Singapore, City of the Future:

Promotional Genres and Visual-Aesthetic Registers of Allochronic Futurity

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In August 2018, a National Geographic feature titled *City of the Future: Singapore* was aired in the United States, in Singapore, and in several other markets. In the documentary's opening scenes, a man's voice can be heard providing voiceover narration: "The paradigm has shifted. The world is accelerating…. This city could be a model of what's to come. This is the city of the future: Singapore" (National Geographic 2018). The film has garnered more than 14 million views and 121,000 thumbs-up or "like" reactions since it was aired and posted in full to YouTube, most of them appearing in the 12 months following the video's launch. To date, there are zero thumbs-down or "dislike" reactions.

A year later, in late 2019, the third season of the dystopian sci-fi series *Westworld* began filming in Singapore. In *Westworld* Season 3, Singapore serves as the backdrop for 2058 Los Angeles. Why? As Jonathan Nolan, one of the show's creators, explained in an interview: "If you go out in the world the future is there, it's in places like Singapore" (quoted in Rhys 2020). This quotation and others like it recurred repeatedly across global mediatized reportage about *Westworld* being filmed in Singapore. As is common in such reportage, the written descriptions were often accompanied by visual images depicting what the future looks like in the Southeast Asian island city-state: monumental glass-and-steel forms; buildings whose regular, rectilinear grids are interrupted by vegetation planted into their façades and terraces; and vistas comprised of repetitive, pointillistic architectural textures juxtaposed against curvilinear, biomorphic patterns. These depictions represented Singapore—and yet, not quite. It was Singapore deployed as a backdrop (Babcock & Huggins 2021), a metaphorical proscenium onto which "the future" could be projected—in various forms and toward diverse ends—but which had little, if anything, to do with Singapore as such.

This article analyzes the two media sites mentioned above: the 2018 National Geographic documentary feature and accompanying special-issue publication by a similar title, together with reportage on Singapore's selection as a *Westworld* filming location. Other examples could have been included for greater breadth, but ultimately the two case studies stand as representative samples of a range of media-artifactual types that discursively construct and visually depict Singapore's technoscientific futuristic-ness. In a range of media like these, circulated across numerous public-facing sites, Singapore is repeatedly referred to as a "city of the future": a place where the future is being made, a place where the future has already (or is soon to be) materialized, and a place that exists in the future. Despite the register differences—differences in the specific kinds of futurity that are represented through recognizable collections of signs-in-discourse—it is significant that Singapore is consistently labeled and narrated as "futuristic." What is more, Singapore is not just *called* "futuristic": the future itself is also *shown* and imagined in and through visual depictions of the city.

How do discursive and visual frames articulate with one another in promotional genres about "the future" in and as Singapore? What media effects are produced when registers are incongruent across genres and modalities? Despite being about Singapore at one level, the cases that I analyze have the effect of invisibilizing Singapore as an actually existing place inhabited by real people. Much in the way that texts by policymakers and global analysts denude Singapore of its particular historical, sociocultural, and geopolitical content to render it a decontextualized model for use elsewhere (Chua 2011), my analysis demonstrates how promotional genres and discursive registers that verbally articulate Singapore's distinctiveness are nevertheless subordinated to, and undone by, a set visual-aesthetic registers that render it generic, placeless, and timeless. Analogous to classic Orientalizing, and more generally colonial, representations that construct Otherness as trapped in the past or relegated to a time-outside-time, the media effects that I analyze in this article are grounded in descriptions and depictions of Singapore as being in or of the future.

The mediatized (Agha 2011c), remediated (Bolter & Grusin 2000; Gershon 2010b; Silvio 2010) artifacts that I analyze may seem disparate, even wholly unrelated. However, I suggest that they ought to be understood instead as collaboratively producing a generalized Western media trope about Singapore. Specifically, I argue that these media both produce and employ the trope of *allochronic futurity*. This trope is materialized most overtly in a visual-aesthetic register that circulates across a range of genres, and which articulates with a multiplex discursive register whose effects proceed orthogonally to those of the visual-aesthetic. The genres that I focus on comprise mass-mediated promotion—not only tourism-and-investment promotion, but also media-

promotion styled as newsworthy, pop-culture entertainment reportage. Across these media artifacts, Singapore is produced for Western audiences as existing outside the here-and-now. This effect is afforded not only by the felt immediacy of visual forms, but also by the discursive descriptions that accompany them. I seek to analytically disentangle verbal and visual channels within these tropological framings, while also showing how they materialize and mediatize Singapore's futurity, both verbally and visually.

This article responds to scholarship in recent decades that has focused on media "handlers" (Gitlin 1980/2003, p. 7), "sponsors" (Gamson & Stuart 1992, pp. 55ff), and other visual-rhetorical producers (Barthes 1977b, 1977a). In analytically disentangling genres from registers, and further disentangling register effects across modalities, I aim to draw attention to the effects that are *not* selected-for or agentively chosen by producers, but rather that emerge out of the real connections and contiguities—in a word, *indexicalities* (Nakassis 2017, 2018)—among likenesses of visual forms across media (read: mediums in the plural). Crucially, these emergent connections and likenesses exert a stipulative, regimenting function (Silverstein 1993, pp. 33–34) that constrains or canalizes the purposive selection of signs in a graphic-visual channel as much as it enables that selection. This article thus contributes to critical global media studies (Kraidy 2018) by attending to situated, by-degrees institutionalized practices for the circulation of Western registers and genres of public communication through which the non-West is constructed as an object of knowledge and desire. It also demonstrates the utility of a non-denotational approach to the critical project, namely, the utility of an approach that does not focus exclusively on propositional discourse as the site or locus of nonwestern erasures. In the media artifacts that I analyze here, Singapore is figured as what the brand theorist Koh Buck Song has referred to as a "hip, sexy place of wealth" (Chan 2019): a futuristic, technoscientific playground for anglophone elites to conveniently access goods, services, and social capital. This serves to erase the breadth and depth of lived realities, aspirations, and experiences of intersectional inequality that structure life in the Southeast Asian island city-state (Teo 2016, 2019). I hope to demonstrate the importance of analytically disentangling genres and registers (in multiple modalities) as they are mobilized toward the production, maintenance, and legitimation of mediatized tropes in circulation.

My aims in this article are threefold. First, I seek to show some of the pernicious effects of ostensibly celebratory descriptions and depictions of a place (or phenomenon) as existing in, or of, the future—specifically, in the ways that this can amount to a denial of coevalness in the present (Fabian 1983, pp. 31–35). Second, I attempt to demonstrate the importance of analytically separating genres and discursive registers from visual-aesthetic registers in media analysis to

better locate the effects under study, particularly in cases where genres and discursive registers work at cross-purposes with visual forms in both establishing and subverting the ostensive distinctiveness of a location. Finally, I offer a methodological intervention into the study of the visual images that circulate in and through media artifacts, and point a path forward away from mechanistic approaches to the analysis of images (as comprising universal tropes, grids, principles of composition, etc.; e.g., see Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 2001) and toward a flexible, inductive semiotic method for engaging with visual tropes as they manifest (in) their particular historical, institutional, and sociocultural configurations.

The article proceeds in four sections. In section one, I elaborate the trope of allochronic futurity to situate my article's intervention vis-à-vis theoretical and empirical scholarship on time and temporality in discourse, predominantly drawing on works by sociocultural and linguistic anthropologists. In section two, I describe the features of the promotional genres constructed in the National Geographic documentary and special-issue publication, *City of the Future: Singapore*, together with mediatized reportage on *Westworld*'s location-scouting and filming. Here, I show how Singapore's distinctiveness gets constructed at the level of genre. In section three, I explicate the features of the discursive registers that structure the ways that Singapore is written about when it is described or labeled as (a) "city of the future." This section shows how Singapore's constructed distinctiveness at the level of genre gets amplified at the level of register. In section four, I analyze the composition of visual-aesthetic registers of allochronic futurity, revisiting both the National Geographic documentary feature and *Westworld* reportage. This section demonstrates how visual-aesthetic registers work at cross-purposes with genre and discursive registers to render Singapore—as an actually existing place—invisible in and through its visualized futuristic-ness. Finally, after the conclusion, I offer a brief Coda that engages with the short video, *Singapolis: Enchantment Made Possible*, released in conjunction with the multidisciplinary series *State of Motion 2021: [Alternate / Opt] Realities* in Singapore. This video montage uses juxtaposition to critically intervene into the constructed placelessness of mediatized representations of Singapore. It does so, crucially, by anticipating a Singaporean audience, not a default, global-qua-Western/American audience. I end here to show that Singaporeans and people in Singapore are not silent, passive, or hapless dupes of Western media tropes, but actively contest and refuse these tropes—albeit across unequal positions.

1. Chronotope and the Allochronic Future

As myriad critical scholars of time and temporality have argued, the future is not just a time-yet-to-come. Though it is part of a taken-for-granted Western formulation of linear temporality, the future must be understood as part of an historical, moral order that shapes orientations and actions in the here-and-now (Augé 2015). This is true in Singapore as elsewhere in the modern world: the future has long served as a focus of "state-defined anxiety" (Chong 2010, p. 508) in Singapore, mobilized both as a justification for public-institution building and as a private, individual imperative. Often, the future is not specified, but merely held out as a social, economic, cultural, or political necessity. This takes a variety of forms. To name a few: the National University of Singapore renamed its career office the Centre for Future-Ready Graduates in 2015 (Yuen 2016); the SkillsFuture scheme was also launched in 2015 to provide Singaporeans with the ability to "upgrade" themselves for future jobs (Woo 2018); and the Centre for Strategic Futures was founded in 2009 under the Scenario Planning Division of the Singapore Prime Minister's office, part of a longstanding state concern for "strategic foresight" (Kuah 2013, pp. 104, 105). Like many other global locales, Singapore's futures are things for which good citizens prepare, plan, educate their children, upgrade their skills, and more. The future is both threatening and threatened, a spacetime in which the spectre of foreign interference looms large, and in which the tenuous "harmony" among Singapore's four official enthno-racial and linguistic groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other—are constructed as always-already at risk of dissolution (Babcock forthcoming; Goh 2010; Kathiravelu 2017). But unlike many global locales, "the future" is a predominating, inescapable focus of public life in Singapore and an intensively talked-about matter of public concern that animates governmental and nongovernmental initiatives to both prepare for uncertain futures, and to present Singapore as a place where future solutions are found.

As critical scholarship has further shown, there is not one "future," but many (Munn 1992, p. 96): the near future, the distant future, the Millenarian "End" of Prophetic Time (Guyer 2007; Koselleck 2004, p. 11), etc. Further, whether implicitly or explicitly, the future is not only temporal, but also spatial, and involves ways of living as specific kinds of people (or posthumans)—not actually existing individuals, but the avatars they embody, also called images of personhood (Agha 2011b, pp. 172–173; Gal 2013). In this sense, the future as a plural formulation exists as a collection of *chronotopes*: space-time nexuses populated by images of personhood. In Mikhail Bakhtin's classic theorization of the chronotope, he was clear that chronotopic materializations in novels were only a special case of socio-spatio-temporality within the diegetic world of a text (Bakhtin 1981, p. 84). Beyond the chronotopes of narrated worlds and characters

interacting therein, Bakhtin explicitly acknowledges that the link between author and reader/listener is chronotopic as well. Linguistic anthropologists and others have extended the concept of the chronotope to elaborate this broader sense of a socio-spatio-temporal structure (Silverstein 2013). Though I will not expound further here, the tripartite division of the chronotope into time, space, and image of personhood offers a useful model for understanding the media trope that I analyze, in which a time—*the future*—is located in a place—the *city of the future*. Finally, the social persona is *the innovator* or *resilient adaptor*—often an entrepreneurial "innovator" of monetized technoscientific machine applications; a machine user; or an absent, even *irrealis* figure who is spoken for, but who does not speak.

Viewed chronotopically, it should be clear that time and temporality are neither content-free nor unstratified. Rather, temporality becomes a vector of differentiation capable of being deployed in interaction to hierarchically rank and subordinate social positions and personae. In a classic text on the intersubjectivity of time and temporality, *Time and the Other* (1983), the anthropologist Johannes Fabian critically re-examines the relationship traditionally imagined as inhering between ethnographic researchers and the people they study. Particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the groups studied by anthropologists were traditionally those deemed "primitive" or "savage," constructed as lying on an earlier point in biological- or cultural-evolutionary time. The problem, then, was how to make sense of these "prior" peoples existing in the here-and-now (Fabian 1983, pp. 38–41). One effect of such primitivizing discourse—a hallmark of anthropological writings in this period—was to treat these groups and individuals as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966/2001), living remnants of the past to be studied as past, not as present. Such representations are a clear, and clearly violent, case in which coevalness is denied—a denial, it should not be forgotten, that was crucial to the legitimation of colonial and imperial designs (de L'Estoile et al. 2005; Fabian 1983, pp. 63–64; Gordon 2018; Price 2016). However, I push Fabian's analytic in a new direction, focusing on the future as a construct through which coevalness is also denied—not by relegating some peoples, places, or activities to the past, but by relegating them to a time yet to come. In my case study, the city of the future is located in and visualized through Singapore, but in the process, Singapore as an actually existing place recedes into the background. Denial of location in time is also a denial of location in space.

To put it explicitly, I argue that discourses of "futurity" deny coeval existence to Singapore in the present. Moreover, in projecting the future as imperative, the past is presented as something to be overcome, except for the purposes of adding value via "heritage" branding (Chang & Yeoh 1999; Yeoh 2005, pp. 948–955). Such a denial of coevalness is what Fabian calls *allochronism*.

And as I will argue, allochronism is a prominent feature of the cases that I examine in the subsequent sections.

Before continuing, a word about genre and register. *Genre* deals with artifacts' formal features. In this sense, it is a classificatory tool (Briggs & Bauman 1992, p. 132). Yet the features according to which classification is carried out themselves exist only contrastively, according to what they are taken *not* to be: a documentary feature is a documentary feature because it is *not* entertainment news, drama, etc. A genre is also an achieved likeness, an effect of some act(s) of bringing-together through comparison (Gal & Irvine 2019, pp. 21–22). To say that two artifacts exhibit some shared likeness in respect of their formal features— e.g., as a documentary, piece of entertainment news, drama, etc.—is to construct an indexical relation between them, a "relationship of co-occurrence within a frame" (Silverstein 2005, p. 7). With respect to genre, the co-occurrence relation construes two or more artifacts as being of the same artifact-type, according to some principles of formal construction.

A *register*, by contrast, is a mode of social action for making associations among culture-internal signs that are linked "with particular social practices and … persons who engage in such practices" (Agha 1999, p. 216). A register is a collection of signs that "go together" by virtue of a cultural schema of differentiation (Silverstein 2003, p. 212); like genres, they exist contrastively, according to what they are taken not to be (p. 226). Registers can be linguistic— a *discursive register*—but they can also be comprised of other kinds of signs, such as commodities (Agha 2011a), sonic qualities (Harkness 2013), phenomenological impressions (Bate 2009), or, in the present cases, visual-aesthetic features. What counts as a genre and register is always ideological in character, materialized through the ways that participants in social worlds produce and respond to signs about what counts as "sameness" or "belonging together" (Gal 2018, pp. 2–3). In other words, through genre and register are conceptually distinguishable, the actual contours of their distinctness is always an empirical question.

2. Mediatizing and Remediating Promotional Genres

In this section, I describe genre features of the promotional materials in which the "city of the future" trope circulates. I seek to demonstrate that there are two genres of mediatized, mass-mediated promotion constructed by distributed institutional agents: (2.1) *documentary as tourism-and-investment promotion*, and (2.2) media promotion styled as newsworthy, pop-culture *entertainment reportage*. The former is characterized by its interinstitutional networks, with artifacts' substantive content being shaped according to client–service-provider relations

within "content-marketing" and "brand storytelling" frameworks. The latter is characterized by remediation, "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter & Grusin 1999/2000, p. 45), as artifacts of various genres, media, and formats are recruited to the function of "news." Beyond the articulation of old and new media (Gershon 2010b, p. 287), the media that comprise the second genre are typified by a shift in frame. Something produced in one medium for one purpose is reframed according to institutionalized conceptions of what is newsworthy, hence, what should become news. By tracking these two genres, I show how they frame Singapore as distinctive: a unique place worth visiting as a tourist, investing in as a capitalist/financier, or finding entertainment-value in as a token of a pop-culture audience.

Both genres are also mediatized. As I use it here, mediatization refers to a logic by which media institutions dominate social institutions (Hjarvard 2008, p. 110). More concretely, it refers to "institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization" (Agha 2011c, p. 163). Mediatization, it should be noted, is a special case of semiotic mediation: the way in which signs, objects, and conjectures about signs' and objects' interrelationships are produced and interpreted in social life (Gal & Irvine 2019, pp. 87–101). These dynamics—remediation and mediatization as subsets of semiotic mediation—form the conceptual background for the discussion of the two genres that follows. In line with theorizations of the active audience, together with work in the sociology and anthropology of media, I insist that audiences are not passive conduits whose uptake is determined by the intentions and structures of the producer of a message (Curran 2002; Gershon 2010a, 2010c; Morley 1993). My analysis here is not about how audiences actually or necessarily engage with promotional media produced by institutional agents, but rather how a desired addressee is tacitly figured by the formal features of the media.

2.1. Documentary as tourism-and-investment promotion genre

In this section, I analyze *City of the Future: Singapore* and its print-medium counterpart, *Singapore: City of Tomorrow*, as exemplars of a hybrid documentary and tourism-and-investment promotion genre. Both artifacts are predicated on Singapore's distinctiveness as a locale ostensibly unlike any other, according to nation-branding imaginaries and practices (Aronczyk 2013). And yet, as I show here, the commoditization of place has the improbable effect of simultaneously denuding the place of its multilayered particularities, thereby opening a gap in which the register effects I describe later can find a foothold.

Both *City of the Future: Singapore* and the print publication, *Singapore: City of Tomorrow*, were released in August 2018. The documentary is 44 minutes long, divided into six segments. It was produced by National Geographic Group's

Branded Content Studio in collaboration with the Singapore Ministry of Communication and Information. The documentary aired in Singapore on August 18, 2018 and is available in its entirety on YouTube.[1] Though the print publication was released in conjunction with the documentary, I describe it here primarily to highlight the contrast between the discourse strategies employed by the two artifacts.

The 40-page magazine was released on August 1, 2018—a week ahead of Singapore's August 9th National Day celebrations—as part of the Ministry of Communication and Information's (MCI) #WhatMakesSG campaign (Ang 2018), with 250,000 copies distributed to libraries and community centres around Singapore (ibid.; see Figure 1). The fact of co-sponsorship by a Singapore Government ministry is accentuated in the print publication: the MCI logo was prominently placed in the lower left-hand corner of the front cover, and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) logo and slogan appears on the inside cover. Inside, 10 stories elaborate the STB's slogan—"Passion Made Possible"—by both explicitly explaining the "Passion Made Possible" brand, and presenting narratives about Singaporeans' "passions" in areas ranging from wildlife conservancy to shoe design. Most of the photos in the publication are headshots of the featured "passionate" individuals; depicted locations are a combination of famous architecture, such as the Esplanade Theatres by the Bay—a concert hall and multi-genre venue with twin domes shaped like the spiked durian fruit—and colonial-era shophouses. Three of the 40 pages are devoted to the 2018 Trump-Kim summit. Three pages are also devoted to the winning entries from the #WhatMakesSG photo competition. Finally, the magazine's introduction by S. Iswaran, Singapore Minister for Communications and Information, redoubles the media artifact's branded framing: "Singapore is constantly reinventing itself, charting a new course forward amidst demographic shifts and technological change. This is our DNA…. From Smart Nation projects to Singapore-grown strawberries—there is much to celebrate and learn from the passionate individuals who are making an indelible mark and helping to shape our future city and home" (Iswaran 2018, 2; in National Geographic & MCI 2018).

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[1] National Geographic, *City of the Future: Singapore*, uploaded November 24, 2018. youtube.com/watch?v=xi6r3hZe5Tg.
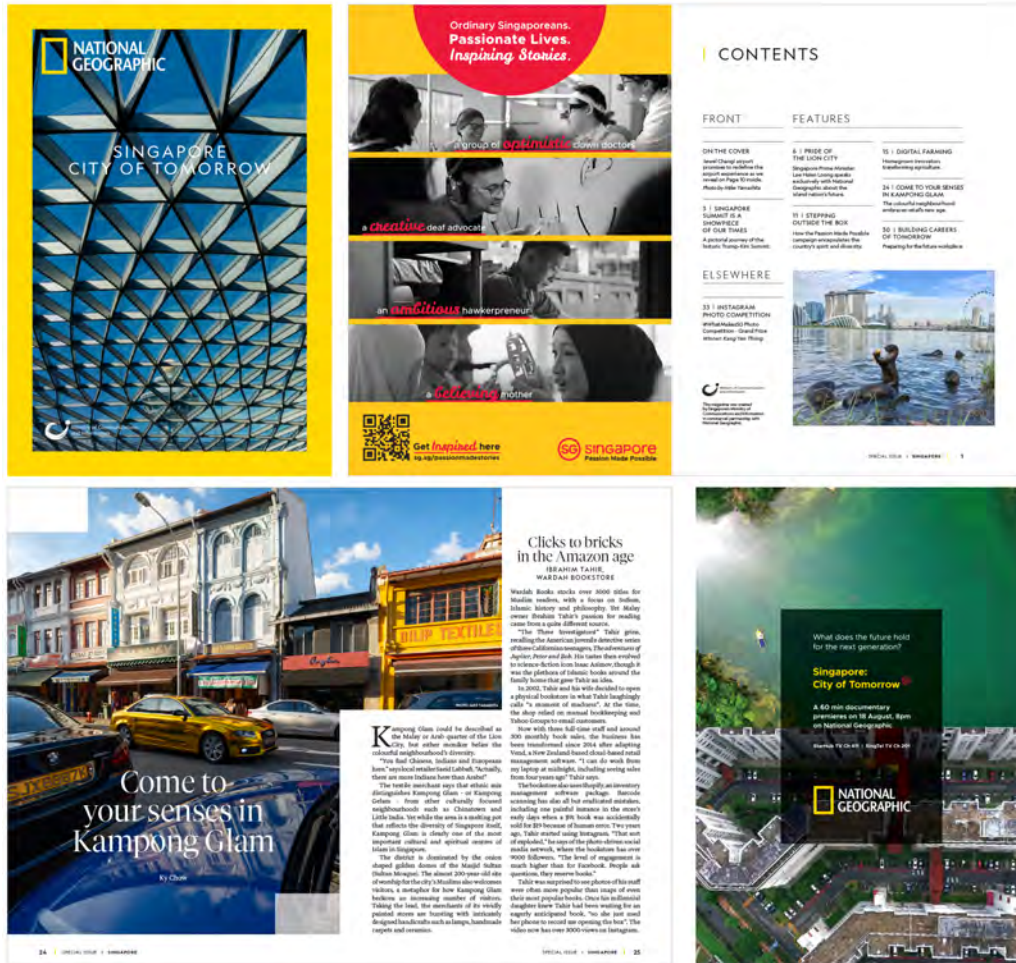
FIGURE 1: Pages from the National Geographic print publication *Singapore: City of Tomorrow*. Top left: cover image featuring an interior view of the glass dome of Jewel Changi Airport, a nature-themed entertainment and retail complex at Singapore's Changi Airport. The MCI logo is visible on the front cover's lower-left corner. Top centre: inside cover features the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) logo and tagline. Top right: table of contents page includes a photo of Singapore's iconic Gardens by the Bay, Marina Bay Sands, and Singapore Flyer behind a family of river otters. Bottom left and centre: inside spreads feature heritage architecture, including the shophouses in Kampong Glam. Bottom right: back cover features aerial views of the MacRitchie Reservoir water catchment zone and a newly built public housing estate.

By contrast, in the *City of the Future* documentary, the fact of the MCI's co-sponsorship is downplayed, mentioned only in the closing credits. The documentary describes 12 "innovations" through talking-head interviews with various government figures, as well as with employees and founders of private or government-linked companies (Ramírez & Tan 2004, p. 511). Roughly half of the total broadcast time features Singaporeans. The other half of the broadcast features permanent residents or work-visa holders. The documentary selectively presents Singapore as a place of technoscientific innovation that is "ahead of its time." Featured "innovations" mostly comprise algorithmic technologies (like blockchain authentication for finance applications) and machine engineering (drone-based transportation and logistics services; medical robots). In classic modernist fashion, much of the content celebrates the triumph of humans over nature (Bauman & Briggs 2003, pp. 3–4; Dobson 2007, pp. 168–169; Gillespie 2008, pp. 37–43): indoor hydroponic agriculture, seawater desalination, wireless electricity transmission, nutritionally optimized 3D-printed food. Just two of the 12 innovations featured in the documentary are not directly linked to engineering or computer programming: one three-minute segment (33:16–36:16) features a private preschool, where students learn to build simple machines, grooming them for jobs as programmers later in life; another two-minute segment (40:50–42:52) features the National Parks Board's (NParks) efforts to build "community" through app-based "citizen science." Most of the locations depicted in the documentary are recently constructed architectural and infrastructural megaprojects. Very few heritage sites are shown; when they do appear, such sites appear as cinematic peripheries. Unlike the print publication, government taglines and slogans do not appear, nor do overt references to "passion" or "Passion Made Possible."

The point is not just that the documentary is selective, failing to depict heritage architectures, non-technoscientific feats, etc. All representation is selective; there is no such thing as a total representation of a locale or phenomenon. Rather, the point is that the documentary's form is driven by genre features that are common to expository documentary film, broadly: voiceover narration (by a man's voice); prompted, "talking-head" interviews; use of b-roll graphics as filler and exposition for narration and interviews; and use of low-detail computer animation in title sequences and explanatory scenes that illustrate otherwise nonvisible technological or physical processes (e.g., when depicting seawater desalination). Further, the documentary is shaped by expectations of *promotional* mediatized genres. The documentary's status as promotion becomes visible, I suggest, primarily through the interinstitutional networks backing its production. Though the Ministry of Communication and Information's participation in its production process is not explicitly foregrounded, the

relationship between the documentary's denotational content—what it says and refers to—and the unfolding, onscreen narrative is nevertheless produced within formal structures of both financial co-sponsorship and the expectations of expository television-targeted documentary film.

Further, the selection of denotational content reflects the intertwined pressures organizing both interinstitutional arrangements and documentary conventions. By depicting and explaining "innovation" in Singapore, Singapore is formally constructed as a desirable site to visit, or in/at which to invest. In the National Geographic documentary, "the future" is a technoscientific wonderland in which ageing populations eat customized, molecular-gastronomy-style 3D-printed gel sculptures from black slate slabs; in which children are groomed in private preschools to become computer programmers in adulthood; in which passenger drones take you from the private terrace of your condominium to other (private) sky gardens—in short, a socio-space-time in which the only sites seen are carefully crafted, high consumption-class, elite tourism utopias (Goh 2017). While it is true that the National Geographic documentary aired in Singapore, and hence prefigured, at least in part, a local Singaporean spectator, this should still be understood in terms of a broader dynamic through which Singapore is promoted to Singaporeans via the figure of the "foreigner" or "global audiences" (Babcock & Huggins 2021, pp. 65–68). Through these communicative tropes, Singapore's successes are framed as worthy of national celebration because of their recognition and validation by Western institutions.[2]

2.2. The entertainment reportage genre

The dystopian, sci-fi series *Westworld* was relaunched by HBO in 2016. The relaunch revisited the central concept of a 1973 film by the same title, which served as the series' inspiration. Analysts in philosophy and critical theory have extensively analyzed both the film and the series, which turn on the "dialectic of reality and simulation" (Busk 2016, p. 26) in exploring the uneasy, unstable boundary between human and artificial consciousness (Hirvonen 2018; Richards 2018). In the show's first two seasons, viewers were taken on a journey through an American "Wild West"-themed amusement park, where human "guests" interact with android "hosts," the former living out their (often violent) fantasies without fear of retaliation from the latter. Season 3, however, steps out of the amusement park and into 2058 Los Angeles, which was filmed in Singapore.

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[2] For instance, Singaporean media outlets extensively covered Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong winning a prestigious global award in 2019 for promoting religious harmony; much coverage also featured Singapore's Changi Airport receiving Skytrax's award for world's best airport for eight years running.

Rather than offering an analysis of the show, I am interested most in *Westworld*'s remediation in and as entertainment news about Singapore. My discussion in sections three and four draws on 18 articles in which "Singapore" and "Westworld" co-occurred, focusing on only those media artifacts that included evaluative commentary. My analysis does not draw on HBO's own "behind-the-scenes" content—which is available both as standalone videos on HBO's website and following select episodes on the HBO streaming site—since this content was already quoted extensively in transcribed form in my selected media.

Much like the promotional documentary I discussed in previous section, the genre features for mediatized promotional texts are also undoubtedly familiar to readers: the texts' formal features and processes of circulation are structured by desired forms of uptake (by Singapore government ministries, American and European media outlets, various audience-consumers, etc.). Though framed at one level as "news," their desired institutionalized uptake is an act of consumption, whether by watching *Westworld* Season 3 (and HBO shows more generally), or by forming or thickening a commoditized destination image (Echtner & Ritchie 1991) focused on Singapore—regardless of whether a viewer will ultimately travel, work, or invest there. As with other genres felt to occupy a "hybrid" position in the informative–promotional continuum, the promotional genres that I focus on in this article are characterized by a "tension between overtly acknowledged and tacitly understood communicative purposes" (Catenaccio 2008, p. 12). Many of the mediatized articles that I discuss in sections three and four name celebrity personae whose naming signals the imputed newsworthiness of the subsequent attribution to Singapore, e.g., "'Westworld' Creator Lisa Joy on Why Singapore Makes for a Beautiful Futuristic Backdrop." Unlike some scholars, I do not view this "commoditization"—also called "marketization" or "promotionalization"—of a given message (Bhatia 1993, 2004; Fairclough 1992, 1993) as parasitic upon information, but as a feature of the mediatization of promotion (Agha 2011c). Rather, in the next two sections, I track the way that this mediatization articulates with other features of the media artifacts qua artifacts, as well as with their design features aimed at facilitating their circulation through various channels.

3. "The Future" as Discursive Register Across Three Frames

In this section, I describe how Singapore gets constructed as "futuristic" in a discursive register that is materialized across three frames in both the documentary feature and selected articles: (3.1) as a result of machine-technological "innovations"—*preparing for "the future"*; (3.2) as a real, emplaced

condition—*(existing in) "the future"*; and (3.3) as partaking in qualities that are interchangeable with other futuristic locales, not as wholly nondescript, but still as a replaceable token of a futuristic type—*futuristic intersubstitutability*. The features I outline across the three subsections that follow are derived via an inductive, qualitative analysis of the 18 articles listed in the *Westworld* Video/Article Archive at the end of the text. In approaching my archive, I analyzed lexical tokens and textual parallelisms (i.e., textual figures achieved via the compositional design, or poetics, of a media artifact). My presentation of findings is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Through exemplary tokens, I show how futuristic-ness at the level of discourse registers delimits the range of possible attributes to the locale in ways that depict Singapore as distinctive through the presence of the lexical label "Singapore" and variants, together with other verbal constructions that emphasize place-based distinctiveness.

3.1. Singapore preparing for "the future"

In discursive representations of the future as something to be prepared for via machine-technological "innovations," the future is enregistered—constructed according to the conventions of a register formation—as teleological and linear, if unknowable and filled with challenges. This kind of techno-optimism reframes future challenges as practical problems in need of machine-technological solutions: how to create more land and potable water; how to use drones to deliver parcels 24/7; and how to get citizens to "eat smart, and well" using artificial intelligence and wearable tech. Ironically, these problems are often also presented as already solved. In cases where problems have not yet been solved, broad references to "research" are offered as evidence for the fact that, soon, they will be.

These discourse-register features are deployed extensively in the National Geographic documentary. The documentary's opening sequence, for example, uses both narrator dialogue and a soundbite from an interviewee, Gareth Tang, Senior Vice President for Technology at Innosparks, an engineering-based "open innovation lab and incubator." (In the transcription that follows, **boldface** text indicates spoken narration or diegetic speech; material in [square brackets] describes onscreen moving images):

> **NARRATOR: The paradigm has shifted. The world is accelerating.**
>
> [*aerial shots: cityscape; 10 lanes of overhead traffic; time-lapse footage of pedestrian and automotive traffic*]

The science fiction of yesterday is rapidly becoming the science fiction of right now.

[*close-up shots: two young boys using screwdrivers on a colourful toy machine; robotic assembly arms at an automated factory*]

How do we understand the tectonic shifts in the world around us?

[*tracking shot: white plastic-clad humanoid robot walking with a piece of metal in its outstretched arms / mid-depth time-lapse shot: robotic arm moving cast steel structures in a large warehouse*]

How does a society thrive when the world economy is undergoing constant disruption?

[*out-of-focus mid-depth shot: pedestrian corridor hung with white string lights in front of illuminated storefronts / close-up shots: LED scrolling marquee with stock market ticker; trading screen on a computer monitor / rapid-cut close-up shots: woman's face; hands typing at a keyboard; source code on computer screen*]

00:28–00:30: no narration

[*close-up shot: space shuttle launch engines firing; long-range shot: space shuttle launch*]

How do we continue to learn when information is moving at the speed of light?

[*mid-depth tracking shot: automotive speed test in a white desert landscape / close-up shot: 3D scanning camera lens; binary code flickering on a monitor / mid-depth shot: time-lapse automotive traffic at night*]

00:36–00:37: dramatic pause in orchestral music

[*aerial shot: 8 teams of rowers on the water at Marina Bay, shot facing east toward Esplanade Theatres by the Bay*]

There are places that are ahead of the curve,

[*aerial shot: 5 teams of rowers on dragon boats, shot facing south toward Marina Bay Sands, ArtScience Museum, and Singapore Flyer; detail tracking shot: spiked dome on the Esplanade Theatres by the Bay*]

cities building the tools for tomorrow.

[*close-up shot: Airbus drone; computer screen activating positioning system for robotic acupuncture system; filtration mask on a black plastic mannequin head*]

INTERVIEWEE 1: "We want to create innovations that have a real-world impact."

[*close-up shot, interviewee speaking—Gareth Tang, Innosparks / mid-range shot: indoor hydroponic growing system illuminated in purple light / close-up shot: surgical glove-clad hands holding a hydroponic strawberry*]

After this sequence, the opening segment ends with the narrator's triumphant announcement: "This is the city of the future: Singapore." The narrator's final stretch of talk is accompanied by an animated CGI city that appears block by block in a smooth, non-realistic geometric style, without rendering or texture mapping; the documentary's title appears over this CGI cityscape: "City of the Future: Singapore."

In addition to generic temporal reckoning—e.g., "tomorrow"—futuristic innovations are also described in more specific terms, as in an interview with the British-born principal architect at a Singapore-based architecture firm who appears in the documentary's first segment after the introduction and a commercial break:

[7:50] **NARRATOR: But some in Singapore are … already imagining the cities of the far future.**

POMEROY: "I actually think that the future of Singapore is not just about increasing the density around the transportation nodes of activity, I actually think it's about exploring air rights as well."

[*on-screen title text: "Prof. Jason Pomeroy, Founding Principal, Pomeroy Studio" …*]

[8:40] **NARRATOR: If cities expand upwards into the skies, conventional methods of road transportation may no longer be effective….**

[8:55] **POMEROY: "But then all of a sudden, you're gonna need to think about how to get people up there. If you were to fast-forward 50 years from now, you already see drone technology becoming so advanced, why are we not sticking people into**

> **those drones?–again, a bit like *Blade Runner*. All of a sudden, your sky courts, your sky gardens, even your private terraces to your condo is actually a landing platform for your own personalized drone."**
>
> **NARRATOR: Though the idea of us flying to work may be decades away, drone technology is advancing rapidly, and could become integral to the future of transportation in the cities of tomorrow.**

This segment of the documentary pairs the underspecified label "cities of the far future" and metaphorical use of "tomorrow" with the more specific time-horizon of "50 years from now." The technological innovation—passenger drones for the rich—is one that does not yet exist, but is "advancing rapidly." (Note that owning a condominium is already prohibitively expensive in Singapore, and will only become more so in the years to come).

Such teleological discursive representations of machine-technological-innovation as practical-solutions-to-futuristic-problems are also deployed in *Westworld* reportage, though less overtly than in the National Geographic documentary. These discourse register features especially occur in interviews with production designer Howard Cummings, although visual effects supervisor Jay Worth and co-creator Jonathan Nolan occasionally also voice such characterizations. In interviews, these individuals describe Singapore as a place in which a range of social and technological problems have been solved technocratically—albeit superficially or with sinister motivations. For instance, when describing the show's digital composite-work used to present Singapore as 2058 Los Angeles, Cummings is quoted as saying: "[Singapore's] vertical greenery provided the look we were going for, which is partially mandated by the government" (Reiner-Roth 2020). Also commenting on urban greenery, the show's co-creator Nolan voices the following misgivings: "Singapore has this mandate to cover all of its buildings in living greenery. It looks very beautiful but also seems like a token effort to offset global warming as a way to reassure ourselves that we've fixed that problem" (Braxton 2020). In such descriptions, Singapore's urban greening is presented as a dissimulating surface. Here, the isomorphism of "the future" with technoscientific machine solutions is presented as deceptive or self-delusional: if not allowed to fall into the trap of "mandate[d] … token effort[s]," Nolan suggests, we could actually allow technology to fix the problem.

3.2. Singapore as (existing in) "the future"

The discourse-register features that locate Singapore *as* the future, or as existing in the future, also position it as a locale that exists at a later chronological point-to-come, rather than as a site at which machine-technological and practical-technocratic solutions are being developed now. These register features take the form of overt discourse constructions, using both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical forms to describe Singapore as variously existing at times other than in the present. This can be seen, for instance, in the National Geographic documentary's introductory sequence. Urban planner Cheong Koon Hean, Chief Executive Officer at the Housing Development Board—which manages Singapore's public housing network, home to around 80% of Singapore's population (Haila 2016)—voices such a claim toward the end of the sequence: "You are looking at the development of Singapore 40 years ahead of time" (National Geographic 2018). The sequence features a rapid cut from a mid-range to a close-up shot of the interviewee, followed by a close-up shot of a new mother placing an infant in a crib. Taken on its own, the utterance could be interpreted to mean that Singapore is 40 years ahead of its own targets, or 40 years more advanced than its peers. Selectively included in the introduction, however, the quotation is strategically decontextualized through editing. In the full interview that occurs later, the narrator focuses on the "high-tech, innovative solutions to not only provide enough living spaces for Singapore's citizens, but also improved quality of life for decades to come" (03:56) *through planning*. Dr. Cheong follows this with a description of the "sophisticated computer models that help the architect-planner to improve the environmental quality in the town" (04:10). However, in the opening sequence, the link to planning is not articulated or elaborated. What is emphasized in the documentary's overt framing, in other words, is the denotationally absurd position that Singapore is 40 years ahead of the current linear-chronological timeline.

There are other discursive features in this register that reverse the relationship, locating the future *in* Singapore. Constructed in this way, the relationship displaces time over space, rather than space over time. For instance, in a July 11, 2019 interview for the *Straits Times*, *Westworld* co-creator Lisa Joy is quoted as saying: "We came here to Singapore because we wanted to find a place that looks like the future. There is no other place that combines incredible architectural marvels with the integration of nature, in which greenery is integrated with modernism. It's incredibly unique and evocative and like nowhere else in the world" (Lui 2019). Elsewhere, *Westworld* affiliates stated this more explicitly: "'The goal from the beginning was to find the future. If you go out in the world the future is there, it's in places like Singapore' says Jonathan Nolan" (Rhys 2020). In another interview, Nolan elaborates: "'It really does feel

like you've gotten in a time machine and stepped forward 20, 30 years into the future… The future is here. It's just unevenly distributed'" (Vary 2020). As these examples make apparent, Singapore's futuristic-ness is thus often voiced explicitly as a visible quality. However, while the discursive register includes constructions such as "unique … like nowhere else in the world" to describe Singapore's built environment, the visual-aesthetic register itself does not similarly construct Singapore's uniqueness beyond numerical distinction, a phenomenon I return to in section four.

3.3. Singapore as futuristically intersubstitutable

Many of the discourse-register features that construct Singapore as a place in or of the future also render the place interchangeable with other futuristic places, in spite of the insistences that Singapore is like "nowhere else in the world." This happens at the level of poetic parallelism—that is, as a function of the compositional design of the media artifacts, rather than by means of overt discourses. Put differently, none of the various promotional media explicitly *say* that Singapore is intersubstitutable with or the same as other places. Rather, there is a "perceived recurrence of some feature of discourse" that structure the internal relations of co-occurrence and coherence among artifacts (Nakassis 2019, p. 70). For instance, the *Westworld* reportage often recounts the origins of Singapore's selection as a filming location by describing other places that they might otherwise have filmed. Five articles from my media selection make reference to the 2013 film *Her*, where Shanghai served as the filming location for a future Los Angeles, and which served as an inspiration for *Westworld*'s creators: "Joy and Nolan actually hit upon this solution [of filming in an existing city] in the earliest days of developing 'Westworld' after comparing notes on their trips abroad. Then the couple saw Spike Jonze's 2013 sci-fi romance 'Her'—which doubled Shanghai for a future L.A. 'We were disappointed that we didn't get to be the first people to do that,' Nolan says with a chuckle" (Vary 2020). After recounting this origin story, media then go on to describe how and why Singapore became the second choice. Equivalence is established by sequential co-occurrence within an article, as locations are brought together as equally plausible locations in which to set Los Angeles 2058.

In the aforementioned article, Nolan is cited as he describes investment in infrastructure and amenities in "Asian cities":

> The two creatives and their production team chose Singapore, with its undulating, cosmopolitan architecture festooned with lush greenery, to double for future Los Angeles. "I love America. Great place," says Nolan. "But we haven't spent the kind of money that you've seen spent [in Asia], in terms of infrastructure and public

transportation and airports. The experience of going to any major
Asian city is always a little bewildering and humbling on that level.
(Vary 2020)

This description of "Asian cities" comes immediately on the heels of a description
of Singapore as the show's second-choice filming location, and then leads into a
description of why Singapore was chosen as the filming location. Here,
Singapore's *Asian* city-ness makes it a generic substitute for other futuristic places
(Chun 2006, chapter 4), where public works make an American viewer
"bewilder[ed] and humbl[ed]." A September 18, 2019 article in the *South China
Morning Post* links this intersubstitutability to a perceived demand on Hollywood
filmmakers to continually present American audiences with new locales. Citing a
film industry professional, the link is more overt: "The cityscapes of locations such
as such as Tokyo and Hong Kong have been filmed too often, leaving American
film and television productions seeking *new backdrops*" (Chan 2019; emphasis
added).

In another way, just 30 seconds before the end of the National
Geographic documentary (43:30), British-born Benjamin Swan—co-founder and
CEO of Sustenir Agriculture, a hydroponics company whose strawberries feature
extensively in the documentary—states: "If we can do it here in Singapore, we
can literally do it anywhere in the world." This triumphal pronouncement is not
the final line in the documentary, yet it serves to rescale the Singapore-based
innovations described in the film. Swan's quotation—through its position in the
documentary—rescales the innovations not as local responses to local challenges,
but as a-contextual models that can be transposed to other locales, a common
kind of move in which Singapore is reduced to a portable "model for success" by
erasing the historical specificities and contingencies that made possible its various
successes (Chua 2011). Part of a larger discourse register, this shift from Singapore
to "anywhere in the world" is achieved in the National Geographic documentary
through a poetic parallelism structured across the documentary feature as a
whole, rendering Singapore's model as portable (ibid.), and thus
intersubstitutable.

4. Two Aspects of "the Future" as Visual-Aesthetic Register

In addition to an internally multiplex discursive register, described in the previous
section, the trope of allochronic futurity relies on another, visual-aesthetic
register. Like the discursive register, the visual-aesthetic register is also internally
multiplex, comprising visual-denotational content, composition, cinematic
angles, and colour palettes. In this final section, I describe this register with

reference to the overarching genres and specific cases discussed so far in the article. Though I analyze them separately, the visual-aesthetic register that is materialized in circulating images should be viewed as co-constituted with the textual content that accompanies and motivates its circulation, and vice versa. It is important that the visual-aesthetic signs co-occur with linguistic signs that explicitly typify the visual-aesthetic features as futuristic. In other words, the accompanying text is crucial to visual constructions *as* the future; at the same time, there is a regularity to the perceivable qualities of the images that circulate, constituting a register that can be analytically disentangled from the discourses that typify it.

In the following subsections, I describe two aspects of the aesthetic-visual register of allochronic futurity. I name these aspects according to the kinds of locales depicted: (4.1) *Biophilic urbanism*, in which an array of architectural forms are intertwined with living urban greenery (Newman 2014), and (4.2) *Monumental architecture*, where a building or building complex is constructed on a massive scale, with no attempt to mask or downplay its enormity (Curtis 1983, p. 307). Further, as I note in my third subsection—(4.3) *Biophilia meets monumentality*—this division is a methodological rather than an ontological one: these aspects often co-occur, such that biophilic urbanism is featured as a function of monumental architectural scale, and vice versa.

4.1. Biophilic urbanism

Singapore has long been marketed as a "Garden City" or "City in a Garden," a framework that has for decades guided its environmental sustainability and conservation planning efforts (Guillot 2008; Newman 2014). The result is what planners and architects have referred to as *biophilic urbanism*, which "bring[s] nature into every element of the built environment" (Newman 2014, p. 47). Urban greenery is a conspicuous feature of this aspect of the visual register co-comprising allochronic futurity, and futuristic-ness is recurrently ascribed to the design and imaging of the juxtaposition of architecture and greenery. Through a combination of wide-angle, aerial, and building detail shots (both moving and still images), the visual compositions are organized around a contrast between organic and inorganic forms, where randomly pointillistic organic forms are juxtaposed against regular, inorganic forms. The images are desaturated—making the images less vibrant and the colours less bright—and darkened, so that even daylighted images appear as if they were taken in low-light conditions.

This can be seen in widely circulated images of the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay (see Figure 2), an array of 12 fluted columns 50 metres tall, comprising networked, branch-like metal beams finished in purple, green, and yellow. The Supertree Grove is featured extensively in the National Geographic documentary

via wide-angle aerial footage. In aerial images, a viewer encounters a contrast between the unbounded, pointillistic organic forms that contrast with the regular arrangement of the Supertrees, whose forms are themselves partially obfuscated by plant life. Nighttime images also circulate—occasionally as aerial images, but more often as mid-angle images that prominently position the Supertrees' trellis canopies. Dark colour palettes render vegetation as a textural contrast rather than a colour contrast; plants serve as a backdrop to the multicoloured lighting used to illuminate the Supertrees by night (see Figure 3).
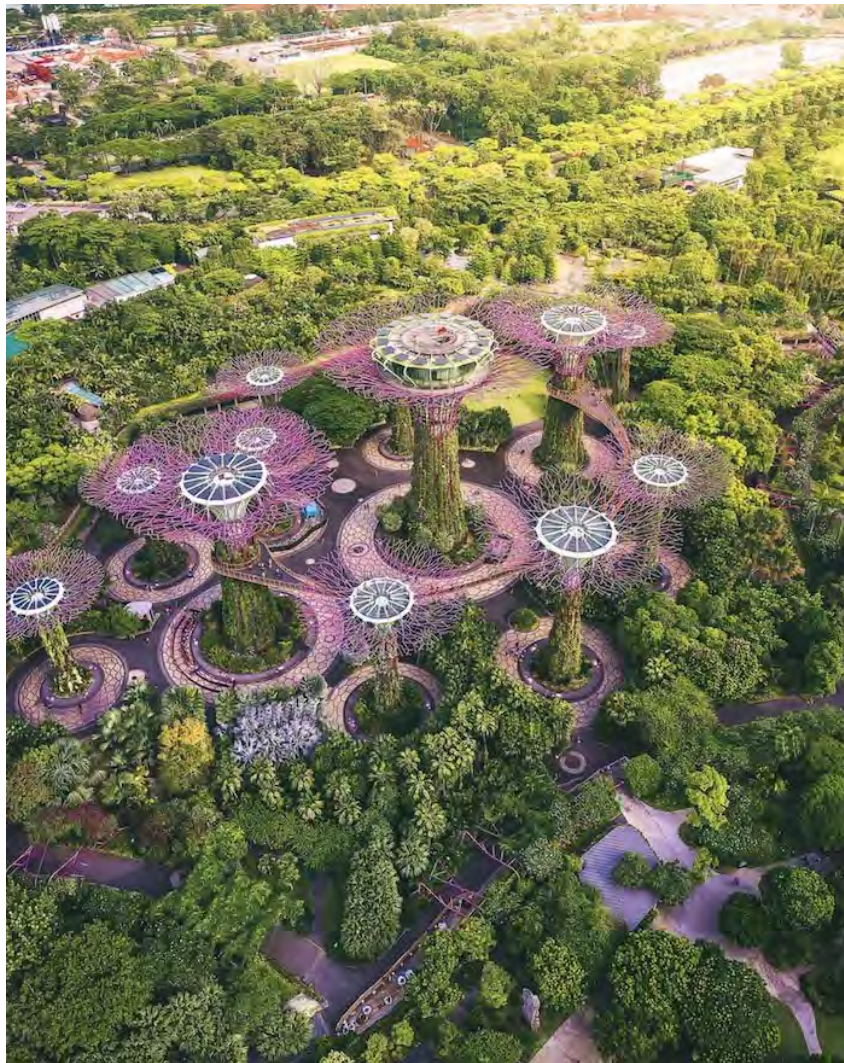

FIGURE 2: High aerial shot of the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay, daytime view. Featured in Danao 2020. Photo © @kevyouthere.

FIGURE 3: Mid-range aerial shot of the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay, nighttime view. Featured in Danao 2020. Photo © @kevyouthere.

FIGURE 4: Aerial view of the Marina Bay Sands complex at night. Featured in Danao 2020. Photo © @kevyouthere.

4.2. Monumental architecture

In the media that I analyze, the architectural images are monumental in both scale and in the techniques of their visual representation. Taking loose inspiration from architectural historians, who theorize the relationship between monumentality and modernism, I use the term *monumental* (and its nominalized form, *monumentality*) to refer to architecture that is designed for "grandiosity of expression" (Curtis 1983, p. 306), figured contrastively with reference to the human scale and surrounding architecture (p. 315). Images of monumental

architecture are produced with wide angles, low angles, or aerial views that emphasize the size of the architecture relative to its surroundings. This is an effect of the building design and urban planning as well, since the structures are spaced relatively far away from other large structures to create a high-impact optic vista. Circulating images also highlight the repetition of curvilinear or geometric forms that draw attention to, rather than distract from, the largeness of the architecture. This can be seen, for instance, in widely circulating images of the Marina Bay Sands (MBS) development (see Figure 4), comprised of three parallel 55-storey towers topped by a rooftop terrace shaped like a ship. When labeled and circulated as "futuristic," the structure is predominantly shown at night, with images produced at a high angle or taken facing southward, toward the sea. In addition to the repetitive pattern of its lighted windows, the glass façade reflects the lights of the Shops at MBS—a shopping centre, entertainment venue, and casino comprising the structure's podium. By contrast, images of the Pinnacle @ Duxton (see Figure 5), which is recurrently featured in visual media, also emphasize repetitive black-and-white geometrical patterns and accentuate the building's enormous size: at 50 stories and 156 metres in height, the Pinnacle is Singapore's tallest public-housing building. The Pinnacle is generally depicted in daylight, both in *Westworld* reportage and in the National Geographic documentary.

FIGURE 5: High aerial view of the Pinnacle @ Duxton. Screenshot from National Geographic documentary, *City of the Future: Singapore,* August 2018.

FIGURE 6: Interior view of the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay. Featured in Danao 2020. Photo © @kevyouthere.

4.3. Biophilia meets monumentality

I describe biophilia and monumentality separately for purposes of analytic precision, but as I stated earlier, the two aspects frequently coincide. This can be seen, for instance, in images of the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay (see Figure 6), which combines features of monumental architectural scale and the integration of plant life with built form. The building is a mist-filled, irregular glass dome lined with metal latticework; it comprises a temperate greenhouse filled with mountain vegetation. The human scale is indexed through the inclusion of people in the foreground, always dark, silhouetted, and shrouded in mist. Biophilic urbanism and monumental architecture also coincide in *Westworld* reportage that featured scenes shot at the Heart at Marina One (see Figure 7), a mixed-use building complex located nearby to the Gardens by the Bay. The 34-storey-tall vegetation-draped courtyard is lined with variegated sculptural ribs that are shaped to imitate the walls of an anatomically accurate human heart. Marina One is featured in an early establishing shot in *Westworld* Season 3, as well as in the Season 3 trailer, and still images from these scenes circulated widely in promotional media about the series. Though I have selected only a few images for description in this section, the features that I discuss can be seen across the various images of Singapore architecture that are routinely deployed—in tandem with discursive descriptions—in which Singapore is typified as a city of the future.

FIGURE 7: Interior view of The Heart at Marina One (right), screenshot from *Westworld* Season 3 trailer, © HBO 2020, February 20.

Conclusion

This article has examined the uses to which "the future" is put in the registers and genres through which Singapore's allochronic futurity is constructed. By considering the registers through which futurity is constructed, and differentiating them from the genres in which they occur, we can come to a better critical understanding of how the trope—and its othering effects—are achieved. Further, this article has sought to show how attention to a specifically visual-aesthetic register can help us to analytically locate where and how (a) place and people are invisibilized. That is, while the genres and discursive registers repeatedly reference Singapore's distinctive place-ness—both by name and through discursive constructions that emphasize its unique locality—the circulating visual-aesthetic register ends up looking like other locales that similarly feature biophilic, monumental, and biophilic-monumental/monumental-biophilic architectural forms.

A few final caveats are in order as I conclude. First, I am not suggesting that all representations of Singapore deny its present coevalness by projecting it as a place that does not (yet) exist. Indeed, where it occurs, the trope of allochronic futurity interweaves with a wide range of other Western tropes, including "authoritarian Singapore," "dystopian Singapore," and "inauthentic Singapore." Interviews with the *Westworld* production designer, for instance, always note that Singapore's urban greenery is "government mandated" (Vary 2020); interviews with the show's visual effects supervisor describe Singapore's vehicle-ownership controls as driven by "rich people … benefit[ing] themselves … by restricting everyone else" (Turchiano 2020)—rather than, for instance, a concern with congestion, CO_2 emissions, or air quality. Whether in overt negative formulations or in ostensibly celebratory representations, the images and descriptions that circulate as "futuristic" embody the desire that structures a Western gaze and elevates "America" through its contrastive positioning vis-à-vis "Singapore" or "Asia."

I have argued that, in the media I analyze here, seemingly celebratory representations of Singapore as "the future" are merely one side of exoticization and othering. These participate in broader, widespread tropes of Asia as "backward," "uncivilized," "exotic," or regressively "traditional." Put differently, the relegation of locale(s) and people(s) to either a future time-out-of-time or to times past are part of a longstanding, distributed, racializing problem-space (Scott 1997, p. 518) for constructing objects (built environments, experiences, linguistic varieties, microbes, etc.) and questions (What is the essential character of the Oriental-Asian Other? Can the Other be assimilated?). Across myriad sites, interests, and projects, this structure seeks to deny Asian bodies and locales coeval

participation in the present. Longstanding tropes that emphasize filth, disease, and supposed cultural backwardness have received more attention to date, especially in U.S.-focused scholarship (Hsu 2015; Kurashige 2016; Lew-Williams 2018), and I am encouraged by the growing number of movements to condemn and dismantle anti-Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander hate in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. My point here is that, whether projected toward the past or the future, the effect is that an Orientalist problem-space gets reinscribed—one that posits a permanent, ultimately unbridgeable gulf between an Asian–Oriental Other and a Western Self.

Finally, it should be noted that, in the registers I have described here, "the future" is a continuation of the present. This is true both in the sense that the continuation of present trends is explicitly assumed—wealth inequality, global political disenfranchisement, generalized techno-capitalist expansion—and in the sense that "the future" draws on and extends extant mediatized repertoires for discursively and aesthetic-visually representing futuristic-ness. Classic films (and their remakes), such as *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott 1982; dir. Denis Villenueve 2017), together with more recent critically acclaimed Hollywood releases like *Her* (dir. Spike Lee 2013), are overtly mobilized in these discourses as part of an historical semiotic chain (Agha 2007, p. 205) of conventionalized representations of "the future."

Ultimately, I have proposed the concept of the *visual-aesthetic register* to characterize how tropes circulate through both visual and verbal texts, and to insist that these two cannot quite be disentangled analytically even as the forms co-occur in discourse. The methodological entailment of this concept is that, as analysts of visual media, we ought to attend inductively to the co-occurrence of verbal and visual forms as they are brought into relations of likeness and unlikeness, alignment and disjuncture. This contrasts with approaches that begin from largely a-contextualized, a priori analytic grids (see Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). At a first level, then, this is an argument about the relationships of contiguity between the verbal and the visual: it matters that something is called "futuristic"/"(like) the future." Yet at another level, it also matters that a representation *actually looks like the future*—that it partakes in the forms and norms that audiences have been socialized to recognize as such. In this way, we can understand where and how to focus our analytic attention to make sense of the constraints that get exerted by the forms themselves in and through their circulations across media sites. Rather than taking this contiguity as self-evident or trivial, I have sought to closely examine how registers of allochronic futurity get constructed by promotional texts through both genres, discursive registers, and visual-aesthetic registers. Though verbal and visual signs mutually reinforce one another, they also work at cross-purposes to accomplish contradictory effects.

I hope that my approach in analytically disentangling and tracking the signs that go together in and as signs in a visual modality will prove fruitful to further study in other areas: while visual and verbal registers are sometimes congruent in their effects, this cannot be presumed in advance.

Coda: "[Alternate / Opt] Realities" in Motion

It would be ironic to write an article about the uses of the future which invisibilize both Singapore-as-locale and people-in-Singapore without acknowledging the many ways in which Singaporeans (and people in Singapore more broadly) are already calling attention to their own invisibilization. In this coda, I briefly touch on a short film released by the Asian Film Archive as part of State of Motion, a Singaporean multidisciplinary program of exhibitions, screenings, and artistic responses focused on Singapore and the broader Asian region. Part of Singapore Art Week, the sixth annual State of Motion series was titled *State of Motion 2021: [Alternate / Opt] Realities*. Promotional materials offer the following description:

> The title takes its cue from the "Alt / Option" key from the computer keyboard, allowing users to modify existing mechanical systems and command codes. By entangling the "opt" between the phrase, "alternate realities," the *optional*, *optimal*, and *optical* permutations imagine possibilities beyond present realities…. Considering the "magical" qualities of *science* and the power of *fiction*, how do we make sense of these prevailing simulations? How do we carve out liminal spaces as portals into *[Alternate / Opt]* realities? (Asian Film Archive 2021)

In the lead-up to the 2021 hybrid State of Motion program, the Asian Film Archive released a short montage, *Singapolis: Enchantment Made Possible*.[3] Named using a playful spin on Singapore's official place and destination brand, *Passion Made Possible* (Babcock & Huggins 2021), *Singapolis* inverted the Western gaze, sampling from approximately 18 cinematic and televisual depictions of Singapore produced both within and without, from *Hitman: Agent 47* (dir. Aleksander Bach 2015), *Geomancer* (dir. Lawrence Lek 2017), and *XX Ray* (dir. Aziz M. Osman 1993) to *Equals* (dir. Drake Doremus 2016), *Independence Day: Resurgence* (dir. Roland Emmerich 2016), *Krrish* (dir. Rakesh Roshan 2006), and *Westworld* Season 3. As the short film opens, snippets from the *Westworld* Season 3 trailer flash onscreen, and the voices of two characters intone: "Another simulation? Well, this one's a bit over the top." The reply—"No, Maeve, this is Singapore"—begins

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[3] "Singapolis | State of Motion 2021: [Alternate/Opt] Realities," accessed at https://youtu.be/7kucHKbmho8, uploaded February 9, 2021.

a slow transition into a Hindi song-and-dance number set, among other locales, at the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay.

Though it is only 5:54 long and has, at the time of writing, been viewed on YouTube fewer than 200 times, the montage reasserts and re-inserts Singapore as a salient frame, refusing to allow it to remain as a mere backdrop for Western entertainment genres. Despite the small number of views, the film is just one in a series of mediatized reportage, social media essays, and personal communications with me during my ethnographic fieldwork in Singapore in which eagle-eyed Singaporean and Singapore-based viewers located and drew attention to Singapore as an actually existing place to be discovered through the fractures in a never-truly-totalizing façade of generic futuristic-ness. In this way, by "foregrounding the optics of the science-fiction genre upon Singapore, 'Singapolis: Enchantment Made Possible' fleshes out the connections between … speculative imaginations and investigates the imaging of the country as a hybrid between reality and fiction on screen" (State of Motion 2021).

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