Materializing the Metaphors of Global Capitalism and Democratic Resistance

Abstract

Material things, such as objects, commodities, the built environment etc., are materializations of metaphors, that is, their meanings are derived from chains of signification initiated by their creators and interpreters (and often have little to do with their bare ‘descriptions’). These meanings are conveyed through texts and images, which are elements in a politicizing process, given that power/knowledge relations pervade societies. This paper will examine the way that global capitalism materializes metaphors in conjunction with the way that democratic resistance attempts to meet these challenges, taking Singapore as the site of a contextual study. Both the Singaporean state, and its democratic ‘resisters’, can be understood as engaged in a practical form of science fiction.
Materializing the Metaphors of Global Capitalism and Democratic Resistance

What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter (Butler 1993: 9; emphasis in original).

These new means of vitalization [in contemporary capitalism] could be described as a shift in governmentality … although I have become increasingly sceptical of this terminology of late, most especially because it seems to me to be unable to easily deal with shifts in the nature of materiality (Thrift 2005: 5, 10; emphasis in original).

Introduction

Metaphors are the way that the material world acquires meaning through processes of inscription (into ‘given’ objects) and transformation (as objects are produced through technologized human systems). The latter process is a familiar one, in that ideas become material realities, where these are not only simple objects but also, for example, the built environment, and perforce all the social systems thereby engendered (which we now know as human ‘technologies’). These are systems of meaning (not mere ‘behaviour’) through which humanized realities are enacted. They are therefore understood as ‘produced’ (Davis 1998; 2006). By contrast, the former process (i.e. inscription of meaning into ‘given’ objects) is somewhat disguised, because produced objects become mere ‘givens’ when their constructed character fades to a memory, collective or individual. From that point ‘given’ objects are then merely reflected in descriptive or factual (rather than in ‘constructing’ or ‘producing’) discourses (Klein 1998). Neither ‘given’ nor ‘produced’ objects have meanings qua objects; meanings arise (variously) through the discourses and processes of construction and description just mentioned (Wittgenstein 1958).

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1 This paper is heavily indebted to the published and unpublished work of, and further ideas in correspondence and conversation with, Kenneth Paul Andrew Sze-Sian Tan (National University of Singapore) and Paul E. Amar (University of California, Santa Barbara). My debts here extend far behind my direct citations of their work to their help in directing me to other works and literatures cited here. I owe another important debt regarding ‘catachresis’ to conversations with David Howarth (University of Essex) conducted at a European Consortium for Political Research Workshop on ‘The Politics of Metaphor’ held at the University of Granada, Spain, in April 2005.
Literal language is dead metaphor; or to put the matter the other way round, the supposed line between literal language, and ‘mere’ metaphor or ‘fancy’ figure of speech, is itself a trope (Shapiro 1985-86). That is, what counts as literal language, supposedly accurate for ‘descriptive’ purposes, and what then counts by contrast as ‘mere’ rhetoric or ornamentation, is going to vary, depending on the purposes and proclivities of the writer and the languages and cultures through which a politics of truth, objectivity and factuality is constructed and enforced (Charteris-Black 2005). If truth, objectivity and factuality are (supposedly) the really forceful ‘building blocks’ of language, why then do writers deploy language in an alternative register? Why is there any metaphorical language at all? The answer is that whatever is to count as ‘literal’ requires an ‘other’ by way of contrast, else we do not grasp the force of the claim to factuality that literal language aims to command (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). But the process also works the other way round: what might strike us as an extravagant and ‘unreal’ metaphor may be literalized by defining, explaining and realizing it as a materialization as construction proceeds from concept to result (Butler 1999).

Overall this is a process of catachresis: the ‘forcing’ of language into unexpected comparisons and similes, neologisms and imagery, through which new understandings and realities (including materialized ones) are produced intersubjectively, hence politically, in a setting where power is always an issue. This is a verbal mirror of the disciplinary power through which human subjectivity is also produced (to go along with the new understandings and realities), and it catches the disruption caused to ‘what already is’ in cultural contexts through which this process of social transformation operates (Howarth 2000). Not that long ago ‘man in flight’ was a ‘mere metaphor’, a trope, a myth, a fantasy, a façon de parle for what could never be; now we have pilots, flight attendants and a peculiar subjectivity in self-trained ‘frequent flyers’. Methodologically it is productive to take metaphors seriously as much more than mere decoration or hyperbole, because they are, as I argue below, a guide to who wants to do what to whom and when. Thrift notes both that contemporary capitalism reproduces itself through a ‘hyperbolic view of the future’ and that the ‘cultural circuit of capital … has the power to make its theories and descriptions of the world come alive in new built form, new machines and new bodies’, and we might add, new subjectivities (2005: [vi], 11).

The overall objective of this paper is to highlight not just the perlocutionary force of language (deployed through the tropological distinctions that establish a productive relationship between ‘the literal’ and ‘the metaphorical’) but to push this understanding of the political process further towards an understanding of ‘the fantastic’ as that which precedes ‘the realized’. Or in other words, literalizing the metaphors of global capitalism and democratic resistance is a process best understood as a practical form of science fiction.

Science present and science past/Are both perhaps present in science future

As a genre, science fiction rates poorly on characterization and the ‘human’ dilemmas on which conventional novels meditate. By contrast it rates highly on fictive projects of social construction through which familiar realities are somewhat estranged and adjusted, but only somewhat, and then made visible as a ‘future’ (often spatialized in galaxies ‘far, far away’). Science here acts both as a constraining and enabling trope. The literary form ‘fantasy’, as such, is freer, and alters normalized realities into fictive ones with unbounded magic.

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3 Contra Thrift 2005: 2, 97, where the ‘imaginary of the medieval world’ and ‘fantasy’ are mentioned but not science fiction.
Science, by contrast, suggests more contact with existing material truths and technologies (themselves said to be the outcome of prior science already known and understood in the reader’s real world). It also suggests more lifelike and practical possibilities for adjustment in some realizable future (much as the reader is assumed to view present social technologies retrospectively as already a success for science). Of course all is not necessarily utopian in this genre, and dystopias are certainly possible and lurk as a threat (from ‘within’ or ‘without’, e.g. mutants, aliens). Indeed science-gone-wrong is a judgemental option for making sense of the past, so all is not optimism, and the best of the genre involves subtle negotiations and ambiguities around this discursive binary (Roberts 2000; Falzon 2002).

Policy-making and policy-resistance is much the same kind of activity, but one where imagination and creativity may be self-acknowledged, though seldom if ever the fictive and author-driven character of the enterprise as science fiction. After all, the ‘real’ world is supposedly non-fictional, otherwise how could we tell a novel from a policy-proposal or resistance-strategy? The answer to this question involves an acknowledgement that the fact/fiction genre binary is another mutually constitutive and self-defining trope, much like the literal/metaphorical one located, in the above discussion, in discourse itself. The fact/fiction binary is created tropologically through the deployment of vocabularies that denominate the literal and the metaphorical, and work discursively to set us firmly in one genre or the other. To put the matter in political terms, our use of language is genre-driven, and it is through this selectivity that genre is established and ready intelligibility (supposedly) secured. Doing this ‘wrongly’ results in alleged unintelligibility and disciplinary action, as the constraints of power weigh in. Policy-briefs and resistance-activities are not packaged as science fiction, nor priced and sold in fantasy bookshops or online sites (Grant and Oswick 1996; Yanow 2000). However, the catachrestic project in this paper is an argument that resists these selective and constraining processes of ready intelligibility in order to press hard on the fantasy and fictionalizing aspects of political imaginations as a socio-material system à venir (Derrida 1994).

Singapore is a particularly interesting place to watch this occur, as it is almost uniquely a city-state, and therefore lacks the national (and in some other notable cases ‘state’ or regional layers of government) through which city policies must be negotiated politically and then carefully represented. Moreover its centralized and authoritarian regime, while hardly transparent, nonetheless provides certain direct and easy-to-track cases where metaphors are developed for literalization and therefore materialization (which is not to say that these policy initiatives are at all successful, necessarily, even in their own terms). Singapore also highlights ‘democratic resistance’ in an accessible way, because the overt movements to promote democracy in an authoritarian and (basically) one-party state, controlled by a ruling clique of business elites, must operate in the full glare of the media through which globalized capitalism articulates – more than a little hypocritically – an ideology of civil liberties and human rights, and some Singaporeans have not been slow to depart from ‘home-town’ values and live some aspects of their lives – virtual and literal – in ‘another world’ where these values really matter (Tan 2008).

Globalization and globalism

Globalization is most often understood as a commoditized flow of products, ideas, people, information and images through global marketplaces where ‘self-expanding value’ accumulates as monetized capital (Marx 1996: 566), Updated, this is a theory of ‘soft capitalism’:
[The] juggernauts of finance and information technology and regulation have interwoven with new developments to produce new possibilities for profit … the discursive power of what I call the ‘cultural circuit’ of capitalism, the changing form of the commodity, and the pivotal role of space and time as not merely metrics but resources … I want to understand capitalism as a vital intensity, continually harvesting ideas, renewing people, reworking commodities and recasting surfaces -- for the sake of profit, of course, but also because capitalism is now in the business of harnessing unruly creative energies for its own sake (Thrift 2005: 5-6, 16-17).

While neither completely indifferent to culture, nor completely unconstrained by politics, there is a trajectory of global commodification and economic power differentials (accompanied by disciplinary and subversive violence in various forms) traceable over some hundreds of years (Steger 2003; Barkawi 2006). As a concept ‘globalization’ marks an acceleration in technologies and subjectivities that shrink space and time to a continuous present in a global village for some persons, and not – or not as yet – for others, given patterns of inclusion, exclusion, resistance and aggrandizement. These occur as resources are made, and made scarce (Luke 1989).

Globalism has been conceptualized as an ideology through which globalization (itself a catch-all for numerous ‘combined and uneven’ processes) can be presented as an inevitable, irresistible, unstoppable and ultimately progressive triumph of capitalism and/or civilization, where trade-offs and alternatives are ignored or discounted. While there are other grand narratives through which quite different pasts, presents and futures are articulated (e.g. various religious and/or anti-capitalist ideologies), the globalist version of the worldwide recent past and prognosticated future is the one that has the most corporate and state funds available to advertize itself, and the most image-conscious ‘branding’ experts to work on its behalf (Steger 2002; 2004).

What, however, is ‘image’, and what is ‘branding’? How do these work, or more directly (continuing the science fiction theme), how do practitioners of these services (and the corporate consumers of these products) think that they work? Moreover how does this operate for ‘resisters’? What spatialized and enacted ‘imaginaries’ are deployed to make what they do intelligible? While current communications theory proceeds from assumptions of mutually assured slippages in intelligibility (between sender and receiver of ‘messages’), and indeed sometimes celebrates mishearing, irony, reversal, resistance, subversion and reappropriation on the part of receivers, there is a certain in-built authoritarianism in the notion of sender, and, in my catachrestic mode of thought, an obvious link to authorization and authorship (Crowley and Mitchell 1994).

**Global capitalism and global cities**

What makes a global city? This is itself a category of aspiration and a recursive political project. It takes elites (in some loose sense related to influence and visibility, as well as control of economic investment and media resources) to ‘buzz’ this and initiate a process that incurs risks (Sassen 2001). The risks are failure at home and abroad on indicators that are set ‘out there’ and not secured within the policy-process itself. The payoffs are economic and reputational for individuals and groups (shared out – or not – on terms that they themselves strive to set). There are no agreed criteria either in the academic or ‘other world’ of elite and media judgement, nor do the shifting and emerging criteria necessarily show much
consistency. You have at first to claim to ‘be one’, and then to ‘make the case’ as you go along (Ashworth and Voogd 1990).

The presumption, of course, is that this ‘branding’ will be accepted in the wider world and bring measurable economic benefits (as reckoned within the terms of global capitalism), and that the city’s inhabitants will re-form themselves (at least somewhat), ‘rising’ to the challenge, and certainly not undermining, subverting or visibly contradicting the ‘hype’, that is, the science-fictional hyperbole through which the claim is made (Amen, Archer and Bosman 2006). As with any discursive project, there is also a process of ‘othering’, that is, the designation of what (and therefore who) does not belong in the aspirational global city; in logical and emotional terms, global city-dwellers need to know who they are not (or what they must leave off being) in order to understand the transformations that they are expected to sustain. The identification, control, domestication, exclusion, erasure and sometimes eradication of populations ‘other’ to the global city project is an on-going dynamic with highly spatial, visibly politicizing and harshly policing practices involved, though these effects vary considerably between cases (Amar n.d.). Summing up, Thrift comments:

… the kind of subject positions that are deemed worthy of managers and workers are increasingly similar to the kinds of subject positions that define the worth of the citizenry … This is particularly true of that network of global cities where these tenets are most likely to be put into action (2005: 93).

Singapore saw all these things come into play in aid of its initial transformation into a global city during the 1960s and 1970s and henceforth into the 1990s. Set adrift from its Malaysian hinterland, and capitalizing on its history as a regional entrepôt, Singapore in that period set itself the task of moving its population into manufacturing industries exporting to the region and the world, rather than servicing a hinterland. What was an effectively one-party authoritarian state cultivated a version of ‘traditional’ values emphasizing patriarchal concepts of deference and obedience (loosely identified with Confucian teachings and ‘traditional’ Chinese cultures). It also practised forms of discipline and surveillance through which common forms of economic and interpersonal risk were managed for client groups, such as the urban working class, through which the manufacturing/exporting strategy of wealth creation was supposed to operate (Tan 2003b).

However, by the 1990s Singapore’s economic success had played itself out in the context of the global capitalism through which competitor cities and countries had been able to undercut it economically in terms of labour costs, inward investment, productivity gains and net returns. The regime was thus made to confront a systemic dilemma, for which there are a variety of responses at the national, civic or enterprise level. Managed decline is not unknown, nor is regression and even overt resistance. As a corporate enterprise, Singapore chose transformation and re-branding as a global city of a different kind, namely one further up the value-chain in economic terms, and further up the reputational scale in media and elite assessments. The regime’s policy-making elites envisaged the (science fictional) transformation of Singapore into a knowledge-based economy where goods and services would derive from brains-in-charge of machines rather more than hands-working-as-machines, or at least they envisaged that the leading edge of an economy set in those terms would then provide for an increasing array of further service industries over and above those supplying food, shelter and the basic goods of technologized life (which on this model would be increasingly imported) (Thrift 2005: ch. 5).
However, exactly how was this transformation of key sectors of the economy supposed to be accomplished? The problem was particularly acute because the political culture of ‘traditional’ working class economic securities and ‘traditional’ working class moralistic values fitted comfortably neither with transformation as such, nor with creativity as such. In relation to this deliberately constructed and cultivated ‘tradition’, the government and elements of its client groups had already demonized ‘deviant’ middle class intellectuals as pro-change (and therefore anti-‘tradition’ tout court) and pro-Western (and therefore anti-‘traditional’ values). By shifting the city’s economic gears in relation to globalization (understood in a particular way), and in accepting the globalist ideology (however tacitly), the regime risked trouble with its client-base nurtured in working class ‘tradition’, and also risked failure in finding, stimulating and protecting the new information and other ‘high-tech’ entrepreneurs who were supposed to generate the economic activity, and the visible ‘branding’, that would update Singapore as a global city success (Landry and Bianchini 1995).

Given its history, ‘sexing up Singapore’ is a surprising project. The regime’s construction of working class ‘tradition’ had been puritanical in character, emphasizing hard work, family- and home-centred marital life intimately connected with an extended family and concomitant homogeneous community, hierarchical inter-generational solidarity, export-driven economies of material production, personal sacrifice and saving for the future, limited birthrates and a highly self-conscious, and economically conscious, approach to sex, viewed in terms that were essentially, necessarily and morally reproductive (only). The demonized image of ‘Western’ decadence, by contrast, was represented as individualistic, non-monogamous, promiscuous, even non-heterosexual, consumer-oriented, directed towards immaterial products, encouraging of frivolous encounters in heterogeneous ‘international’ environments, experimental, evanescent, anti-puritanical, present-oriented, risk-taking, subversive of ‘tradition’ and its supposed values, in love with change, and thus in ‘traditional’ Singaporean terms, decadent, shallow, dangerous and threatening not just to individuals but to ‘public order’. There would obviously have to be considerable care invested in metaphor-selection in order to get the project underway, and to minimize risk to the regime (Tan 2003b).

One instantly obvious danger was that the process of ‘loosening up’ could easily get out of hand, not only alienating traditional working-class client groups but also stoking up intellectual, middle-class and ‘internationalized’ demands for ‘pro-democracy’ reform of the polity, its institutions, practices and politicians. Creative re-branding has its challenges in terms of conceptualization and publicity; the bigger challenge lies in the construction of ‘light touch’ disciplinary institutions and agencies through which humans can be transformed in a predictable way into the desired mindset. The government in Singapore thus committed itself to managing the metaphors of transformation, and managing individuals and groups to fit the metaphors. Moreover it also had ambitions of influencing, while of course surpassing, its Southeast Asian neighbours, and indeed of advancing its position in the world hierarchy of global cities and the financially-driven league tables of globalized capitalism (Thrift 2005).

Sex is not timeless; it has a history. And it is ‘private’ only in so far as ‘the private’ is defined and managed by governments (whether the process is authoritarian or democratic) (Evans 1993). Moreover the term functions as a shorthand for a wide variety of co-constitutive concepts loosely identified with human and animal physiology and evolution, reproductive capacities and child-rearing practices, sexual activity in some only vaguely defined and open-ended sense, including ‘object’ preference and stereotypical patterns and consistencies, as well as differential power relations between the sexes and concomitant struggles for and
against ‘equality’ (Fausto-Sterling 2000). The term also plays a central role in concepts of ‘family’ life with or without monogamous marriage, including relations of divorce, adoption, ‘caring’, dependency and the ‘extended’ family (Phelan 2001). No one in any culture escapes this web of discursive production through which identity, subversion, discipline and resistance are variously defined and individually negotiated.

However, the supposed line between ‘the personal’ and ‘the emotional’, on the one hand, and ‘the public’ and ‘the economic’, on the other hand, tends to erase the moment-by-moment integration of these things as lived experience. Intriguingly the government in Singapore fostered high-profile ‘economic’ reports, and low-profile policies of ‘toleration’, that constructed creativity as a metaphor for the kind of sex its planners construed as central to the transformation of some persons in society. This was in defiance of the dominant and dominating ‘traditional values’ that the regime had created and had endorsed for perpetuity. Now, it seems, some Singaporeans (even but not exclusively immigrant or ‘new’ ones) were due to be transformed in a way that transcends any commonplace mind/body dichotomies, into wealth-generators who would make Singapore a global success. The covering terms for new style minds/bodies, used by government agencies (e.g. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself, and their favoured property-developers, were (in various locutions) ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘bohemian’ (Tan 2003b). The One-North science and technology park cum creative living and lifestyle property development reproduces this textually and visually in its current web-based ‘come-ons’:

Narrow roads that wind around the ubiquitous Black and White houses create a closely-knit cluster of residential housing. Constructed around the 1940’s, the Black and White walk-up apartments and semi-detached houses have now become home to a community of artists, teachers and actors. On the other hand, as part of the one-north development initiative, Wessex Estate is slated to be a hub for the creative enclave. It is envisioned as a place where the gathering of diverse and creative minds will engender a bohemian culture that transcends norms and boundaries. Wessex Estate is easily accessible to amenities such as Colbar, an all-time favourite coffee shop, the Tanglin Halt Cooked Food Centre, Tanglin Halt Market. and Tanglin Trust School (One-North Website/WessexEstate).

This paper is not, however, a discussion of policy-changes in Singapore relating to sex and how it was represented and policed at a particular time in ‘the present’, subsequent to some prior point of reference in ‘the past’, though obviously this could be a subject worth pursuing as a matter of historical and political interest. Nor is it about the practices and practicalities of on-the-ground policy-implementation in terms of commodified sex of any kind. Indeed ‘sex’ was not the policy at all, or only in a very ambiguous and barely acknowledged way. Rather this is an enquiry into the articulations of metaphor in which ‘creativity’ became an idea through which the transformation of Singapore was crucially envisaged in terms of human subjectivities (i.e. minds/bodies), and in terms of the built environment and concomitant codes and cues. It was thus a theme in transformative image-making and city-rebranding.

Why was ‘creativity’ the ‘empty signifier’ of choice? And with what ideas and images was it filled? This turned out to be a process of symbolic synecdoche, that is the deployment of parts for wholes, where the parts have a complex and risk-ridden symbolic structure, and the whole is never fully specified (and never could be, anyway). As the phrase goes, it is ‘image-making’. Ultimately, though, it was intended to have policy consequences and measurable, visible, profound and profitable economic effects. Overall Singapore embarked on a massive attempt to fulfil the hypothesis, articulated in the literature of business and management, that
there is an important and imperative productive connection between regimes of sexual tolerance and the in-migration, development and retention of the ‘creative class’ in ‘the city’ (Florida 2002). As Thrift says, ‘Singapore has become something of an experiment in government through management theory’ (2005: 14).

The Economic Development Board of Singapore, in its high-profile strategy document ‘Industry 21’, explains the proposed vision very succinctly:

The knowledge-based economy will rely more on technology, innovation and capabilities to create wealth and raise the standard of living. For our knowledge-based economy to flourish, we will need a culture which encourages creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as an appetite for change and risk-taking (quoted in Thrift 2005: 100).

The contention in this paper is that images are crucial in transformative political strategies through which results, which are not themselves fully in that image, are produced. Rather one image (e.g. ‘creativity’) stands for another (e.g. ‘sexual diversity and tolerance’), and the communication strategy assumes that receivers of this message have the hermeneutic skills to decode it correctly. ‘Traditional’ constituencies were meant to decode it as mere image, rather than any form of threatening change or practicality that would impinge unduly on their valued securities (though arguably this was disingenuous on the part of the regime, as transformation could hardly be contained as securely as it wanted people in this particular constituency to believe – or feel). ‘Intellectual’ and ‘middle class’ potential constituencies, heretofore somewhat demonized by the regime, and somewhat subversive of it (or at least disenchanted and discreetly restive), were meant to decode the message in ‘creativity’ as the intellectual and cultural liberation (albeit externally managed) that they had hoped for, some of the most visible incidents and issues of which were explicitly to do with ‘sex’. It was thus the cue to realize a ‘freer’ and so more ‘vibrant’ and ‘creative’ Singapore from which they would also benefit economically, and perhaps politically (though here again, disingenuousness kicks in, in that the regime’s appetite for coopting ‘creative’ thinkers into the political process was decidedly limited). The strategy was therefore almost one of cultural apartheid between presumed social classes, managed spatially through a built environment of culturally ‘creative’ spaces distanced in geographical and semiotic terms from ‘traditional’ ones where ‘family values’ reigned, undisturbed by anything ‘objectionable’ (Tan 2003b).

The Report of the Remaking Singapore Committee reproduced the creativity/tolerance nexus within a presumed context of globalization and an acknowledgement of globalism, outlining a number of recommendations through which policies were mapped to spaces, and spaces were to be built and funded, such that this highly binarized vision would be fulfilled:

To be a vibrant hub for talent and innovation, we [sic] need to provide an environment and lifestyle that matches the expectations of a better-educated, more discerning population. As society shifts its preferences, it is inevitable [!] that the restrictions that govern expression and define society’s tolerance level will have to be adjusted as well … Whilst law and order concerns remain valid, it is timely to calibrate the government’s approach towards public expression to promote a more creative and innovative society and culture. We need to find a new balance that maintains law and order and yet does not stifle the creativity of our people (2003: 42).

Spatialization enters here under the rubric ‘Designate performance venues for relaxing rules’:
Singapore already has ‘designated spaces’ where specific rules have been relaxed to facilitate expression and experimentation … The ‘geographical divide’ in the application of rules has also been adopted for movies … The concept can be taken further by designating ‘spaces’ where rules could be relaxed further … (2003: 43).

Further recommendations called for the government to cease vetting play scripts, and to relax the rules on busking (2003: 44). While spatialized tolerance (and thus a universalized apparatus of intolerance) has a long history, and while the particularly authoritarian presumptions of the Singapore establishment are less well disguised here than in some places elsewhere (indeed, they are openly presumed and restated), the remarkable thing is the consistency with which ‘creativity’ as the supposed motor of the cyber-economy is relentlessly linked to a sci-fi ‘high-tech’ future via a purely metaphorical connection between artistic ‘experimentation’ and its supposedly ‘objectionable’ relationship to ‘traditional cultures and value systems’. The over-complexity of the narrative results from a mixture of metaphors that are not perceived as mixed or catachrestic, as that would undermine the force of the argument. Or to put it the other way round, transformative arguments proceed by disguising catachresis and thus proceeding towards literalization. ‘Obviously’, as the narrative would have it, artistic experimentation will involve challenges to ‘traditional’ values covering sex, gender and sexuality, and ‘obviously’, hi-tech industries cannot flourish without this kind of creativity and ‘different’ sexuality. Conversely, ‘cyber-sexy-city’ Singapore will only be a ‘science fiction’, not a real future, unless these ‘spaces’ are put in place.

Sex and the City in the Valley of the Geeks

How then to ‘remake Singapore’ in a way that articulated these complex political strategies? The more empty and symbolic the metaphors deployed, the better, as the last thing that this strategy wants to engage with is a real-life comparison city, which would make Singapore look second-rate and also-ran. It would also raise real-world issues and generate anxieties; both these would undercut what I have termed ‘cyber-sexy-Singapore’ as a metaphor of aspiration, where it would occupy a kind of unimpeachable purity and stay constant as a consistent object of citation. ‘Silicon Valley’ has obvious advantages in this respect. The creative and productive ‘knowledge economy’ in the San Francisco Bay Area (one way or another) generates an impressive array of statistics about itself, its significance in global wealth production, its wealthy workers who reside there, and its inevitably optimistic forecasts (over and beyond any bursts of the dot.com bubbles, and subsequent downturns and crashes, never mind the realities of low-paid legal and illegal immigrant labour etc. etc.). In less evidential terms, its image catches metaphors of future-oriented and futuristic thinking and building practices, lifestyles and mindsets, and moreover connotes the successful management of hippy anarchism within an environment of commercial (and therefore presumed socio-political) success. Writing in a letter to the New York Times, the Permanent Representative of Singapore at the United Nations, Kishore Mahbubani, outlined and defended his government’s plan ‘to help start-up companies, to encourage risk-taking, to be more tolerant of failure and to welcome foreign technology entrepreneurs’, all under a banner making explicit reference to the supposed ‘space’ and ‘place’ of knowledge-based, high-tech economic success:

‘Like Silicon Valley, Singapore Needs Time’

We are now encouraging creativity and innovation in school curricula and teaching.
We are also investing heavily in computers for education … a fully connected island will provide Singaporeans full access to cyberspace and every opportunity to express themselves (1999).

Moreover Singapore’s government-commissioned master-strategy from the ‘Remaking Singapore Committee’ (which was later very largely adopted as official policy) itself cited Silicon Valley, in one of its rare mentions of foreign comparators, noting that the National University of Singapore had chosen to establish its first overseas campus there (Tan 2003b):

The NUS College in Silicon Valley (NCSV) is based in the world renowned Silicon Valley, California, a region noted for its concentration of high technology start-ups. Started in July 2001, the College allows NUS students to experience living and working amongst the high tech communities of Silicon Valley … Students study entrepreneurship related and discipline based courses at Stanford University, one of the world’s leading research and teaching institution, located right in the heart of Silicon Valley (NUS Website/Overseas Colleges).

Most important of all in this context, ‘Silicon Valley’ is not actually a city or even a very identifiable set of locales. It is loosely associated with the industries located in and around certain municipalities (or more strictly, very selected portions thereof, very selectively viewed) between SoMa (‘South of Market [Street]’) in San Francisco itself, on down the peninsula through suburban San Bruno, exurban Mountain View and Woodside, small cities such as Santa Clara and Palo Alto, and ending roughly in San Jose, itself a suburb-turned-urban-sprawl of significant size and diversity. ‘Silicon Valley’ is thus a signifier that hovers over hard facts and soft thinking (Ross 2003).

What, however, has ‘Silicon Valley’ got to do with sex? The answer is … not that much more or less than anywhere else, at least in evidential terms. All the issues here are more of representation than attested behaviour or inclinations, and of course in this area any supposed facts are notoriously unreliable for obvious reasons. What counts as a ‘sexy’ lifestyle could be specified in representational terms (essentially the opposite of, or least somewhat challenging to, ‘traditional family values’), but whether anyone individually or collectively lives up to this would be an endlessly debateable question. Even in symbolic terms it is hard to see the connection between sex and Silicon Valley, given the ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ image of information industry top-earners, the often suburban character of the industry, and the hard-working habits and long hours that these ‘creative’ entrepreneurial activities supposedly require.

However, creativity is the link here between the two, and it works both ways (Caves 2000). That is, the ‘Sex and the City’ lifestyle stands in for creativity (notoriously lifestyle TV ‘shows’ such as that one are not about work), where ‘city’ and ‘sex’ are more or less the same thing by association. The association here is with ‘singles’, gay and other individualized, non-family-values proclivities and venues (Florida 2002). In so far as information industries are associated with non-manual labour, they are then identified as opposite to the ‘low’ educational levels and supposedly repetitive and ‘unthinking’ processes of manual work. Manual, low-paid and supposedly ‘uncreative’ work in ‘Silicon Valley’ is thus erased, and its undoubted connections with ‘high tech’ ICT industries are then used to constitute a narrative of economic ‘success’. This chain of metaphors works through an associational ‘logic’ of opposition and metonymy, all of which seems very tenuous in comparison with reasoning that conventionally counts as evidential and sound. My argument here is that sound,
evidential reasoning, as constructed discursively through metaphors of fact, objectivity, logic and science, is not necessarily the first port of call in the politics of policy-making. Indeed the politics of policy-making is never very much or very successfully configured in those terms. Rather within larger structures of metaphorical and symbolic linkage, factuality and logic, and their supposed persuasiveness, function as tropes, arguing credence for the incredible (Yanow 2000).

The following section is ‘in progress’ and requires further research in order to draw out the relationship between the argument and relevant literatures, both theoretical and Singaporean. The account below is based on Tan (unpublished).

**Pro-democracy ‘spaces’**

In relation to politics ‘space’ is obviously a metaphor, opposite to an object, i.e. it’s what is ‘in between’ objects. The above lengthy discussion of the enactment of globalized capitalism (as Singapore’s overarching economic policy) highlights the power of the state to enact objects (i.e. to construct meanings in the built environment, public policy, human technologies etc.), even when these meanings incorporate long and bizarre articulations of metaphor – knowledge economy, Silicon Valley, creativity, sexualities, ‘little bohemias’ etc. Populist resistance to state policies – and globalized capitalism – is unlikely to have resources to do more than deface what has already been constructed, i.e. to inscribe it (posters, graffiti etc.) with alternative meanings, and in a sense to make some objects do other work, e.g. lamposts or subway station walls, even using park benches as orators’ stands. ‘Private’ spaces are (relatively easily) politicized for meetings and suchlike (though just as easily policed in the literal sense), and virtual spaces (e.g. internet use) have much the same quality. Access to the ‘public’ media depends on newsworthiness, and the message that is communicated from there (whether in print or on radio or TV) depends on ‘news values’ and reader-response. Again, these are easy ‘spaces’ for policing for those who have the resources (whether ‘public’, privatized or ‘private’). Moreover these news and media ‘spaces’ are always and already constructed as political or easily politicized.

In these circumstances populist resisters sometimes turn to spaces understood as depoliticized, and in effect attempt a subversion, preferably one that ‘flies under the radar’ in terms of conventional policing. While ‘the political’ is always defined as serious in essence (i.e. not entertainment) and as sober-mined (i.e. not funny), the subversive counterpart to this is therefore satire and parody, both of which are as old as any politics for which we have records. Populist resisters in Singapore have accordingly spatialized and materialized the ideas of pro-democracy resistance as theatre (amongst other strategies). This of course relies on the presumption that theatre is (mere) entertainment, and therefore at least at some remove from ‘politics’, and that drama is by definition fictional or at least fictionalized, or as a last resort, not a ‘real’ intervention into politics, because politics and theatre are oppositionally defined in the first place.

The above discussion has mentioned that, despite this oppositional ‘framing’ of theatre as non-political, it is nonetheless easily policed when this (supposed) boundary is threatened. The authoritarian state in Singapore was never slow to subject theatre to considerable ‘public order’ regulation (and indeed specifically to ensure that it reflected only the ‘right’ values and ideals). This was – and still is – the case, through vetting, licensing, censorship and intimidation (though Singapore is hardly unique in this, and all societies exercise some public order restraints over public performances, or have the powers to, even if minimal and rarely
used). Theatre as a ‘space’ that is somewhat ‘apart’ from politics was thus subverted in practice by the state itself; paradoxically, this (barely) covert politicization by the state itself enabled resistance precisely because even tiny deviations from established values and mores were bound to stand out.

Obviously the game in this ‘space’ became one of cat-and-mouse with metaphors, where the arguably innocuous can be read as conformity, and the unarguably provocative can be read as resistance. In terms of changing the political subjectivity of Singaporeans, indeed in terms of changing their conception of what it is to be a human subject vis-à-vis globalized capitalism, there have been two notable theatre projects through which – following the lines of my previous discussion – a kind of science fictional social engineering has been attempted. These projects are no less dependent on the built environment, but not on newly built (or re-built or re-claimed) ‘objects’. Rather they depend on existing objects (theatres, parks, plazas etc.) and their redefinition as ‘spaces’ through which political activities (i.e. resisters’ theatre) can be enacted outside the ‘normal’ activities (e.g. recreation, ‘non-political’ entertainment) usually pursued there. ‘Normal’ is of course defined by what the state endorses or tolerates as such, or is willing to allow (or occasionally overlook), and this may also involve ‘private’ owners or ‘public’ authorities in the state’s network of policing and presumptions.

Two theatre groups in Singapore have been engaged with practices of resistance since the 1990s – both were challenging the undemocratic structure and practice of the Singporean state, and also a similar but broader set of issues concerning the penetration of globalized capitalism into Singapore, and the wider economic, social and aesthetic effects of this. Both derived their political philosophies from earlier theory and practice schematized as ‘forum theatre’ by Augusto Boal and others in the 1960s and 1970s. This involved a dramaturgy such that spectators would be transformed into protagonists (‘spect-actors’), and thus – in a further onward displacement – citizens would be empowered to change society. This is itself a kind of science fiction, producing the engaged and participatory citizenry earlier envisaged by Rousseau, but with updated technologies of personal and social change. It thus actualizes the tropes of the social contract literature through which liberalism, and ‘liberal’ democracy as a representative system, were themselves founded. Moreover it engages with the same questions that Marx later addressed, concerning the relationship between that form of government and globalized capitalism (Carver 2004). The Singaporean government was not slow to make life difficult for such ‘Marxists’, displacements into ‘mere’ theatre notwithstanding.

In the new, ‘creative’ and ‘cyber-sexy’ Singapore, though, matters are somewhat different, and following through with the ‘little bohemias’ trope, the state currently supports one of the ‘radical’ theatre companies (‘The NecessaryStage’), thus somewhat subverting the pro-democracy radicalism through which the original resisters had wanted to produce citizen-activism and regime-change. A certain didacticism on issues about which the state wants to advertise its managerial skills and ‘tolerance’ has crept in, e.g. HIV/AIDS and other sexual matters. The politicizing edge to the ‘experience’ is thus blunted; audience participation is less directive towards unscripted goals, because the issues singled out for ‘discussion’ are themselves determined. The contrasting group (‘Drama Box’) pursues a more demotic (Chinese-language) and spatially imaginative strategy, rather more consistent with Rousseauian ideals of citizenship: they gather crowds in public spaces, and thus make certain spaces ‘public’ in a new way that eludes state sponsorship and control, precisely because so few resources are required. They have even staged their politicizing experiences outdoors in multi-lingual settings involving migrant workers, thus eliding any line between mimesis and
drama, on the one hand, and life and politics on the other. But such moments are short-lived, and do not register very large in terms of social transformation, even in a place as small as Singapore. Singapore is, of course, a microcosm of globalized capitalism, and indeed, not very much else.

Conclusions

The overarching economic and social transformational strategy set out by the governmental regime in Singapore, and its pro-democracy resisters, is thus akin to the novelizing activities associated with science fiction, that is, a selective rearrangement of the present, holding some values, practices, technologies and environments constant, altering others, and then framing this account within a very broad-brush utopia/dystopia binary, thus generating a productive dramaturgy of insecurity/securitization (Gibson 1993). In this genre, relatively little effort goes into outlining the ‘small change’ of ‘minor’ things going wrong, given that technological and economic projections of ‘success’ define the whole project as such.

The state-sponsored articulation of metaphors that novelizes a relationship between ‘Silicon Valley’ (as an economic and social comparator of sorts for Singapore) and ‘sex’ (as a metonymy for professional-class technologized creativity) is thus intended to produce effects in Singaporean society, within a carefully managed strategy of visibility and ‘profile’, such that there is a real side to the ‘hype’, namely practices of sexual tolerance in contradiction to previous constructions of ‘family values’. Or at least there are hints and suggestions of new zones and regimes and objects, obviously still objectionable to some, that will now (or soon) be tolerated (toleration being an aspect of authoritarian rule, rather than a way of protecting democratic entitlements).

Similarly, but on a much smaller scale, the resistant activities of the two ‘radical’ theatre groups are intended to produce effects in Singaporean society (and indeed elsewhere through their international connections). Given that their conception of the democratic citizen relies on a self-generated critical perspective which requires grappling with any and all problems outside the narrow framework of capitalist consumption (i.e. an ‘economic’ framing of problems such that greater income and wealth is always the ‘right’ solution), it is unsurprising that both companies have taken themselves abroad both to enact and to teach the practices of enactment. While ‘The Necessary Stage’ occupies a somewhat co-opted position in Singapore, and is thus rather less resistant to global capitalism than its founders had intended, the more radical group, ‘Drama Box’, enjoys state-licensing for its activities, though not National Arts Council grants (which would be more overtly compromising).

Both theatre groups are testimonies to changes wrought on the Singaporean state, more than on the citizenry or indeed on global capitalism itself. Nonetheless social engineering, i.e. the production of a democratic ‘activist’ subjectivity, is always going to be difficult, and indeed global capitalism arguably promotes a ‘passive’ complicity with authoritarian decision-making (‘in the boardroom’) – theories of consumer democracy and economic choice notwithstanding. My point here has been not so much to weigh these movements against the obvious might of the Singaporean state, but rather to reframe their ‘spaces’ as resignifications of the built environment and their dramaturgy as resignifications of the familiar fact/fiction, spectacle/spectator, politics/entertainment, consumer/citizen binaries through which politics in the world of globalized capitalism must necessarily be articulated.
This paper has attempted to make sense out of the ‘bizarre logics’ at work in policy-making, and policy-resistance, where complex articulations of metonymy and opposition in catachrestic metaphors are the discursive constructs through which policy is formulated and ‘resistant’ realities created. While science fiction occasionally ‘comes true’, this is of course conceptualized as remarkable prescience or mere happenstance, because writers are not by definition the authors of realities. Policy-makers and theatre troupes, by contrast, are the authors of realities, and these realities come into being through processes of literalization and materialization that make the world meaningful – and inherently political.
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