



Merlionicity: The twenty first century elaboration of a Singaporean symbol

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Abstract Designed in 1964 as a symbol for the (then) fledgling Singaporean tourism industry that reflected Singapore's maritime heritage, the Merlion – a figure comprising a lower half fish and upper half lion – has become a widely recognized icon of the modern island-state. But despite its prominence in representations of Singapore, the figure has divided opinion and generated debate amongst Singaporeans. Since the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s and 2000s, artists, writers and critics have variously re-imagined and modified the Merlion in order to comment on aspects of Singapore's national project. Prompted by the re-imagining of the Merlion at Singapore's third Biennale of Arts (2011), this article develops comparisons to similar international symbols and analyses the role and historical trajectory of the Merlion in Singaporean society and the manner in which it has stimulated discussion of the island-state's identity.

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Introduction

The nature of symbols and of symbolism has attracted the attention of semioticians since the earliest days of the field. At a general level, symbols are signs that signify objects, entities or qualities to individuals and communities. Peirce (1867/1998) famously identified three types of signs and asserted that that they represent their designata (i.e. that which they designate) through 'iconicity' (the resemblance of the sign to aspects

of its designatum), through 'indexicality' (a direct informational relation to the designatum) and through 'symbolism' (a conceptual evocation with no necessarily logical relation between the symbol and its designatum). In an influential study, Morris (1938) asserted that symbols operate within the social sphere through three different types of relationships: to persons, to objects and to other symbols. The stability of these relationships varies dependent on the nature of the symbol and on the nature (and complexity) of the designatum. A ✓ for example, operates relatively simply, unambiguously signifying a positive response. However, in the case of more complex designata, such as a social group, the relationship between symbols of that population and the population itself is more complex and liable to contestation or disassociation. In established territorial entities, such as cities or states, official civic symbols generally connect with the public on a spectrum ranging from passive disinterest and tolerance through to enthusiastic engagement. In more recently established and/or

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reconfigured territorial entities that do not have access to obvious heritage symbols, the creation, promotion and promulgation of new symbols is a more problematic project. Moghaddam et al. (2000) proposed the concept of 'symbolic carriers' to refer to symbols (such as flags) that represent particular communities and their values. However ancient or timeless they may appear, such symbols have life-spans that include moments of inception, phases of promotion and promulgation and periods of prominence, decline, disavowal and/or obscurity. While not primarily semiotic in orientation – being more concerned with issues of interpretation and critique and the role of artists and writers in pursuing these – this article recognizes the operation of symbols within the frameworks outlined above.

This article specifically addresses the creation of the Merlion as a national symbol for Singapore, initially as a logo for the state's tourism development authority and then promulgated to be a 'symbolic carrier' for the state and its population more generally. In this regard it explores similar ground to Yeoh and Chang's seminal study of the Merlion's inception and late twentieth century development and reiterates their central research question in a more contemporary context:

If both tourism and nationalism are strongly productive of iconographic and monumental forms, what then happens when these forces converge and collide? Can a single iconographic form represent the coalescence of both forces and, Janus-faced, become both a recognizable emblem of the nation to the rest of the world and at the same time gain entry and root into the collective psyche of the nation? (2004: p. 31).

As a symbol developed in the earliest phase of Singaporean nation building, the Merlion has accompanied and participated in Singapore's rapid socio-economic rise and played a prominent role in the development of the state's spectacular 'cityscape' – an urban arena that (it will be argued) reflects the ideology and ambition of Singapore's dominant People's Action Party (PAP). The element of spectacularity in Singapore's civic spaces (and public culture more broadly) is explored in this article with reference to concepts originated by Situationist theorists in the 1950s–60s. The deployment and discussion of these extends and reflects upon a number of Singaporean engagements with Situationist theory over the past decade. The most relevant reference in this case is Debord's (1967: p. 1) epigrammatic pronouncement that:

The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production prevail announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

Aside from the sweeping nature of Debord's (1967) central claim, acceptance of this characterization poses a number of questions about the nature of art (conceived as an incisive form that can illuminate and/or critique aspects of hegemony). As Home (1991: p. 42) concisely summarizes, the Situationists engaged with the concept of art and its effectiveness in a somewhat convoluted manner, rejecting established 'bourgeois' art as subsumed within the hegemonic operation of spectacle, calling for 'real' art to erupt out of its niches in order to assert itself in new forms that could escape this subsumption. Drawing on the semiotic concepts outlined above, this article analyses recent variants of and cultural engagements with the Merlion

with regard to what a number of Singaporean writers have characterized as the spectacularization of Singaporean civic spaces. With particular regard to artistic engagements – and principally those associated with the state's national Biennales (2006, 2008 and 2011) – the article addresses the extent to which successive creative engagements with the Merlion have modified its symbolic carriage.

Singapore: Tourism development and the Merlion

While the island has had a long history of habitation, Singapore became a fully independent state in 1965. Unlike the colonies that aggregated to form the Malaysian federation, Singapore was established as an ethnically and religiously diverse state, with the majority population (around 75%) being Chinese, with Malay and Indian populations comprising the majority of the remainder and with English as the state's official language. Since independence, Singapore has been politically dominated by the PAP, which has promoted multiculturalism and religious tolerance as core values (along with a vigorous engagement with international capital). Tourism was identified as a prime area for economic development in the early 1960s, with government formulating the 1963 Tourism Act and establishing the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (now known as the Singapore Tourism Board or STB) in the following year (at a time when tourism to the city was minimal, with visitors numbering less than 10,000 per year). The Act formally gazetted a logo for the tourism board (Fig. 1) and restricted use of the symbol without official clearance.¹

The central image of the logo featured a 'Merlion', a creature with a lion's head and fish's body and tail. This chimeric creature resembles various figures from Asian and European mythologies and more specific images developed within western heraldic practice.² While the design of the figure is often attributed to Fraser Brunner, curator of the city's Van Kleef Aquarium and a member of the tourism board's Souvenir Committee, Lee (2004: p. 99) suggests a more complex and col-

¹ The Act states: The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) grants permission for use of the Merlion symbol or a symbol or representation resembling it (the "Merlion Symbol") to an individual, organisation or company ("User") on the terms and conditions set out in the guidelines below:

- The Merlion Symbol is to be used in good taste.
- The Merlion Symbol is to be reproduced in full.
- Wordings, graphics or objects are not to block or be superimposed over the design of the Merlion Symbol [...].

The Merlion Symbol cannot be used:

- in any trademark.
- as part of a logo e.g. in letterhead of the company.
- in association with or in promotion activities which are illegal or likely to debase The Merlion or embarrass the image of STB or Singapore. (STB, 2010)

² Within the latter context, the figure invites comparison to other hybrid symbols of marine locales. England's port of Great Yarmouth, for example, is represented on its shield by a figure comprising a lion's head and front feet to the left of the shield, completed by a herring's tail to the right. A similar figure also appears in several official heraldic designs used in the Philippines, deriving from sixteenth century Spanish colonial designs.

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