Desperately guarding borders: media globalization, 'cultural imperialism' and the rise of 'Asia'[1]

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Abstract: *This article explores the mobilisation of a concept of 'Asianness' in the context of the emergence of the Western-dominated satellite TV industry in that region in the early 90's. While many Asian governments responded to the anxieties resulted from the challenges brought by this process of media globalisation by projecting a common Asian cultural identity, private enterprises, such as Murdoch's Star TV, have capitalized on intra-Asian cultural differences in order to conquer the huge Asian market. The article describes some of the ways that discourses of 'cultural imperialism' and the 'clash of civilizations' have been utilised in the struggle for national identity and survival in a world marked by a permanent flow of media, capital, people, technologies and ideas.*

Key words: *Satellite TV, Asian identity, media globalisation.*

Resumo: *Este artigo explora a mobilização de um conceito de 'asiedade' ('Asianness') dentro do contexto da emergência de uma indústria de TV por satélite, dominada pelo ocidente naquela região no início dos anos 90. Enquanto muitos governos asiáticos responderam às ansiedades resultantes dos desafios trazidos por este processo de globalização midiática projetando uma identidade cultural asiática comum, empresas privadas, como a Star TV de Murdoch, têm capitalizado em cima das diferenças culturais intra-asiáticas para conquistarem este enorme mercado. O artigo descreve algumas das maneiras nas quais os discursos do 'imperialismo cultural' e do 'choque de civilizações' têm sido utilizadas na luta por uma identidade nacional e pela sobrevivência num mundo marcado pelo fluxo contínuo de mídia, capital, pessoas e idéias.*

Palavras-chave: *TV por satélite, identidade asiática, globalização midiática.*

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A few years ago, when the so-called East Asian economic miracle was at its height, former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim delivered a speech in which he emphasised the challenges brought about by Asia's entry into the world of high modernity. Significantly, he saw the greatest challenges not at the level of economics, but at the level of culture and intellectual life. Not surprisingly, the role of media and technology, especially television, loomed large in Anwar's concerns:

> In recent years there has been an overwhelming, almost imperialistic diffusion of Western or Western-influenced cultural products. This has been made possible, and will be further accellerated, by the opening of the skies to satellite television networks (*The Straits Times*, 1 February 1994).

What Anwar refers to here is not just a challenge faced in Asia. During the 1980s a similar worry about the proliferation of transnational satellite television channels raged across Europe. The image of the threat evoked was also similar: that of the integrity of a cultural and geographical space -- 'our' space -- being eroded by the opening up of the frontierlands of the sky to wayward global explorers such as Ted Turner (owner of CNN) and Rupert Murdoch (owner of Sky Channel and, in Asia, Star TV). The resulting electronic invasion from the sky has exposed the vulnerability of national borders (which conventionally provide the enclosure of 'our' space): with satellite technology, given geographical boundaries are superceded by the vectors of transmission, which generally transcend the bounded territorial space of the, any, nation-state. The idea of a 'Television without Frontiers' -- the title of a 1984 European Community policy document (Commision of the European Communities 1984) -- was informed precisely by the perceived necessity of reimagining a new, pan-European electronic image space beyond national borders, induced by border-eroding new communication technologies such as satellite TV ((Robins 1989). The European Commission argued that a 'European audio-visual area' had to be developed because technological progress had made 'a mockery of frontiers', and because 'the day of purely national audiences, markers and channels is gone' (quoted in Robins 1989:153). In other words, the defense strategy was not one of giving up borders as such, national or otherwise, but of the drawing of a more inclusive and grandiose but also more elusive border, that around 'Europe', presumably to protect the European image space from the 'cultural imperialism' of

especially American, but also, as the Commission observed, Japanese and Brazilian corporations.

By the mid-1990s, the skies above 'Asia' had become the major area of exploration for global sattellite broadcasters (*Asiaweek*, 19 October 1994). In Asia, however, as indicated by Anwar's statement, the name of the 'cultural imperialist' was not 'American', let alone 'Japanese' or 'Brazilian', but, pure and simply, 'Western'. Rupert Murdoch acquired STAR TV from a Hong Kong company in 1993. Soon after the sale the Chinese government banned unlicensed satellite dishes. Other governments in the region also expressed concern that an outsider -- that is, a Westerner -- had gained control over such an important channel of satellite TV channel aimed at 'Asia'. One of the most outspoken protesters against Murdoch's acquisition of STAR TV was Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir, in whose speeches the idea of 'Western cultural imperialism' has been a recurrent, prominent theme (Yao, in this volume)..'Today they broadcast slanted news', he complained. 'Tomorrow they will broadcast raw pornography to corrupt our children and destroy our culture.' (*Asiaweek* 19 October 1994). It should be clear that 'they', in Mahathir's discourse, is 'the West'.

The slippage from 'American' to 'Western' cultural imperialism in contemporary concerns about satellite TV in countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, India and Indonesia signals a longstanding stance of post- or anti-colonial anti-westernism. The discourse of cultural imperialism has dominated critical perspectives on transnational cultural relations in the last few decades, especially with respect to the overwhelming dominance of Western (mostly American) media in the Rest of the world (Tomlinson 1991). As an idea, 'cultural imperialism' actively echoes the brutal history of conquest and domination which so unsettled and disrupted non-western societies in the process of European colonial and imperial expansion. Edward Said defines 'imperialism' as 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory', to be distinguished from 'colonialism', which, observes Said, is almost always a consequence of imperialism through 'the implanting of settlements on distant territory' (Said 1993:8). According to John Tomlinson, the concept of '*cultural* imperialism' emerged in the 1960s, in a recently decolonized world in which newly

independent nation-states in the so-called Third World were struggling to claim their national autonomy (Tomlinson 1991:2). In this sense, the idea of 'cultural imperialism' indicated a colonization by other means in a formally post-imperial world. In radical intellectual discourse, then, speaking about cultural imperialism generally evokes a clearly unequal power relationship between a culturally dominant 'West' and a culturally subordinate 'Rest' (sometimes also called, in a different geo-ideological topography, 'North' and 'South'), where colonization takes place through symbolic forms of settlement – through the forced implanting of information, ideas and images – rather than a physical one. Such theories generally presume the invasion and takeover of all 'other' cultures, mostly the 'Third World', by an all-powerful, all-consuming culture – i.e. 'Western' culture (although, as we have seen, in Europe the enemy is called 'American' and the feared process is one of 'Americanization'). In this way, 'cultural imperialism' is seen as a necessary vehicle for the universalization or globalization of capitalist modernity, which in turn is mechanistically equated with a wholesale 'westernization' of the world.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that talk of 'cultural imperialism' is mostly enunciated in the name of the subordinate side in this relationship of power. The discourse of cultural imperialism is a discourse of protest or complaint, a discourse signalling the political or moral unacceptability of what the enunciator sees as the cultural domination exerted by a powerful Other. In this sense the discourse of cultural imperialism has first and foremost been a *defensive* discourse: a discourse aimed at warding off cultural intrusion by foreign powers, a discourse of the powerless to protect their cultural 'autonomy'.

In the West, such positions have been militantly supported and elaborated theoretically by vulgar Marxists such as Herbert Schiller (1992). Schiller, an American media theorist, sees the transnational communications corporations as the major forces of a process of sheer coercion. Schiller's theory of cultural imperialism, which he virtually *reduces* to *media* imperialism, is based on a sweeping theory about media manipulation and ideological domination in which 'the notion of "the system" becomes reified and operates in a rather crude and rigid "functionalist" manner' (Tomlinson 1991:38). The problem with such a theory is that it is such a totalizing one, in which there is no room for any other 'truth' than the inexorable spread of a

homogenizing capitalist culture, to which more and more parts of the non-Western world are succumbing – courtesy of the media which, comments Schiller, 'are now many more times more powerful and penetrative than in an earlier time' (quoted in Tomlinson 1991:39). To put it in another way, what this theory suggests is that 'culture' is totally and completely reducible to the 'economy' – the 'logic of capital'.

But the current situation in South-East Asia illuminates the explanatory limits and limitations of such a one-dimensional, reductionist theory. To be sure, the widespread concern with satellite television in the region does echo this preoccupation with the destructive effects of 'cultural imperialism'. After all, the economic operation and exploitation of this communications technology is evidently primarily carried out by big transnational corporate players, especially 'Western' ones. However, Schiller's assumption that the modern world system is unambiguously and indisputably an imposition of Western capitalism on the rest of the world makes for a theory which cannot account for the complex specificities which accompany the globalization of capitalist modernity and the contradictory nature of its cultural consequences. As Marshall Sahlins has remarked, 'the World System is not a physics of proportionate relationships between economic "impacts" and cultural "reactions." The specific effects of the global-material forces depend on the various ways they are mediated in local cultural schemes' (1994:414).

In his capacity to speak from such a local cultural scheme – a capacity warranted by his privileged position of legitimate representative of the Malaysian nation-state, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, whom I quoted at the beginning of this paper, revealed an awareness of the contradictions involved where he spoke about the *'almost* imperialistic diffusion of Western cultural products' (my emphasis). In other words, Anwar suggested that what is at stake is *not quite* cultural imperialism. Indeed, throughout Southeast Asia in the early 1990s there have been signs of a self-conscious determination to go *beyond* 'cultural imperialism': buoyed by a new self-confidence instilled by the new economic prosperity, which allowed Southeast Asians to imagine a future beyond their seemingly eternal status as nations which were always catching up with the powerful West, they have begun to develop their own global cultural aspirations.

In an editorial about the coming of satellite television the Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times* expressed a similar desire for influence in a much more agressive tone:

> Well, instead of Asians complaining about the onslaught of alien values and getting no farther than the cultural imperialism debate of an earlier age, it is better for them to get into each new act of the media play and try to reach fellow Asians in an Asian voice (The Straits Times, 6 January 1994).

Which is exactly what the Singaporean government set out to do with the establishment of Singapore International Television (SITV), a satellite TV service aimed at a region stretching from northern Australia to southern China and from Papua New Guinea to the Maldives. *The Straits Times* hailed this initiative as 'a small step' to counter the predominantly one-way traffic of transnational satellite broadcasting to sell Singaporean culture abroad. Note, for the moment, the appeal to a common 'Asianness', to which I shall return.

Anwar, in fact, has expressed a much more 'positive' brand of defiance against Western media hegemony than his Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, who tends to articulate his distrust of Western powers in a much more impulsive and uncompromisingly resentful way.[3] Anwar's response to the global challenge posed by satellite TV is a case in point. It was a response that is neither desperate nor defensive, but full of positive self-confidence, at least in rhetoric. In Anwar's words:

> It will not be too difficult for Asian countries to gain control of the communication technologies to mount a counteroffensive. But this will be meaningful only if we can offer cultural products that compete successfully for the free choice of a universal audience. This is a challenge to Asian creativity and imagination. Asia's increasing prosperity means that it is now in a position to offer serious alternatives to the dominant global political, social and economic arrangements (*The Straits Times*, 1 February 1994).

Thus when Malaysian or Singaporean government representatives speak about 'cultural imperialism' today, they no longer merely voice a defensive stance, but a much more self-assertive, forward-looking stance – at least, this has been the case

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[3] These subtle differences between Anwar and Mahathir, with the former being more conciliatory towards the West, at least in rhetoric, may have contributed to the former's fall from grace in the Malaysian political hierarchy in 1997, when Mahathir deposed him as Deputy Prime Minister and as appointed successor to the PM.

until the currency crisis of 1997 which has put a dent on Southeast Asian self-confidence. This voice no longer speaks from a position of relative powerlessness, but is one which is far more assured about its own worth and value. 'Cultural imperialism', presumably by definition a 'Western' vice, is no longer just reprehensible because it signifies the domination of a powerful 'culture' over weaker, less powerful ones, but also because the less powerful 'culture' regards itself as *better* than and, in some respects, superior to the imperialist power. As Anwar put in his book *The Asian Renaissance*: 'Not only has Asia to fortify itself against the possibility of negative cultural bombardment, it has to be able to make a positive and lasting contribution to a new world civilization which is just and equitable.' (Anwar Ibrahim 1996:97).

As we all know, anti-western discourse – as undergirded by the concept of 'cultural imperialism' – has generally accompanied the fragile nation-building efforts of recently decolonized nation-states in Asia and Africa in the post World War II period. Today, however, as some of these postcolonial nation-states have managed to gain some economic leverage against the very colonial masters of the past -- generalized as 'the West' -- anti-Western rhetoric still lives on but its inflection and its politics has changed from an anti- or post-colonial to a, what could be called, neo-civilizationalist sentiment.

Thus, it is notable that Anwar chose to speak from an unspecified, generic 'Asian' point of view. His speaking position was not explicitly associated with a particular *national* position: he did not speak as a Malaysian, but as an Asian. This eclipse of specific national identification is a significant move – one that can be seen as a critical reflection of the transnational construction of 'Asia' as a unitary imagined community, at least in electronic terms, in the footprints of the satellite broadcasters beaming onto the region. As Brian Shoesmith has remarked, satellite broadcasting provides 'markers of the potential for a new way of thinking about Asia, both by Asians themselves and by non-Asians' (Shoesmith 1994:127).

In this sense, the introduction of satellite TV in Asia has brought about similar responses as in Europe: the destabilization of national boundaries as marking the bounds of cultural identity and sovereignty is (partially) compensated for by the imagination of a more encompassing, regional form of cultural boundedness,

'Europe' in one case, 'Asia' in the other. But while the longstanding idea of 'Europe' is now being promoted and materialized in policy initiatives underpinned by the institutional power of the European Commission aimed at protecting European audio-visual industries (Miller 1993), there has been no comparable pan-Asian institutional base for a similar deployment of 'Asia', although several governments, including Malaysia, are quite insistent on the need to develop a satellite industry of their own 'to counter the dumping of information by irresponsible media from the West' (*The Straits Times*, April 5, 1994). What, however, can 'Asian' mean here? To answer this deceptively simple question, we need to look at the larger, global and historical context in which these new, Asian discourses of 'Asia' have emerged.

Now that nation-states such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, China and Indonesia look set for ever increasing economic integration through the promotion of regional free trade, the problematic of 'culture', previously primarily cast within strictly national(ist) terms, is undergoing rapid transnationalization. As the globe shrinks, the status of 'culture' as a global contested terrain has increased. The logic of these contestations cannot be sufficiently understood in terms of 'cultural imperialism', but must be cast within the framework of what Stuart Hall has called 'the global post-modern' (Hall 1993). The terrain of postmodern culture as a global formation, says Hall, is an extremely contradictory space and it is precisely this unruly contradictori-ness which I want to emphasize. The meaning of the ubiquitous term 'globalization' figures prominently in this respect.

As we have seen, the dominant image in the discourse of cultural imperialism is that of a world irrevocably and unilinearly headed towards an increasingly homogenized, westernized global culture controlled by the logic of a borderless corporate capitalism. Hall has astutely reversed this narrative of a singular, unitary logic of global capital; in his view, 'the totally integrative and all-absorbent capitacities of capital itself' are a deceptive myth. Instead, he emphasizes that 'capitalism only advances, as it were, on contradictory terrain' (Hall 1993:29). In order to become global, capitalism has had to incorporate and partly reflect the differences it encounters in its different sites of expansion. In other words, capitalism today *thrives* on difference: it incorporates rather than crushes differences, and exploits them to suit its own purposes. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that

global capitalism does not simply produce a global culture which will become increasingly homogenized over time, but brings into play a complex and ongoing tension between simultaneous cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, integration and fragmentation.

One of the signs of the resulting pluralization of 'history' as global capitalism expands is a gradual decentering of the 'West' as prime historical mover. Many world observers agree on this, and in Asia, in particular, self-confident, almost self-congratulary assertions could be heard, while it lasted. Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani for example could make these remarks in 1993: 'When I was posted [in Washington DC] in 1982, I went there with the clear sense that I was going to the Rome of the 20th century. And it was. (…) But at the rate things are moving today, it is doubtful that Washington DC will be the Rome of the 21st century. (…) Banish the thought that answers to global questions can be found only in New York, London or Paris. They are equally likely to be found in Shanghai or Tokyo, Jakarta or Bombay, or perhaps even Singapore.' (*Straits Times Weekly Edition*, September 4, 1993). I am interested here in whether Mahbubani's prediction will come true or not. What is more important to consider is the cultural significance of the frequent expression of such imagined futures in the early 1990s, when the rise of the so-called 'Asian tigers' was at its height. I will return to this forceful rhetoric of an 'Asian renaissance' shortly.

First, however, we should entertain the prospect of a more radical change: not just that of a *shifting* of centres but of a deconstruction of centres as such. Arjun Appadurai has remarked that we are now faced with a 'new global cultural economy … which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those which might account for multiple centers and peripheries)' (Appadurai 1990:6). Instead, the world should be seen as 'a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order' characterized by 'certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics' (Appadurai 1990:6). These disjunctures arise because the globalization of capitalist modernity has not resulted in a stable and systematised global order with rigid dependency relations between 'Western' and 'non-Western' nation-states, but rather in an increasingly dynamic and 'chaotic' criss-crossing of global flows, not only of media but also of money, people, technologies and ideas. It is

the disjunctures between these different flows, both in source and direction as well as in intensity and effect, which create a situation of profound uncertainty about the 'shape' of the 'global culture' at any point in time. Or to put it more accurately, since the intersection of these multi-directional flows at any locality creates differential effects which cannot be predicted, any certainty of an ordered 'system' should be forever bracketed (Ang 1996). From a more local point of view, too, this situation brings about more uncertainty and ambiguity. The local, that is, becomes more and more a space of flows rather than a space of places, as 'the actual dynamics of a given territory rely mainly on (...) activities and decisions that go far beyond the boundaries of each locality' (Castells and Henderson 1987:7). In other words, the local and the global should not be thought of in terms of their mutual exteriority, because global flows are not only dependent on local circumstances for their impact, but are also *constitutive* of local "identity".

In this process the nation-state plays a double role: on the one hand, it is the site where an ordered global diversity is *officially* articulated and represented (as in a United Nations plenary session), on the other, it is also the site of power for the containment of proliferating differences at the level of the local. In other words, the nation-state is the institutional site where a precarious balance between world homogenization and world heterogenization is being upheld – for the time being at least. While globalization does involve, as Appadurai has observed, 'the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, and clothing styles)', these homogenizing forces 'are absorbed into local political and cultural economies' and in that way heterogenized through infinite and contingent processes of indigenization (Appadurai 1990:160). The unpredictability of such local potentialities is contained, for an important part, not by global forces, but through the intervention of intermediate power structures operative within the local, particularly the agencies of the nation-state.

As the nation-state operates as the legitimate guarantor of cultural sovereignty and collective identity, the media, such as the press and broadcasting, serve as vehicles to unify the nation as an 'imagined community', as has been famously proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983). It is for this reason that many newly independent, postcolonial nation-states, precisely because they are new

nations with weak national identities, have generally been inclined to forge very intimate, highly regulated media/state relationships. The assumption that the media are powerful instruments of creating a national culture has played a constitutive role here (Karthigesu 1994). Thus, postcolonial nation-states, certainly those in Southeast Asia, have generally developed ultra-modernist media policies, based on a strict imagined (and imposed) equivalence of territorial state, media, culture and nation. The control of media messages circulating within the nation, e.g. through censorship, or more positively, through the promotion of national TV industries which it can regulate and oversee, is part and parcel of this desire for the state to vindicate the cultural solidity of its national boundaries. It is also within such a context that the deployment of a discourse of cultural imperialism was ideologically useful, because it identified the 'enemy' as an external force invading the cultural space of the national.

But this modernist scenario has been steadily crumbling. In an increasingly globalised world the quest for national/cultural self-identity has become increasingly fraught, and increasingly difficult to sustain. After all, in global capitalism the illusion that the state can be in control of its own destiny is disappearing; instead, it is now generally accepted that, as a territorial entity, the status of the state has been reduced to that of nodal point in a network of ever-shifting, nomadic, global flows. It is in this sense that 'the new territorial dynamics (..) tend to be organized around the contradiction between placeless power and powerless places' (Castells and Henderson 1987:7). This does not mean, however, that nation-states are about to give up their cultural nationalist projects, on the contrary. But it does mean that the inherently contradictory nature of such projects is coming increasingly to the surface, producing extremely intractable, contradictory effects which are beyond the state's control. As Appadurai puts it: 'States find themselves pressed to stay "open" by the forces of media, technology, and travel that have fuelled consumerism throughout the world and have increased the craving, even in the non-Western world, for new commodities and spectacles.' (Appadurai 1990:14). At the same time however these flows are threatening to the nation-state because they destabilize 'the hyphen that links the nation and the state' (Appadurai 1990:14).

In a sense, then, the effects of globalization are much more daunting and much more elusive than that of imperialism, because the cultural incoherence

brought about by it can no longer be related to a clear external cause. Instead, it has become endemic, part and parcel of the domestic life of the nation. Internal cultural contradiction is now the inescapable fate of all national formations. As Tomlinson says:

> The idea of 'globalization' suggests interconnection and interdependency of all global areas which happens in a far less purposeful way [than the term imperialism implies]. It happens as the result of economic and cultural practices which do not, of the themselves, aim at global integration, but which nonetheless produce it. More importantly, the effects of globalisation are to weaken the cultural coherence of *all* individual nation states, including the economically powerful ones – the imperialist powers of a previous era (Tomlinson 1991:175).

The state however does not have the means to adjust effectively to this new configuration of global power because its mode of operation remains firmly cast within a modernist framework. After all, the very operation of the nation-state system rests on the assumption of a closed, territorially defined space of national culture and a binary opposition between what does and what does not belong to that national culture, a clear borderline between the national Self and its Others.

Satellite TV is a dramatic case in point. Satellite TV embodies a qualitatively new phase of transnationalization of media flows, because its powerful extra-territoriality makes it very difficult for territorial states to control and police. State policies aimed at keeping satellite TV out, for example by banning satellite dishes, are becoming increasingly ineffective, especially as satellite dishes will progressively shrink in size so that their owners will no longer have to have them in public view (which has made their surveillance possible so far). The Malaysian Information Ministry Parlementary Secretary Datuk Fauzi Abdul Rahman has realized this: 'Then whatever laws we introduce would be impossible to prevent anyone from receiving satellite broadcasts from every corner of the world' (*The Straits Times*, April 9, 1994). In this sense, satellite broadcasting has posed a hitherto unseen challenge to the modernist state/media relationship, because it is a technology which so blatantly exposes the difficulty of cultural border patrol by the state. Experience in Europe and elsewhere learns that all attempts by individual states to accommodate the satellite 'invasion' (for example by introducing commercial national channels or pay

television) will eventually only dilute the centralized, modernist arrangement of state-controlled national(ist) television.[4]

For example, it is in recognition of the unstoppability of technological advances that the ban on satellite dishes in Malaysia was lifted in 1996, although this did not mean the introduction of a laissez-faire policy toward satellite TV reception. Instead, Malaysia decided to launch its own satellite, Measat (Malaysia East Asia Satellite), and licences for dishes were restricted to those that could receive signals only from Measat. But while initially only local TV and radio stations would be permitted to beam programs using Measat, it was foreshadowed that foreign programs would be allowed in a later stage (*The Straits Times*, 21 April 1994). One wonders whether such a 'compromising' policy would not be the beginning of the end of effective state control over Malaysia's audiovisual image space,[5] and how long it would take before Malaysian audiences would be able to watch Star TV, especially now that the transnational broadcaster has learned to 'localize' its programming and to accommodate the sensitivities of the national elites as to the perceived erosion of traditional values by Western programming. This is reflected in a statement recently made by a Star TV official to the effect that 'there's no money in cultural imperialism'.[6] This makes it disturbingly clear that the struggle over control can no longer be cast in terms of a clear distinction between inside and outside (the nation), because the border between the two has become increasingly porous. In other words, the problem is not one of 'invasion', but of 'dilution' – an unintended process often actively encouraged by the ambivalent policies of the states themselves.

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[4] The rapidity of developments in global communications is signalled by the fact that while satellite television was the issue of concern in the early 1990s, by the late 1990s the main concern has shifted towards the Internet, which has posed an even more daunting challenge to the border-guarding aspirations of national governments.

[5] It should be added however that such state control was never completely effective in the first place. For example, despite the ban people in Sarawak have for years been able to receive foreign broadcasts using satellite dishes bought on the black market. Similar infringements of satellite dishes bans are regular practice among TV audiences in places such as Southern China and Iran, along the Indian/Pakistani border, and, until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, in East Germany. In the latter case, cross-border television has commonly been seen as a significant contributor to the popular uprising which led to the fall of the wall.

[6] This comment was made during a speech in Jakarta, June 1995. I would like to thank John Sinclair for reporting this to me.

For example, the Indian state broadcaster Doordarshan, for years a key government tool to keep 'the West' out of (post-colonial) India, made an arrangement to carry MTV, the music video station, on one of its channels, and recently signed a similar arrangement with CNN. All this in light of a market-driven attempt to counter the competition of the private Hindi channel Zee-TV and transnational satellite channels such as Star-TV (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 5, 1994). Another example is the Singaporean attempt, in its bid to become a major information hub in the region, to woo international news services and broadcasters through attractive financial and infra-structural incentives. As a result, it has attracted Asia Business News (a pan-Asian satellite channel with round-the-clock business reports), Home Box Office Asia, ESPN, MTV and the Discovery network – all 'Western' enterprises – to set up their headquaters in Singapore. At the same time, the Singaporean government has remained insistent on the need for tight regulation and censorship. As Ian Stewart puts it, 'Singapore seems torn between an inclination to be at the forefront of informational and technological change, on the one hand, and a determination to protect its people from what it sees as Western degradation and unbridled democracy, on the other' (Stewart 1995:30).

Assuming then that the media are indeed central to the construction of national identity – an assumption which is worth interrogating (see, for example, Collins 1990) –, the dwindling of state control over the media would indeed spell danger for the future of nations. This, at least, is the general mood among many official representatives in the region. Will the territorial state indeed become powerless in the face of media globalization? Whether or not that will be the case, the *perceived threat* seems to be producing quite militant language. Remember Anwar Ibrahim's suggestion that Asian countries should 'mount a counteroffensive' by 'offer[ing]' cultural products that compete successfully for the free choice of a universal audience'. This prospect is echoed by Datuk Fauzi in his insistence that the best way to counter Western media 'dumping' would be for Malaysia to become a giver, not just a receiver of programming: 'We must get into the satellite industry and have control of the Asia-Pacific region or at least the ASEAN region'. (*The Straits Times*, April 5, 1994). Such an emphasis on export possibilities is not restricted to the Malaysians: as we have seen, the Singaporeans are equally interested in it, while the

relatively strong media industries in India, Hong Kong and Japan are already increasingly looking for transnational audiences within and beyond the Asian region (Iwabuchi 1994).

How to interpret such moves? On the one hand, of course, there is nothing surprising to the fact that media producers in Asia, too, are seeking to increase their markets through export and internationalization. This, after all, only makes economic sense in the age of global capitalism. On the other hand, however, there is a culturalist residue, as it were, in discourses such as Anwar's which indicate that there is *more* at stake than just economic rationalism. It is a redemptive discourse, a discourse born of an acute sense of dislocation which post-colonial nation-states increasingly experience now that they are seriously entering the globalized, postmodern world. Do Anwar Ibrahim and others really believe that one day in the next century, Western audiences will en masse watch 'Asian' films the way 'Asian' audiences now consume Western films? What would these films look like? And what would 'Asian' mean in the first place? Kungfu films? Bollywood musicals? Canto pop? But this is not what matters here. What matters – and what we need to try to understand – is why such a future, the future of an 'Asian renaissance', is being imagined in Asia today (and will not disappear despite the more or less temporary setback in economic progress). And I want to suggest now that, in cultural terms, this imagining is not just a sign of a newly found self-confidence in the region, but also, contradictorily, a sign of anxiety – a particularly postmodern kind of anxiety.

I noted earlier that Anwar did not speak as a Malaysian, but as an Asian. This identification with 'Asianness' can be interpreted as an attempt to reinstate a (cultural) border on a much more grandiose, 'civilizational' scale, now that the borders of the nation are becoming increasingly vulnerable. In some ways, it can be seen as a response to the rapid pace of economic globalization: postcolonial nation-states feel prematurely launched into the world of postmodern flux, where all identities, including national identities, are up for grabs. This leads to a great sense of cultural insecurity, uncertainty and directionlessness which needs to be compensated for somehow. A self-orientalizing capitalization on an 'Asian' identity – the cultural currency and imagined viability of which was reinforced by Western fascination with the success of 'Asian' capitalism in the first half of the 1990s, exemplified most

spectacularly by Australia's official desire to become a 'part of Asia' (Ang and Stratton 1996) – is one such compensatory strategy.

That the 'real' significant differences within the region cannot be easily subsumed within a unifying and unified pan-Asian whole is of course clear; it is something Western satellite broadcasters were quick to learn when they realized that there is no such thing as a pan-Asian TV audience. Thus, already in 1994 Murdoch's Star TV, one of the major Western promoters of the pan-Asian ideal, pronounced the ideal dead when it decided to create separate services for the Mandarin, Hindi and Indonesian language groups. As Jonathan Karp remarks, 'Because Asia includes so many cultures, programme suppliers are finding it must be conquered land-by-land, language-by-language' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 January 1994). In light of this new emphasis on localisation or 'glocalization' among Western satellite broadcasters (Robertson 1995), signalling their belated discovery that 'Asia' does not exist (at least not from a marketing point of view), it is ironic that Asian national elites are speaking increasingly in the name of precisely such a reified, idealized 'Asia'.

In this sense, I want to conclude that Anwar's discourse can be read as symptomatic, because it suggests how a sense of crisis over the deconstructive effects of capitalist globalization is 'resolved' in some Asian circles today by resorting to the fantasy of a kind of reverse, if soft, cultural imperialism, where it is now 'Asia' which will 'civilize' the world by disseminating its 'values'. Thus, Anwar suggested that 'Asia in the 21st century should become a greater contributor to the advancement of human civilization'. And as I have already suggested, he is by no means alone in imagining the future of a what he has called an 'Asian Renaissance'[7]. There has been a growing chorus of voices in Southeast and East Asia throughout the 1990s articulating the desire for a shift to the 'East' not only of global economic power, but also of global cultural authority. Singapore's Minister of Culture George Yeo has put it this way: 'When we were poor, we had no say. Now that we are less poor, we should begin to assert our own point of view.' (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 January

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[7] Ironically, Anwar's own ill-fated downfall and current imprisonment in Malaysia may, in the eyes of his supporters, be seen as a definite retreat from the 'Asian renaissance' he himself has aspired to represent.

1994). And he has asserted squarely that 'The Western dominance of the global media will be contested by the East.' (*The Straits Times*, 6 February 1993).

This self-promotion of an 'Asian' civilization as an alternative to the global hegemony of 'the West', this stated desire for 'Asia' to make an impact beyond its own territorial and cultural boundaries – that is, this desire to raise the status of 'Asian' civilization to global prominence and power – is a form of post-colonial 'writing back' with a vengeance which disrupts, at the level of the imagination, the linear process of universal modernization implicitly inscribed in the European project of modernity (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989). Sometimes, as in the case of Dr. Mahathir, this rhetoric is expressed in terms of a defiant 'Asia' which will give 'the West' its comeuppance – a specification of the controversial 'clash of civilizations' premonitioned by influential American political science professor Samuel Huntington (1993). At other times, as in the more idealist discourse of Mathathir's former Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, what is articulated is the dream for a 'civilizational dialogue' on an equal footing, for 'the creation of a global community, fominated neither by the East nor the West, but dedicated to the ideals of both' (Anwar Ibrahim 1996:41). Either way, the discourse operates to reduce the sense of disorder and uncertainty created by 'the global post-modern' through the continuation of an East/West divide.

What such a discourse obscures is the fact that 'East' and 'West' are not two mutually exclusive, eternally different 'civilizations' but that all nations and peoples, despite their obvious differences, now share a single global order which, despite – or perhaps precisely because of – its decentered and fragmented, localized nature, is governed by the same rules, procedures and requirements - ultimately, those of global capital. Arif Dirlik has astutely remarked that 'what makes something like the East Asian Confucian revival plausible is not its offer of alternative values to those of EuroAmerican origin but its articulation of native culture into a capitalist narrative' (Dirlik 1994: 51). In this sense, the ascendancy of 'Asia' so strongly banked on and desired among Asian elites today cannot be understood in terms of a triumph of 'East' over 'West', but more complexly and unrelentingly as the insertion and mutual entanglement of both in a more comprehensive but at the same time more fragmented and diversified global capitalist culture.

As Dirlik puts it, 'for the first time in the history of capitalism, the capitalist mode of production appears as an authentically global abstraction, divorced from its historically specific origins in Europe' (1994:51-2). Seen this way, the most successful and accomplished form of 'Western cultural imperialism' has been precisely the universalization of capitalist culture throughout the world. To an important extent, then, the promotion of 'Asia' must be understood within the framework of the abstract logic of the now globalized capitalist mode of production. Anwar Ibrahim himself has remarked, as already quoted, that what he has called an Asian 'counteroffensive' 'will be meaningful only if we can offer cultural products that compete successfully for the free choice of a universal audience'. And *The Straits Times* remarks that 'Good values do not sell on television because they are good values but because the programmes they are communicated through are good programmes' (*The Straits Times*, 6 January, 1994), implying that Singaporean programmes should first of all develop their *entertainment* value. The language of capitalism is spoken loudly and eloquently here: 'competition', 'free choice', 'selling'.

So naturalized has the capitalist culture of marketing and commerce become that what constitutes 'Asian' cultural products, apparently, can only be defined in terms of their career as commodities on the global market place, a matter, that is, of market positioning, niche marketing.

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