thus refuse to hang the flag.

CONCLUSION

The theatre of power expressed in the form of state rituals and public spectacles is found in monarchies, oligarchies, dictatorships, democracies and republics alike (Cannadine 1987: 6). Singapore's National Day parade is so highly structured, so meticulously coordinated, so scripted to a protocol and so hierarchically arranged that it resembles communist state rituals more than street carnivals. Its structuredness underscores the values of order, discipline and compliance.

This study of consumption of the parade acknowledges the existence of both patriotic zeal and resistant indifference. The latter is repressed by social institutions like the media, which do not feature alternative and dissenting voices. If these voices were given legitimate expression, the polysemic meanings of nationalism would be more clearly and openly expressed.

Short of this free articulation of multivocality, the category of repressed consumers suggests that nation-building in Singapore again bears resemblance to the Soviet model of socialist realism. Socialist realism was the state formula for aesthetics in the Soviet Union. Art should picture reality, not in terms of an accurate portrayal of society, but in terms of what that society should be. Art should picture life, not as it is, so much as life as it should become (Schudson 1986: 215). So fiction should dramatize politically correct heroes, art should inspire people to socially correct behaviour.

Nation-building in Singapore follows this logic of socialist realism by suppressing social realities and replacing them with social ideals as defined by state elites. Social reality is suppressed insofar as dissent is nullified, social divisions based on ethnicity, class and other categories are glossed over by 'unity in harmony' slogans (1978), and history is erased through collective amnesia (nationalist images in Singapore seldom refer to the past for inspiration). In place of these realities that are repressed, the social ideals to be emulated are spelled out in National Day themes: 'national pride and confidence' (1966), 'youth and ruggedness' (1968), 'productivity and progress' (1972), 'self-reliance' (1976), 'teamwork' (1981), 'total defence' (1985), and so on.

Even if part or most of these ideals are achieved, the social realities do not disappear. They mutate into resistant forms. Not given expression, they lie dormant. Members of the nation, as an imagined community, can pretend such social realities do not exist, but nevertheless they do.

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