Media and Myth-Making in Contemporary Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia

by Joseph T. Salazar

The study explores the connections between different media practices in three Southeast Asian countries in three different decades. These practices employ the biggest myth perpetuated in this age of information and technology, namely, nationalism. The changes affecting Southeast Asia from the 1980s to the present have been nothing but dramatic. Many of these changes reflect the blurring of the region's once exclusive national borders into a consolidated mass of cultural and economic practices reeking of global capitalism benefiting the new middle class. Surprisingly, the production of images and texts by media pertaining to nationalist sentiments has intensified and has become the center of many developmental efforts in the region. At the same time, the same practices have also managed to alienate local customs, traditions and cultures that do not comply with the mythological image of a modern Southeast Asia.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes illustrates how language cannot be separated from structures of ideology and power. For Barthes, meaning operates on two levels of signification—denotation and connotation— which are now common categories in the exploration of meaning. Denotation refers to the most commonly accepted "signs" or meanings of a word, while connotation is used to describe meaning inscribed through culturally constructed vestiges of signification. It is in the exploration of the latter that Barthes is able to interrogate samples of cultural material to unravel

their entanglement with the bourgeoisie's attempt to assert its own values and to maintain its own position of privilege. Wine, as he illustrates, can be taken — even until now — as a new signifier, expressing the idea of a healthy, robust, and relaxing drink, while masking at the same time health risks and the economic maneuverings of a product and a lifestyle that help to uphold the present social structure (Barthes, 2001: 1461-1465).

These insights led to a reformulation of the concept of myth. Once a source of knowledge dealing primarily with gods and heroes to explain both the commonplace and the phenomenal, myths now manifest the control of specific institutions in managing what everyone is expected to know and accept as true (Heidegger, 1977: 3-36). In this day and age dominated by rational thinking, the possibility of revaluating our present-day knowledge as cultural constructs becomes an exciting albeit daunting activity. How is it possible to deny the significance of symbols at this point when everything is, according to Heidegger, "mathematical", and denies us the possibility of seeing the myth we use in framing our own reality?

Media texts have added to this layer of mythological denial a sense of concealment and betrayal. Whether in the news or in the reenactments inside a documentary, media texts have laid different claims on the truth and resurrected the position science once enjoyed in the past—science being its own myth replacing the logic of religion. Whether it works for or against science, media also have effectively marginalized other avenues for seeing things, coercing us to discover other forms of framing our understanding, such as art, history, and religion, to find legitimacy through the specific vocabulary and syntax of science and media. This task is made more difficult when one considers science's multi-faceted technological machinery that has transformed media into numerous possibilities. McLuhan's messenger—the medium that has become interchangeable with the message itself—has morphed into a million odd forms demanding their own rationale, thanks to the numerous incarnations provided by technological innovation. What

is regarded as true is masked by the delicate and demanding task of understanding media practice and the contexts where such practices are played. In trying to understand the reality of media texts, it is not only crucial to understand just what myth is created and what processes are involved in its creation. It is also important to postulate the possibility that media have structured the very escalation of modernity itself in the same paradigms that the past used to codify the world through its own myths. This possibility, while radical from the fabled imagination once associated with myth, could not be more real in the perspective of the moment. The clear contextual borders that once structured the difference and containment crucial in mapping culture have disappeared, and have been replaced by the onslaught of economically consolidated global practice heralding the ascent of a disposition consciously seeking to replicate modernity.

Remarkably, this flattening of culture is the most commonly observed slant structuring the critical understanding of Asia. Postcolonial studies have made strides in pointing out how the naïve "orientalizing" of the West resulted in the homogenized cultural specificity in the East. The effects of such practices have never been felt more than in media themselves. Numerous Asian nations have been at odds with Western media regarding the latter's depiction of these Asian states. Islamic countries have fought hard against the stigma of terrorism triggered by 9/11, while countries like Cambodia have always been at odds with a militaristic identity that has associated them with the Khmer Rouge's trial of Pol Pot, mass killings, and human rights abuses. While the news provides the bulk of distortions that demand clarification and reworking, various misrepresentations of the Asian are also in need of rectification in movies, TV, music, and other avenues of culture involving the media. In *Images of the 'Modern Woman' in Asia*, Munshi examines the aftermath of gender significations and the corresponding power relations afforded by the global media and its alterations in local contexts. At the very core of these investigations are burgeoning media practices raising serious

questions about the integration of capital-intensive global activities in the production of culture-specific images of gender (Mushni, 2001). Similarly, Ien Ang's "Desperately guarding borders: media globalization, 'cultural imperialism' and the rise of 'Asia'" takes the same sentiment and expands it further by pointing out that "what constitutes 'Asian' cultural products, apparently, can only be defined in terms of their career as commodities on the global-market place—that is, a matter of market positioning, niche marketing" (Ang, 2001: 27-45). The result is a consistently narrow set of portrayals of social and cultural "others." These characterizations become particularly problematic when the groups being represented are not culturally proximate with those administering the media industries, indicating a cultural aesthetic that forces the image of the Asian to assume a "traditional" and therefore inferior stance.

At this juncture, it becomes crucial to ask: inferior to what? The truth media speak (or claim to speak) is by no means indicative of the truth (or versions of the truth) they champion. It is possible to rationalize that the language media speak is modernity itself, the standard by which all other cultural constructs are exacted. The political supremacy of democracy and the social ideology of human rights have paved the way for a consolidated vision of an imagined ideology that has not only been made real, but has also become primordial. Media has served as that all-knowing presence in the schema of manufacturing day-to-day reportage and entertainment that have paved the way for bringing together specific local cultures and histories into a mass that can be staged into an acceptable and unplaceable mythos through media's ever-evolving forms. This is Jameson's contention in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society":

> I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper

logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (Jameson, 2001: 1960-1974)

Jameson's observation applies especially to how images and ideas of modernity have been dealt with in numerous media texts in Southeast Asia in recent decades. A whirlwind of change affected the region: the 1980s saw the restructuring of production activities hastened by the influx of industrial technology; while the 1990s became the stage for a dramatic recovery from the financial crisis. The latter set the mood for a spirit of optimism among the rising middle class, their rise heralded through a series of practices that signified a shift of the political sovereignty of nation-states into the cultural and economic flattening of the region through global capitalism, effectively increasing the transnational flow of people, goods, capital and information within and beyond the region. Interestingly enough, as global activities increased, signifiers of nationalism echoing the preservation of culture became a significant feature in a number of media undertakings around the region.

For this purpose, I have chosen three different media practices from three different decades to show the structural conjunctions between media and nationalism, and how the former uses the latter to mask capitalist maneuverings in the region. I begin with Philippine commercials in the 1980s immediately after the first EDSA Revolution, continue with post-*Reformasi* Indonesian cinema in the 1990s, and end with Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor. More importantly, the different examples discussed will each highlight significant myths which effect what Heidegger considers the control practiced by particular institutions in

structuring what we believe — or what we are made to believe — as true. The following discussions will reveal how these different media have all had significant success in realigning their practices to provide a collective imaginary that gives credence to nationalism and its role in resuscitating upper class control and capital activity.

Philippine Commercials After 1986 and The Myth of Nation

In the Philippines, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw an influx of commercials which had a knack for sentimentalizing collective unity and a sense of national character. Coming after the 1986 EDSA Revolution that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos from power, many commercials tried to capitalize on national fervor to position the products of a booming industry. Most memorable of these were Philippine Airlines' "Shining Through" campaign, Cosmos Bottling Corporation's Sarsi commercial titled "*Angat Sa Iba*" (Above Everyone Else), and San Miguel Corporation's string of promotions for its beer, such as "*Sabay Tayo*" (Let's Go Together), "*Si Boom*" and "*Isang Bangka*" (One Boat). Each corporation's advertisements represented three different strategies for the incorporation of nationalist sentiment in selling their respective products.

Shown on local television channels sometime between 1987 and 1992, the Philippine Airlines (PAL) "Shining Through" commercials exploited pastoral images of different Philippine attractions and scenes. It indulged orientalist fantasies, evoking images of beauty, serenity, and vivacity far detached from the commonplace, highlighting the achievements of the colonizer whose gaze transformed the territory. Beaches, sunsets, radiant smiles, flowing water, and other idyllic images dissolving into each other became the airline company's version of national pride, and consequently of their bid to increase ticket sales.

If PAL obliged the colonial rhetoric through symbols harking back to the settling of the colony, Sarsi, a local *sarsaparilla*

Figure 1. Images from Philippine Airlines' "Shining Through" commercial evoke "nationalism".

or root beer brand hoping to grab a significant share off Coca-Cola's then monopoly of the softdrink market, took the opposite route. Its nationalist construction employed a number of elements culled from different precolonial traditions in the Philippines, imagining the possibility of not being, to put it bluntly, undiscovered. Rhythm-heavy instrumentation provided by indigenous musical instruments became the background for local dances and ethnic symbols. The nationalist strategy was glaring: it postulated an identity of being Filipino through carefully selected symbols that were not in any way reflective of colonial experience, suggesting the imperious presence of its foreign competitor: "*Mag-Sarsi ka para maiba*" (Drink Sarsi to be different), the advertisement chanted repeatedly. As the images of the *singkil* performed by dancers wearing traditional costumes flash, the idea of preserving authentic local identity and national sentiment is equated with the purchase of a locally produced softdrink.

The same period following the EDSA revolt was dominated by commercials from San Miguel Beer. While Philippine Airlines and Sarsi positioned images in opposition to each other, San Miguel sold its beer through nationalist sentiments generated by the strategies employed by the two companies above. Add to this a multitude of other symbols where nationalism could be inferred.

Taking its title from a *kundiman* (traditional songs that interchanged themes of romantic love with patriotism), the "*Sabay Tayo*" commercial combined classical and kitsch in fiesta-like fashion. It fused high and low art. It recreated nostalgic images from history, combining them with references to popular culture, including San Miguel's own commercials featuring popular athletes, actors and other entertainers of the period. True enough, San Miguel entertained potential patrons with popular songs that provided the background for their ads. "*Isang Bangka*" utilized the popular rock group The Dawn and their ballad of the same title to contemporize brotherhood and solidarity. "*Si Boom*", a nonsensical novelty song featured not only the Apo Hiking Society, the famous pop trio who sang the song, but also sexy starlet Rachel Lobangco who reached semi-stellar proportions after the commercial was released. While "*Si Boom*" had no pretensions to nationalism, it did employ images reminiscent of national sentiment similar to that of PAL's — by highlighting the dark and exotic skin of Lobangco which sharply contrasted with her white swimsuit and the white sand beach she trod upon while the wind blew her hair as well as details of a fiesta and the Apo Hiking Society singing "*lalalalalalalala si boom si boom*" behind her. Lobangco became the quintessential object of orientalist desire, not only making the syntax of Western notions of the Filipino and/or Filipina more acceptable, but also more desirable.

While these commercials are successful in expressing a semblance of collective pride, they also effectively masked the state of the businesses behind them. Philippine Airlines, despite the good image and branding afforded them by their "Shining Through" campaign, was suffering significant losses because of bad management. By 1990, four years after the accession of Dante Santos as president of the airline, no fewer than 22 of PAL's top executives were charged with negligence, fraud and mismanagement, leading to the cessation of European services, as well as reductions in domestic destinations in the mid 1990s. By September 23, 1998, the airline shut down operations, albeit

Figure 2. Nationalism sells beer in different San Miguel commercials.

temporarily, the first in the region to be grounded by the effects of the economic crisis. Sarsi's commercial boosted profit for a few years, but it was not enough to sustain the fledgling corporation. Ironically, San Miguel Corporation, which controlled Coca-Cola products in the country, bought Cosmos eventually. Sarsi replaced Barq's, Coca-Cola's rootbeer that wasn't selling well locally. Meanwhile, San Miguel was trying to reinvigorate patronage among its customers who boycotted the company's products after its dubious acquisition by Danding Cojuangco during the Marcos dictatorship and its sequestration by the Aquino administration after the 1986 Revolt.

All these commercials illustrate what Jameson has lamented as the "disappearance of a sense of history". The historical detail and cultural significations made by these commercials do not matter, neither does the nostalgia it evokes to reify a sense of national pride and patriotism. The visualized references to culture and history are codified in order to create a sense of collective identity that can be realigned with activities sympathetic to the accretion of economic gain made vital by the West. In these commercials, the nation crystallizes into an ideology that establishes the legitimacy of an ordered global operation resting on the urgency of capital accumulation. The nation becomes the very agent that, as Appadurai noted, marks the presence of global practice and

thereby homogenizes local customs and activities to fit the schema of the imposed new order.

Indonesian Cinema After 1998 and The Myth of Difference

While the concept of nation is being setup as the stage for the realization of imperial control, it is also important to develop other ideological constructs to facilitate the erection of modernity in the region. For the concept of nation to crystallize, it is important to construct it alongside other myths that will actualize social configurations, and eventually maintain the order and structure needed to lend a sense of solidarity and belonging to a specific community. Such a move can be seen in Indonesian cinema after 1998.

For the local film industry, *Reformasi*—the period after 1998 related to Indonesia's restoration efforts—signaled a renewed vigor in filmmaking. The year 1998 marked a significant turning point in Indonesian society. The economy was in shambles, and students protesting in the streets with militancy unseen before drove President Suharto out of power. Prior to that, large riots by exasperated locals unable to cope with the Asian financial crisis targeted the Chinese Indonesians who controlled majority of businesses in the country. Due primarily to deeply-rooted anti-Chinese sentiment formented in the past 50 years, Chinese homes were looted and burned, and many Chinese nationals were raped or killed during the incident.

Reformasi represented a shift in social and cultural outlook for Indonesian cinema. Prior to 1998, the industry was already concerned with breaking down barriers dividing its populace. The 1970s to the early 1990s saw the emergence of directors who took on the role of tackling those numerous categories, structuring the inclusion and exclusion of particular individuals in the country's

systems of power. Films such as Arifin C. Noer's *Taksi* (Taxi, 1990), Garin Nugroho's *Cinta Dalam Sepotong Roti* (Love in A Slice of Bread, 1991), and Teguh Karya's *Ibunda* (Mother, 1985) have made stringent observations on the divisiveness of Indonesian society, often pointing to the reification of culture, gender, and class and its effects on day-to-day lives.

Cinema after 1998 continued this project with focus on the formation of the middle class, exposing the economic strategies by which the class assumed control. *Kuldesak,* one of a handful of local films to come out in 1998, is illustrative of this strategy, and pivotal in restructuring the cinematic practice of the country. A collaborative effort between some of Indonesia's most active filmmakers today, *Kuldesak* problematized the alienation of a young middle class which seems to have no affinity whatsoever with the divisions and differences that characterized the discourses of the films prior to them. The film looks at the middle class youth and their entanglement in a life that has gone beyond traditions often problematized in pre-*Reformasi* Indonesian films. Immersed in concerns like drugs, homosexuality, capitalism, and the alienation caused by the city, the film has brought attention to a convergence of problems more identified with the developments of a global community rather than of a specific locality. It reformulates the supremacy of global capital in Indonesia, and about how the practices pertaining to it have altered the lives of the population.

Many of the aspirations and desires of *Kuldesak*'s characters reflect the signs depicting Indonesia's shift of consciousness from the local to the global, from the concerns about its internal social structure to the positioning of Indonesia's subjectivity in a wider forum besieged by the growing power of global capital activity. In this new terrain, it is possible to disengage Indonesia's individual identity from the concerns that once informed the discourse of past Indonesian cinema and reorient it towards a consciousness marked by the presence of the art film — the film's symbolic anchor. Aksan, a local video shop owner, is

Figure 3. ***Kuldesak, Arisan*** and ***Ada Apa Dengan Cinta*** problematize the notion of difference.

obsessed with finding the means to finance his great movie. Both his shop — his means of livelihood — and his aspirations have steered his attention away from the local concerns and diverted it towards those agents of culture that seem to offer options or choices informing a certain individuality. In reality these choices reel him closer to the capital-conscious maneuverings of the world outside. His video shop poses an alternative to the dominant video shops, as it is spruced up with films and film posters representing the emergence of an art house market that may not have been popular locally but still has gained significant economic legitimacy through film festivals worldwide. The same sensibility informs the masterpiece he imagines to make for himself: a Tarantino-esque film that will sweep the world and wake it up from the conventions of Hollywood.

Aksan's quest for the art film becomes symbolic of the power of the new global order. Echoing Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry as "mass deception", the much revered alternative cinema re-articulates the intimidating and imperialist stance of Hollywood, the very system which it tries to antagonize. As it promises a different perspective in seeing reality, it conveniently re-labels lifestyles and ideology under a seemingly

110

fresh and innovative standpoint; it cowers under taste and personal preference in order to articulate a different view of the self, restructuring the same view on the premise of what it is supposed to escape from. Aksan's profession and desire—his video shop and his film awaiting form—are encapsulated under the lucrative global enterprise of capital control.

As in *Kuldesak,* what is immediately noticeable in many of these films is the depiction and even valorization of new patterns of consumption brought about by globalization. Nia DiNata's 2004 film *Arisan* (Social Gathering) legitimizes these activities through the lives of three friends who are left wanting more in life, despite having everything they could possibly need. The movie moves within the boundaries of the contradictions of life in the upper class: their lavish parties that seem to be confined to themselves, flaunted for everyone to see just the same; the supposed intimate conversations between a few individuals that everyone knows anyway; and the gatherings filled with laughter and merriment coming from people who are masking a lot of frustrations, partly arising from their personal affairs, partly coming from the need to keep up appearances that will differentiate them from the rest of the country. The appearances they keep to enforce their class is taken from the syntax of globalization, with appearances in high-end restaurants and boutiques with globally recognizable names and appearances demanding to be framed inside the film along with affluent characters.

The same can be seen in a horde of teen romance movies that has dominated Indonesian cinema in the early part of the new decade. This trend has been popularized and is best exemplified by Rudy Soedjarwo's *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta* (What's Up With Love), whose release in 2002 broke existing box-office records and helped solidify the careers of its lead actors Nicholas Saputra and Dian Sastrowardoyo. It explores the puppy love blossoming between a boy and a girl coming from middle-class origins. The girl comes from the new rich, and has been concerned primarily

with activities pertaining to her and her immediate environment's prettification — shopping for clothes, seeing friends and being seen at bars and hip night spots, protecting her popularity in school. On the other hand, the boy comes from a well-educated family — his father is a professor who used to be a severe critic of one of the former political leaders — and is immersed in his own world crafted from books, music, and popular media. Both the identity of the girl and the boy represent the severity of global control. While both seem to represent opposite ends of the spectrum, the logic that binds them in such an opposition is culled just the same from the activities indicative of Western supremacy.

Kuldesak, Arisan, Ada Apa Dengan Cinta and much of Indonesian cinema since 1998 problematize the notion of difference in its numerous fissures. Aksan's need to differentiate himself through his Tarantino-like film is symptomatic of the contradictions of erecting a sense of difference. Aksan and other characters belonging to the middle class like him find their redemption by turning their attention to "popular" or globalized culture and its products, effectively reinstating them into their social class while maintaining a semblance of difference from others in their locality. While many of these characters — especially the privileged ones — may feel that they are establishing their social positions locally, they also reinforce another much more potent structure. Whether they use their obsession for Tarantino as in the case of *Kuldesak,* brandish their Louis Vuitton handbags in *Arisan* or hide behind the academe and the books of Che Guevara in *Ada Apa Dengan Cinta*, they are not much different from each other. Their acitivities are shaped by a common oppression under the constructs of a more dominant global culture. While they may struggle to maintain (or attain) this position of privilege in their own locality through their supposed differences in identity, they also naturalize the very processes, perpetuating their coercion by the West's oppressive profit-generating machinery.

Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor and The Myth of Information

Binding a collective identity and "individualizing" it at the same time through cultural practice can never be more coercive in a situation where information becomes the omnipotent logic behind the drive towards the development of a technological infrastructure. Castells has been the most vocal proponent of paradigms critical to the development of cities that are being reconditioned according to the society and economy of a global character. As different cities build up the needed technological infrastructure to accommodate an emerging knowledge-based economy, their respective national identities and the cultures underneath them need to be reexamined in relation to the numerous transformations surrounding their growth. For one, these cities attract a decidedly large portion of the nation's economic activities but do not necessarily side with their respective state. Instead, these cities have taken up the role as hubs of transnational networks, reconfiguring the form and function of the city in the nation-state that has been met with both optimism and severe reproach. For some, the transformation is viewed as a means to reorient the image and identity of the nation in order to push particular local strategies as a means to secure their competitive edge in the world (Keil, 2003: 278-295). As the global economy is appropriated into the national agenda, the character of the state as a political and economic entity is strengthened further through its participation in a larger arena. For others, global restructuring has had profound implications between the relationships of the nation-state and the bigger transnational economy. The latter is always held in distrust with matters affecting the former from altering local practice to imposing neocolonial control over countries with no capacity to compete.

In the middle of these disputes between the nation and the global community is a collection of media and technological practices aiming to absorb a significant share of capital stimulated
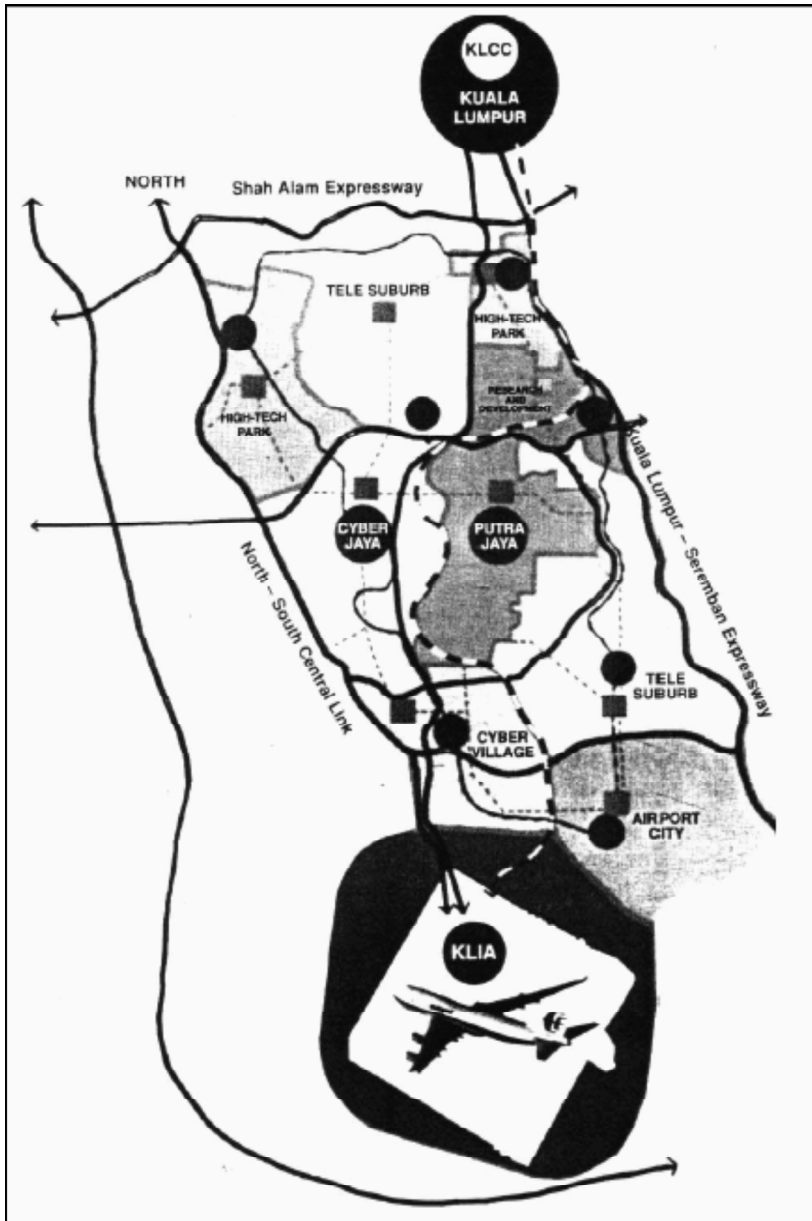
113

Figure 4. The span of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor houses an ICT hub for the country. (Illustration courtesy of Ariff & Chuan)

by the burgeoning of transnational networks. In Southeast Asia, much of these applications affected by new technology have been nothing short of dramatic as the region has made significant strides in investing on new information technologies to boost economic output (Kraemer & Dedrick, 2002: 22-47). Across the region, different enterprises have had a hand in contributing to the erection of an information-conscious society. Singapore's National Library has mandated itself to, according to Director Ngian Lek Choh, "become the premier stop for research needs on Singapore, Southeast Asia and Asia" ("New National Library," 2005). The Philippines has deployed several tactics in harnessing the potentials of SMS, allowing the medium to employ a number of roles from marketing popular music to becoming an alternative site for banking.

Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (or MSC) is the most ambitious in the region. A massive undertaking first conceptualized in 1996, the MSC is a government-designated zone spanning more than 50 km in length from the Petronas Towers to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. Within this large corridor is housed a dynamic information and communications technology hub for the country. The Malaysian government has allocated US$3.5 billion to fund the ICT sector in its 9th Malaysia Plan, a cabinet-approved comprehensive proposal allocating the country's national budget from 2006 to 2010 by the Economic Planning Unit of the Prime Minister's Department and the Finance Ministry. Today, it is the biggest in the region, attracting close to a thousand multinational companies that specialize in multimedia and communications products, solutions, and services. It offers some of the best incentives in the region offering everything from tax breaks to the most sophisticated information technology infrastructure that can easily compete with the best in the world. As a result, it attracts not just business but also different foreign "knowledge workers" under its wings.

Malaysia's bid for a reputable cyber presence is an overwhelming attempt to reconstruct its national identity, possibly

115

positioning it in the even more fluid — and not to mention problematic — material culture of cyberspace. The challenging role of culture in technological enterprises has always presented complex institutional challenges. Media forms such as the television, telephone, and computer forestalled the development of social communication in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The construction of the nation relied heavily on audiences whose interactions through the abovementioned media dispersed the potency of actual physical interactions (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). Viewed in this light, the MSC has played a significant role in solidifying Malaysia's image as a modern nation, continuing the work that media such as television have accomplished. Malaysia's attempts at centralizing control over new technology resonate with what Robins describes as manifest need to create ordered societies through the idealized interventions of cyberspace. For Robins, this has brought about a considerable need to resuscitate nationalism and state sovereignty alongside new reconfigurations of power by multinational companies and the technology they employ. The nation, or a concept of it, is made to stand at a defensive against the overwhelming control exercised by several conglomerates, whose operations and processes can never be pinned down to one nation or entity. In most cases, such establishments seem to warrant a fluid nationality, encompassing their interests that are performed beyond borders of the modern state.

It is also possible to view the MSC as having intensified the power of media over the conception of the national imagination. While the concept of nation has traditionally been formulated through a common consensus resisting colonial rule, concepts of the collective are now spread through interactions and experience in cyberspace by individuals unmindful of the panoptic eye embedded in the infrastructure of today's information technology. As access to media recording and broadcast technologies are democratized, the virtual space they create seems to secure a sense of anonymity since actual interactions between

human beings are severed. Individuals employing numerous sets of such technologies engage in what appears to be harmless transactions made even more attractive by the convenience of sitting behind a computer terminal or mobile phone. On the other hand, the same transactions are the very objects driving today's technological momentum. Each transaction points to a million seemingly insignificant details. One click over the Internet's infinite links, or a million similarly spelled inquiries on a search engine can result in the congealing of information that become the core of knowledge, coercing us to do a variety of things from submitting a personal profile to making seemingly "informed" decisions on what to buy. The methods of accumulating data in this manner transform individuals from participants in democratic and informed choices into subjects with hardly any choice in what they consume.

At the core of all these transactions is the deployment of media-induced information industries symbolized by the MSC. Many information technologies, especially those based on pervasive and chronic computing, deny the essentials of privacy protection as data collection remains undefined and the user is almost always never advised on the extent and purpose of the information they consciously or unconsciously volunteer (Cas, 2005: 24-33). Mainframes and servers become critical channels in determining everything from marketing to crime prevention, transfering once crucial decision-making processes from human beings to machines programmed by statistics and probabilities. Automated processes replace the human eye that once probed these activities and informed policy and communal procedures. Seemingly uninvolved at first, the omnipotent machine is more piercing and exacting in estimating human behavior. The information disseminated may seem empowering, but it is also constricting, prohibitive and presents serious implications for nations like Malaysia and its Southeast Asian neighbors who are mobilizing resources towards the establishment of cyber infrastructure. As the MSC positions Malaysia as a strategic hub within a larger network of information-driven economies, it also runs the risk of

intensifying the subjugation of its citizens into alienating socio-economic relations and cultural practices. While it may be argued that the establishment of the MSC affords Malaysia's rapid economic growth made public in numerous international fora, numerous critics have pointed out that the same efforts have resulted in "a mass consumerist lull of mediocrity." The Malaysian Institute of Economic Research reported that the country's economy grew by 7.2%, in the same period that recorded "one of the worst income disparities in Asia, with the richest 10% of Malaysians earning 22 times more than the poorest 10%" (Gatsiounis, 2005).

The disparity in economic gains can be attributed to a number of factors. Most crucial here is the level of human resources in Malaysia. Davidson suggests that Malaysia was not prepared with the restructuring of human resources needed to meet the ambitious requirements of the MSC. Focusing on education, he states:

> The level of human resource in Malaysia is thus far low and the MSC is dependent on knowledge from other countries. Malaysia has few high-educated workers, especially in broad IT and media based teachings. Another problem is that a majority of the students lack high skills in the English language, which is needed to develop areas such as the MSC. This is a sensitive political issue but the government has recently decided that a few topics in school will be taught in English. (Davidson, 2002: 19)

True enough, Malaysia has undergone drastic changes to allow education to accommodate the requirements of the MSC. This has led to the launch of the Malaysian Smart Schools project and the opening of the Multimedia University, both of which are mandated to help in honing the human resources needed to operate the numerous industries and operations of an ambitious undertaking. While the government has provided measures to

118

ensure its success, the MSC has also steered away valuable resources and attention from accomplishing prior goals of equitable development in Malaysian society. The start of the 1970s saw Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP) that sought the leveling of wealth between the richer non-Malays concentrated in the cities and the predominantly Malay rural poor. These developmental efforts echoed a need to unify different identities under a geographically defined state. Three decades later, and with the erection of the MSC, Malaysia's nation-building efforts have shifted (Bunnell & Coe, 2005: 831-849).

As its educational policies illustrate, the development of the state has been identified with capital-accumulating efforts favoring the reconfiguration of so-called "knowledge workers", a media and technology-savvy elite skilled in the production and duplication of information that is capable of conspicuous consumption oriented towards a massive agglomeration of familiar labels and merchandise seen and desired all over the world. The developmental efforts that once focused on decreasing the economic divide has taken a back seat to the shifting strains of global capital requiring itself to take center stage in the policy making and implementation processes of countries coerced into adopting its machinery.

A Modern Southeast Asia: A Myth

At the core of this newly invigorated collective consciousness is the conceptualization of information to create seamless differences and a sense of solidarity. Technology and media pertaining to the build-up of such information is given a national character, and the portrayal of projecting the nation into the future through such development efforts conceal the possibility that what is actually constructed are a set of economic practices upholding the social and cultural importance of activities that ultimately may have no sympathy and concern for local customs and desires. It can be

119

argued that these tactics have accomplished considerably little and may even be considered counter-productive to nationalism and development. Instead, they have seemed to intensify activities of surveillance and control. It has also contributed to divisiveness by erecting new categories of discord between a limited few that can afford the technology and skills, and a vast majority of the population who have no means to appropriate the currents of such technologies in their own lives. The direction to where the nation is steered also becomes problematic as the national agenda is detached from the rest of the nation and closely linked to the symbolic activity of the capital. Developmental efforts that assimilate this strategy also mimic power, politics and policy formulated by entities coming from spaces unsympathetic to local concerns.

What is of grave concern in these changes is the primacy of nationalist sentiment to establish modern order. Images of the nation and the ability to preserve its integrity in the future has become interchangeable with the manufacturing of Southeast Asian nation-states into nodes or hubs of global capital, with practices not much different from other nodes adopting the same agenda. Local cultural practices provide the emblems that become the discourse to the order creating the impression of modernity in the region. Ironically, it is the same order that poses a serious threat to the very fabric of local cultures in the region.

References

Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (2001). The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception from "Dialectic of Enlightenment." In Leitch, V. B. (Ed.) & Cumming, J. (Trans.). *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (pp. 1223-1240). New York & London: Norton.

Ang, I. (2001). Desperately guarding borders: media globalization, 'cultural imperialism' and the rise of 'Asia'. In Souchou, Y. (Ed.). *House of glass: Culture, modernity and the state in Southeast Asia* (pp. 27-45). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. In *Theory, Culture and Scoiety, 7*(2/3), 295-310.

Ariff I. & Chuan G. C. (1998). *Multimedia Super Corridor*. London: Leeds Publications.

Barthes, R. (2001). Mythologies. In Leitch, V. B. (Ed.) & Lavers, A, (Trans.). *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (pp. 1461-1465). New York & London: Norton.

Bolter, J. D. & Grusin, R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Bunnell, T. (2002). Multimedia utopia? A geographical critique of high-tech development in Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor. In *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography, 34*, 265-295.

Bunnell, T. & Coe, N. M. (2005). Re-fragmenting the 'political': Globalization, governmentality and Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor. In *Political Geography, 24*, 831-849.

Cameron, D. (1996, June). A sporting chance. In *Airfinance Journal*, 20-23.

Cas, J. (2005, Spring). Privacy in pervasive computing environments: A contradiction in terms. In *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, pp. 24-33.

Castells, M. (1996). The rise of the network society. In *The information age: Economy, society and culture, Vol. 1.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Davidson, T. (2002). *The creation of a cluster: A case study of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor*. Department of Management and Economics, Linköping University. Retrieved December 29, 2007 from http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-1556

Gatsiounis, I. (2005, February 11). Malaysia's blind path to progress. *Asia Times*. Retrieved December 29, 2007 from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/GB11Ae02.html

Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ghosh B. N. (2000). *The three-dimensional man*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn. Bhd.

Heidegger, M. (1977). The question concerning technology. In Lovitt, W. (Ed.). *The question concerning technology and other essays* (pp. 3-36). New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.

Jameson, F. (2001). Postmodernism and consumer society. In Leitch, V. B. (Ed.). *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (pp. 1960-1974). New York and London: Norton.

121

Keil, R. (2003). Globalization makes states: Perspectives on local governance in the age of the world city. In Brenner, N., Jessop, B., Jones, M. & MacLeod, G. (Eds.). *State/Space: A reader* (pp. 278-295). Oxford: Blackwell.

Kraemer, K. L. & Dedrick, J. (2002). Information technology in Southeast Asia: Engine of growth or digital divide?. *Information technology in Asia: New development paradigms* (pp. 22-47). Singapore: Intitute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Mackey, M. (1996, February). Split personality. *Air transport world* (pp. 71-75).

Macluhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The medium is the massage.* New York, London & Toronto: Bantam Books.

Munshi, S. (2001). *Images of the 'modern woman' in Asia: Global media, local meanings.* Surrey: Curzon.

New National Library to open in July 2005. (2005, April 21). *Getforme Singapore.* Retrieved December 29, 2007 from http://www.getforme.com/previous2005/210405_newnationallibrarytoopeninjuly2005.htm

Robins, K. (1999). Foreclosing the city? The bad idea of virtual urbanism. In Downey, J. & McGuigan, J. (Eds.). *Technocities.* London: Sage.

Said, E. (2001). Orientalism. In Leitch, V. B. (Ed.). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp. 1991-2012). New York & London: Norton.

Said, S. (1991). *Shadows on the silver screen: A social history of Indonesian film.* Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation.

Sen, K. (1994). *Indonesian cinema: Framing the new order.* London: Zed Books.

Tan, A. (1996, April). Flying on borrowed time. *Asian Business*, pp. 19-20.

Joseph T. Salazar is a faculty member at the Department of Filipino, School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University.