CHAPTER TWO

THE CULTURE INDUSTRY IN RENAISSANCE-CITY SINGAPORE

The products of Singapore’s culture industry—whether they are television sitcoms and dramas, ‘reality TV’ shows such as the Singapore Idol competition, or commercially successful films by Jack Neo—are all intimately linked to the larger capitalist economy through which they are circulated for profit and for which they provide ideological support through the messages conveyed. Even the art-house variety of films by Eric Khoo and Royston Tan are ultimately susceptible to being drawn into the logic of advanced capitalist-industrial society. In one-dimensional society, any thought, action, or cultural product that purports to critique the system is either exiled as dangerous or transformed and rechanneled into forms that ultimately support the system, even if they remain ostensibly critical of it. In one-dimensional Singapore, instances of real critical thinking can be quickly neutered, absorbed into the system, and transformed profitably into docile commodities that serve that system. This account of Singapore’s culture industry corresponds to this book’s first Marcusean analytical limit, based on the principle of complete encapsulation.

This chapter discusses the political economy of cultural and artistic production in Singapore, its evolving place within the larger economy of a ‘global city,’ and the policy developments that have had an impact on it. While the Marcusean analytical limit will serve to highlight just how susceptible art and popular culture are to being subsumed by the logic of capitalism, the Gramscian cultural studies approach will allow for a more dynamic exploration of ideological negotiations within art and popular culture, where texts are encoded and decoded in a continuous struggle to articulate, disarticulate, and rearticulate ideological, economic, and political aspects and fragments that conjunctively form historically significant moments and shifts.
Culture and the arts have been important in post-independence Singapore for their role in socializing Singaporeans for the PAP government’s nation-building project. Racial harmony, for instance, continues to be simulated through spectacular ‘ethnic’ dance routines performed at public events to showcase the four racial groups, choreographed to perform separately and then together in a harmonious finale. In the earlier decades of post-independence development, government policy focused on strengthening Singapore’s economic base, which in turn needed to be fully supported by a limited cultural and artistic superstructure that Singapore’s national budget could ‘afford.’ According to professor of English literature Koh Tai Ann, “the arts have never been seen as a basic ‘need.’” Only after the basic material needs—the “primary concerns” of “Singapore’s mostly immigrant community” (Koh 1989, 736)—had been met through economic growth and development, could the arts really take off and become an integral part of more widely bourgeois lifestyles. In these early decades of independence, artistically talented Singaporeans—such as internationally renowned pianists Seow Yit-Kin and Melvyn Tan—had to leave the country for better career prospects overseas. Singapore artist Ho Ho Ying, writing in the 1960s about the Singapore arts scene then, observed that

> the sand and stones in this cultural desert simply do not respond to [the artists’] screaming … No wonder many artists who have studied art overseas choose not to return and work here. Despite this appalling condition there are still many artists here who refuse to retreat, hoping that one day the situation will improve. (H. Y. Ho 1964/2005, 64)

Today, the arts often continue to be viewed as higher-order needs—at times as superficial luxuries—that Singapore would be able properly to afford only at the end of its developmentalist lap. Similarly, government restrictions on the arts—largely in the form of censorship and the withholding of specific licenses and grants—continue even today to be explained in terms of national priorities and the typical claim that Singaporeans are mostly conservative and therefore not ready for more progressive (especially if politically critical) works of art.

In the 1960s and 1970s, cultural questions were also emerging in the public discourse as a reaction to the perceived problems of a disenchanted citizenry made up of *homo œconomicus* motivated only