

## **USE2312: Nationalism and the Arts**

**Sem 2, AY 2019/20**

### **Singapore Art #2**

#### ***Nat/Arts* Final Paper: Reflective Interview Report**

For the *Nat/Arts* final paper assignment, my interviewee and I talked at length about the Trump-Kim Summit Costume, worn by Ms Zahra Khanum for the Miss Universe 2018 finals. For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to my interviewee as Jane, another USP student who has not taken *Nat/Arts* as a module.

Jane's initial reaction to the costume was a strong dislike; she called the costume "jarring" and "not a nice dress". In exploring Jane's vehement dislike towards the costume, I directed the conversation to her notions on art and nationalism. Although Jane's notions of art as having an intention and message intersected with Tolstoy's theory, we also talked about the importance of audience receptivity and aesthetics. Similarly, Jane's ideas on nationalism resonated with Renan's theory when talking about a collective acceptance of the nation's "values", but also went beyond in terms of political power, geographical boundaries and policies as components of a 'nation'. The interview thus touched on possible blind spots and extensions to the above theories. A central idea was the importance of *context*: the place and audience under which the artwork is scrutinized. Jane's receptivity to the costume, and her ideas on art and its relation to nation-building changed with the context. This report will address

these changing notions, offering additional insights into Tolstoy's and Renan's theories. By laying out these insights, I also hope to offer justifications on why the costume can be considered as a work of 'art'.

Although Jane expressed dislike for the costume, she immediately acknowledged the dress as 'art' when the question came up. The main reasons revolved around the presence of intention and a need to communicate:

I would call this art because it seems very intentional. It seems like it is supposed to convey a message. It seems like it was designed with a purpose, with an audience in mind, supposed to be saying something to someone.

The above statement resonates with Tolstoy's theory of art, where "art begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself... expresses that feeling by certain external indications" (#7). The idea of art beginning with one person's (the artist's) intention to express feelings aligns with Jane's ideas of art as "intentional" and something that is "supposed to convey a message". An interesting point Jane brought up was the idea of art being created with an "audience in mind". In the interview, the issue of audience receptivity was closely tied to the context under which the artwork was received. Considering context can enable us to extend Tolstoy's theory by looking at how the message received by an audience can differ with the setting in which the artwork is presented to them.

Tolstoy acknowledges a work's need for audience receptivity when he says that "if only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings... it is art" (#9). However, the theory never details how the context under which the artwork is viewed affects this receptivity. One of the factors which context can affect is how well the perceived message from the artist, and consequently the artwork itself, is received by the audience. As Tolstoy mentions:

If a man is infected by the author's condition of soul, if he feels this emotion and this union with others, then the object which has affected this is art (#28);

According to Jane, however, this "infectiousness" of emotion is dependent on context: the same emotion can be well-received in one setting but ill-received in another. "I would not have thought it was for a beauty pageant. It looked like a parade costume" was her first comment when describing the costume. This suggests that one of the emotions behind the costume – that of Singapore as a "mediator in this neutral ground" – would have been much better received in a context different from a beauty pageant. We looked at some other costumes from the same pageant and Jane's verdict was that these other costumes are more "intricate" and aesthetically pleasing. Her comment suggests that beauty and aesthetics, without an explicit meaning, hold more importance in a beauty pageant than depicting a diplomatic event the country helped conduct. To Jane, presenting the costume in a particular context also compromised

with the sincerity of emotions – another factor central to Tolstoy’s theory. Jane thinks that the dress makes “a very political point”, making it seem “impersonal” and lacking “love and care”. Instead, the more relevant aspects of Singapore in an international pageant should have been “Singapore’s culture and people”.

The conversation about whether it was appropriate to make a political point in a beauty pageant led into us discussing Jane’s notions of what a nation is, and how art contributes to nation-building. Part of Jane’s ideas about a nation were that the sense of “belonging” is important, which only comes when there is a collective acceptance of “the values that the country stands for” – values such as secularism and equality. In this sense Jane’s claims seemed quite Renan-ian:

A nation... presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is... a daily plebiscite... (Renan 58)

The “consent” that Renan talks about is closely related to the “collective acceptance” Jane believes is important for a nation to exist – the consent to inhabit a nation comes with an acceptance of what the nation stands for. Jane is also a non-Singaporean who has spent most of her life outside Singapore. She talks about the importance of memories in belonging, where she doesn’t feel Singaporean because her “memories about Singapore are closely tied to education and experiences surrounding that”. She also mentions how living longer in Singapore, and having more life experiences here,

would make her consider herself more as a Singaporean. In talking about the relation between memories and belonging, Jane's nationalism struck close to Renan's idea of a nation consisting of a "rich legacy of memories" (58). However, her ideas for nationalism did not stop there. According to Jane:

I think you can call it a nation only if it has geographical boundaries, political power and jurisdiction. But what differentiates it from other nations is its values and culture, which come from its people and are enshrined in the country's policies and institutions.

While Renan's theory does not give much consideration to factors like territorial boundaries, political power or institutions, these are important constituents of a nation for Jane. Some factors are closely related to "collective acceptance" from the nation's people – in her view "values are reflected in the policies and institutions". Other factors, though, like territorial boundaries and political power are relatively detached from the people and yet important for a nation to exist. In hindsight, I should have probed more into these factors with Jane, but I made the hasty decision of reverting discussion to the artwork.

The question of what constitutes a nation led to how art can help in nation-building, where Jane believes that nationalistic artwork is any artwork where the audience derives a "positively representation of the country". Additionally, Jane thinks that "the more people it [the nationalistic artwork] reaches, the more impactful it is at nation

building”. The issue of context resurfaced here: since context affects audience receptivity, it also affects how many people the nationalistic artwork reaches. One thing we discussed was the implications of context upon how explicitly an artwork shared its message. For example, a relatively abstract artwork criticizing Singapore might not do the best job of painting a nationalistic message, because many people will not derive the intended message. Placing the artwork in a specific setting, “like an exhibition about criticizing the different aspects of Singapore” would make drawing the message out easier, said Jane. Thus, an equally explicit artwork, with a changed setting, can propagate its message to more people.

Beyond explicitness, we also talked about the relevance of the message for the context. A message irrelevant to the platform can even make a nationalistic artwork evoke anti-nationalistic feelings. For Jane, this anti-nationalistic came in the form of “Singapore always trying to push a national narrative”, which might not have existed if she viewed the artwork in another context, like “a parade” or “an exhibition highlighting Singapore’s achievements”. She claimed the dress would be better received if it talked about other aspects of Singapore’s nationalism than its political diplomacy, for instance its multiracial people or the diverse culture.

To conclude, interviewing Jane on the Trump-Kim Summit costume was quite a learning experience. Some of her notions on art and nationalism aligned with the claims presented in Tolstoy’s and Renan’s theories. Other notions though, touched on the issues of context and narratives of political power – which neither theory covers.

The artwork would have been much better received by Jane if she came across it in a different context, which suggests that audience reception to the artwork not only depends on the artist and work itself, but also on the setting in which it is received.

(1496 words)

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### **Works Cited**

Renan, Ernest. "What is a nation?" *Nationalism in Europe, 1815 to the Present: A Reader*. Ed. Stuart Woolf (London and New York: Routledge, 1996): 48-60.

Tolstoy, Leo. "What is art?" <http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r14.html>.

### **Edited Interview Transcript**

Me: What were your thoughts about the artwork?

Jane: I would not have thought it was for a beauty pageant. It looked like a parade costume. Or something that belonged in an exhibition highlighting Singapore's achievements. [...] In my opinion, it's not a nice-looking dress. It is also way too explicit. It looks very jarring to me. It was trying to project Singapore as this mediator in a neutral ground. [...] seems like an attempt to project themselves as something that they are clearly not. At least in this context.

Me: [...] What do you think the costume should show?

Jane: I am not Singaporean, so I don't know if I have the best answer. [...] If it had any Asian, Malay or Western influences then that would be a good representation of Singapore [...] Looking at other dresses I feel like wow that's so nice, that's so intricate [...] [The dress] looks try-hard. My opinion of wearing something nice and wearing something representative of culture, [instead] it seems to be making a very political point.

Me: Do you think this dress as an artwork?

Jane: [...] I would call this art because it seems very intentional. It seems like it is supposed to convey a message. It seems like it was designed with a purpose, with an audience in mind, supposed to be saying something to someone.

[...] I think other things could also be art. I would call something that aesthetically looks pleasing art as well. [...] Like the ones [dresses] that we saw, I don't know if they are conveying a message. But either way I would call it art.

Me: What do you think are the motivations behind this dress?

Jane: National narrative, that's the motivation. [...] The costume seems impersonal. It does not capture emotions or thought or a deeper meaning. It captures an explicit



meaning which can be crafted by anyone. For the other costumes, it's like someone put love into it. Someone put effort, they cared about it.

Me: What defines nationalistic artwork?

Jane: Representing it [your country] in a way that makes you proud about it. It is created with the intention of inducing a sense of pride or positive feelings towards or about a nation.

[...]

Me: How do you think art can achieve nation building?

Jane: By reaching a lot of people, by getting them to think about something. The more people it reaches, the more impactful it is at nation building. It can't be abstract art [...] because I think that limits [the art] from reaching everyone. Unless it is placed in a particular context, like an exhibition about criticizing different aspects of Singapore.

Me: Do you think this artwork achieves that?

Jane: I don't know if it is successful in doing so but it attempts to. [...] It might be counterproductive if many people see it as an anchor to their criticism, or what's

maybe wrong with Singapore. Like the whole dress trying to push a narrative. If they look at the dress and many people go like "oh Singapore is just trying to push its narrative" then that would be counterproductive.

[...]

Me: What do you think defines a nation and nationalism?

Jane: [...] it is like when people identify with the values that the country stands for.

[...] The policies of a country and its institutions reflect on its values, values like equality and secularism. [...] I would like to believe that it originated from the people and became a part of the nation. [...] I [also] think you can call it a nation only if it has geographical boundaries and political power or jurisdiction.

Me: Would you consider yourself a Singaporean?

Jane: Nope. I think there are many things about Singapore I still need to understand.

[...] The longer I live here, the more my answer will lean towards maybe you could consider myself a Singaporean. I don't have that sense of belonging towards Singapore, because my memories about Singapore are just closely tied to education and my experiences surrounding that. I guess how much you feel like you belong to a country is also how many memories you have with it [...]

(698 words)

## Artworks considered

### Trump-Kim Summit Dress



### Other Miss Universe 2018 Finals costumes

<https://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/life/people/2018/12/10/miss-universe-meet-all-contestants-national-costumes/2268584002/>