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Final Paper: You Choose

Imagine Nation:
Space, Time, and *Singapore Dreaming*

What can a local film tell us about the way we view time, space, and the fate of the Singaporean nation? In this essay, I will examine the 2006 film *Singapore Dreaming*, directed by Singaporean expats Colin Goh and Woo Yen Yen, in light of Anderson's and Thongchai's theories of nationalism, to demonstrate a weakened sense of agency and of national identity in Singapore.

Singapore Dreaming is the story of the Lohs, a typical Singaporean family. Poh Huat, the father of the family, aspires to a higher social status while growing tired of his wife Siew Luan. They have two children: Mei, a secretary seven months pregnant with her first child, and Seng, who returns from studying in the US. Mei's husband CK is looked down upon by the family for working as an insurance seller, while Seng's girlfriend Irene stays with his parents, already playing the part of filial daughter-in-law.

The film follows the characters through Poh Huat winning the lottery, and the aftermath of his equally sudden death. The major part of the film focuses on tension, in the form of conflict between characters – Mei's resentment of her parents' favouritism of sons over daughters, or Irene's anger at Seng buying a new car without her knowledge, before even getting a job – and also the different expectations placed upon the characters by themselves, their family, and society.

The main thesis of historian Benedict Anderson's landmark work on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, is that the nation is "an imagined political community" (6). In "Cultural Roots," Anderson investigates the historical context out of which nationalism arose, tracing its roots to the popular worldview before the 17th century, namely the sacrality of written language, and dynasty as the only viable political system.

As these two cultural institutions were weakening, there was concurrently a radi-

cal change in how societies viewed the concept of time. Following philosopher Walter Benjamin, Anderson identifies a medieval conception of "Messianic time", which views history not as "an endless chain of cause and effect or of radical separations between past and present" (23), but rather as "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present" (24); it explains why medieval Christians see no problem with characters in the Nativity dressed in contemporary clothing (22–3). He contrasts this with modern "homogeneous, empty time," in which simultaneity is "marked... by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (24).

Anderson argues that it is only recently possible to imagine a nation, in large part due to the advent of homogeneous, empty time. He compares the modern novel – in which the narrative can only proceed by marked, calendrical time – to the modern nation,

> ... which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans... But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (26)

For Anderson, the narrative form of the modern novel enables the imagination of such an abstract community as a nation.

As in any other modern society, Singaporeans operate almost solely on calendrical time; it is hard to imagine a day in Singapore without watches or clocks. This fact of life is not lost on *Singapore Dreaming*; as mentioned, its narrative is predicated upon homogeneous, empty time in the first place. Checking the time is also a device used to advance plot, when Mei wonders why CK is taking so long with his parking coupon (00:23:52–24:02), or when Irene calls Seng after his job interview (00:35:05–15).

However, I see some discrepancies between the film and Anderson's theory. As I understand Anderson, homogeneous, empty time connotes a linear, flowing version of

time, in which progress and agency are made possible by the idea of "now" as "the present moment." However, Messianic time is static, with a long view of the "now" as "the Biblical end times," where history has been shrunk down into a point. To me, this perspective of Messianic time resonates especially with the character of Poh Huat, who seems to have reached a stage of stagnation in his life. He dreams of the Singaporean 5 Cs (car, cash, credit card, condominium, country club), but not in the same way that Seng and Irene look forward to marriage, or Mei and CK look forward to their first child. Besides buying lottery tickets, Poh Huat does nothing in the film to actively change his circumstances.

This sense of passivity holds more generally over the entire film. The main narrative turning points, namely Poh Huat winning the lottery (00:39:15–40), his heart attack (00:54:35–55:20), and Irene overhearing Seng's impassioned confession that he failed to graduate (01:16:55–17:35), all happen *to* the characters, rather than *due to* their conscious decisions. The character development arc of Mei and CK have a similar emphasis: Mei repeated pleas for CK to "try harder" (00:17:45–55), "be more thick-skinned" (00:18:00–15), and "work harder" (00:26:10–25); Mei returning home to CK smoking and playing the guitar (00:51:45–52:22); culminating in Mei breaking down and falling out with both CK and their maid over condolence money (01:11:25–13:15). All these events are *reactive*, built on the stresses that Mei and CK face at work, instead of *active* attempts to drive change. If Anderson's medieval Christians characterised themselves as "placed at the end of time" and did not believe in "the prospect of a long future for a young and vigorous human race" (23), I think they would be less likely to see the future in terms of progress towards an end goal. As I have noted, the characters in *Singapore Dreaming* show, in some ways, a comparable stagnation.

How can we explain the appearance of elements of Messianic time in a Singaporean film? A plausible explanation can be found in Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul's essay "Writing at the Interstices," where he notes that "there was no religious or intellectual revolution that could break, or secularize, [history in Southeast Asia] from

traditional perceptions of the past" (5). It is then perhaps unsurprising that parts of the "traditional" worldview have carried over to contemporary Singapore.

However, I see a bigger culprit in the name of the phenomenon itself: the Messiah has had much less cultural and historical significance in Singapore than in Europe. According to Thongchai, "instead of taking the experiences of Western Europe as the authentic or genuine prototype, we should take them as a genealogical ancestor of nationalisms in other parts of the world" (17). In my view, Anderson's analysis of historical novels from the Philippines, Mexico and Indonesia (26–32) indicate his belief that his theory applies in many different contexts, and thus certainly to Singapore. In contrast, Thongchai advocates a more careful analysis of local contexts that averts the complications in Anderson's theory that I have shown.

In contrast to Anderson's interest in the concept of time, Thongchai's own theory focuses on the role of space in shaping national identity; to Thongchai, "a national history is the biography of a spatial identity" (9). Thongchai points out that new conceptions of spatial identity have emerged in recent decades, caused by conditions such as globalisation (and equally important to Thongchai, its twin process of localisation). Thus, he argues, the dominance of national histories will be challenged by alternative forms of narrative, for instance a transnational history of Southeast Asia, or the history of an ethnic group within a state.

I propose a synthesis of Anderson's and Thongchai's approaches to sub-national communities, which are hinted at in the film. In his analysis of an early Mexican novel, Anderson notes that "the succession of plurals... conjure up a social space full of *comparable* prisons, none in itself of any importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence)" (30). Hence, the ability to imagine communities is closely linked to the ability to *generalise*. In the film, Poh Huat complains about public urination in his public housing flat (00:13:43–14:05), and Mei brings CK to a condominium showroom (00:34:50–35:55). Here, Poh Huat and Mei freely refer to the plurality of people living in public housing, and offer generalised associations such as

public housing and filth (Poh Huat), or condominiums and affluence (Mei). In my interpretation of Anderson, this ability to generalise to an abstract group of people is a natural consequence of the transition to homogeneous, empty time.

Now Thongchai adds the view that "A spatial identity is always a place – that is, a space loaded with values and meanings for those who identify with it" (9). Thus Poh Huat's treatment of the space of public housing qualifies it as a place (and similarly with Mei and condominiums). Thongchai speculates that these new spatial identities serve to diminish the importance of the nation; indeed, the only mention of the term "Singaporean" in the film is by a foreigner beer girl (01:18:23).

Public housing and condominiums do not function just as places. I conjecture that Thongchai's argument can be applied to many social conditions, which are fostered by the same modern conditions such as globalisation, and further partition and weaken the nation. This research direction would, I hope, open up new ways of thinking about the nation.

(1496 words)

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