CHAPTER ONE

ONE-DIMENSIONAL SINGAPORE

They lead ultimately very miserable lives which they enliven by spending money. They don’t have time, they have only money, so they buy themselves a nice car or whatever, but in the end they don’t have the time to enjoy these things—or life. (Singaporean lawyer and writer Philip Jeyaretnam, quoted in Tom 2006)

Economically at its peak in 1997, even at the onset of the Asian economic crisis, Singapore ranked as the fourth-richest country in the world in terms of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (C. N. Seah 2005); and today, its per capita GDP is equal to those of the leading countries of Western Europe (Central Intelligence Agency 2005). In this conspicuously affluent and proudly consumerist global city state, accelerated national development has brought freedom from basic want for nearly every citizen. Singaporeans are constantly warned by their government about the fragility of these material achievements and many believe that they can only preserve these achievements through their ability to be productivity-driven in the workplace, willingness to make personal sacrifices when the national economy calls for it, and openness to the demands of foreign capital and talent, both considered necessary for economic growth and development. In Singapore, survival anxieties and material gratification have converged in the national psyche in ways that seem to have sustained an authoritarian and repressive culture poised toward overcoming vulnerabilities and achieving success, but often at the cost of human autonomy, individual creativity, and higher-order freedoms, ideals that are summarily dismissed as quixotic or culturally inauthentic by political and ideological leaders who proudly—and in a doubly ironic way—declare a dogmatic allegiance to pragmatism.

The national psyche has been saturated with paranoia about whether Singapore can cope with the vulnerability of being a country with an ethnic Chinese majority and a significant minority of Malay-Muslims, complicated by its location in a Malay-Muslim region dominated by periodically hostile neighboring giants Malay-
sia and Indonesia (Leifer 2000). Foreign investors and global businesses, forming a view of Singapore as an expensive, culturally bland, and bureaucratically rigid location, have already turned to regional competitors such as China, India, Thailand, and Malaysia. Acutely aware of these developments, the Singapore government has been trying to ‘remake’ Singapore into a “vibrant global city” (H. L. Lee 2005b) with a “creative and entrepreneurial” people behind a globalized and diversified economy that aims to be a key node linked to all major economies in the risky but profitable global networks of capital and power (Economic Review Committee 2003). A dynamic component of this remade economy is expected to be the creative cluster that comprises the arts, design, and media, predicted to contribute up to 6 per cent of GDP by 2012 (Economic Review Committee Services Subcommittee 2002). And two important components of Singapore’s remade media industry are film and television.

German social philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s critical analysis of ‘one-dimensional’ America in the 1950s (Marcuse 1964/2002) continues, in spite of its historical specificity and the fierce criticisms that have been leveled at it, to present theoretical possibilities for gaining a critical and historically sensitive understanding of the culture, society, and politics of contemporary Singapore. As ‘new critical theorists’ William Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris have argued, “No theory oriented to liberation can proceed without careful and historically grounded analysis, regarding which there remains much to learn from Marcuse,” whose “revolutionary fervor, … intellectual rigor, and … sensitivity to new possibilities for social change and theorizing make him an ideal figure for a critical theory after postmodernism” (Wilkerson and Paris 2001, 2). Together with the ‘critical theory’ tradition of the Frankfurt School, and the culture industry analysis of its leading proponents Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944/2002) in particular, Marcuse’s approach tended to lament the nearly inescapable integration of marginal, critical, and resistant forces into the affirmative universe of advanced industrial society. According to Marcuse,

the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification … Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend