Promise: Design, Modernity and Everyday Life in Modern Thailand (1957-1973)

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Abstract

In this paper we reflect upon aspects of the interplay of modernity, everyday life and design in Thailand. Our research focuses on a signal moment in Thai history, the emergence and consolidation of consumer capitalism between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. This period is characterized by complex and contradictory socio-economic developments – liberal economics and authoritarian social policy – the long terms effects of which are still at play today. We investigate this period by considering product advertisements directed at an emerging social and political subject, the urban middle class. It is out hypothesis that the rapid and profound changes to the textures and rhythms of everyday life heralded by the emergence of a new form of capitalism, whilst escaping the broad-brush strokes of historical narrative, might register in the ubiquitous, mundane and largely overlooked semiotic materials of the period. To this end, we adopt a methodology that combines image analysis and interpretive historical research, with fragments drawn from literature of the period. We introduce and discuss three themes that demonstrate the interconnection of design, modernity and everyday life during this period: the growing significance of visual culture; the emergence of new social actors; and the advent of new subjectivities. We suggest that these provide fertile ground for further study into the socio-political role of design in modern Thailand.

1 Introduction

The present paper forms part of ongoing research into the various roles of design in the visual and material culture of modern Thailand. Our previous work traced the development of a single consumer product – the rice

cooker – through various stages and phases of its development and domestication in everyday life (Juthamas & Power, 2005, 2007, 2008). The current study broadens our area of interest and focuses our historical lens on a particular period. The thinking behind this move is as follows. The period in question is pivotal to the development of design in Thailand. At this time, design emerged as an important socio-cultural phenomena, became a recognizable sector of the economy – at least in terms of advertising design – and began to impact on the rhythms and patterns of everyday life in subtle but significant ways. By seeking to develop our understanding of the origins of design and by mapping these against changes to the economy and society, we hope to construct a distinctive picture of the emergence and significance of Thai design. In so doing we seek to lay the foundations for a social history of design in Thailand.

2 Methodology and intellectual framework

We deployed and synthesised two major research methods: image analysis and historical research. Broadly speaking, our approach to image analysis draws on semiotics. In particular, we make use of a number of important critical concepts and approaches derived from the early work of Roland Barthes. Like the Barthes of 'Rhetoric of the Image', we made detailed analyses by skimming off the various messages at work within advertisements and plotted the ways in which these interact to establish a particular moment of communication (Barthes, 1977). Previously, Barthes had introduced the notion of 'myth' as a way of explaining how the usually overlooked objects of mass culture – publicity, products, personalities, for example – masked deeply political ideas (Barthes, 1993). Put simply, for Barthes a myth was an ideological operation that served to make the contingent, the historical and the cultural appear both neutral and natural. Myths were and are material and symbolic configurations that explain away social contradictions and asymmetries of power.

However, whilst we made use of these theoretical concepts, we did so critically. That is, we deployed them without recourse to the linguistic reductionism, formalist abstraction and decontextualisation, typical of the later Barthes and much mainstream semiotics. Our overall approach is closer to the materialist semiotics of Voloshinov (1985) or the socio-semiotics of Rossi-Landi (1992) in that: firstly, we recognise that all sign systems are located within particular historical and material contexts and relationships, and that it is in conversation with these that significance of signs takes shape; and secondly, that we view signs as material entities that connect human subjects to social realities, rather than immaterial structures that are, in themselves constitutive of human realities.

Our use of historical analysis of the period served to establish a rich narrative picture of historical events, processes and relationships. In particular, our aim was to establish and explore the complex and multidimensional interactions between economic and social change, between in Marxist terms, base and superstructure. To this extent our works sits within the tradition of historical materialism. However, we were also greatly influenced by Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life and in particular his argument that the quotidian had, throughout the period in question, rapidly become the key to understanding contemporary capitalism. Lefebvre argued that in order to reproduce itself capitalism increasingly colonised the everyday world, turning ever more non-commercial interactions, spaces and forms into commodified functions (Lefebvre, 1971). Where these changes in everyday life elude historical or image research, we also used literature and poetry of the period to provide important insights into the more emotional dimensions of lived experience.

It is important to note that, for us, image analysis and historical research were neither discrete nor sequential forms of inquiry. Rather they interpenetrated and influenced each other in various ways. For example, we *read out* from images towards issues and events. We asked, for example, at what does this image or that message point to in the world in which it appeared? Secondly, we *read into* them through our critical reading of historical documents of the time. We asked, for example, how does this political concept or that social custom show up in the advertising imagery of the time? Thirdly, we used images as crucibles within which to bring together and consider our three major concerns: modernity, design and everyday life during this period of Thai history. In this way, our approach echoes two suggestions made recently by Jacques Ranciere. Firstly, that the outcomes of design – products, spaces and 'configurations of words and images' – are powerful ways of cutting across usually discrete categories of knowledge. And, secondly, the idea that, "by drawing lines, arranging words or distributing surfaces, one also designs divisions of communal space […] certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world" (Ranciere, 2009, p. 91).

Design is, of course, a complex, diverse and interpenetrating set of practices. It encompasses spaces and places, products of all scales and modalities, and messages across a broad range of media. In this paper we make fleeting reference to the first of these, the area that Henri Lefebvre theorised as the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Elsewhere we have discussed some aspects of the role of product design and product form at this period (Juthamas & Power, 2007). Here, however, our focus is on graphic or publicity design and in the text

that follows, we use *design* as a shorthand for the production and display of the semiotic tissue that increasingly enveloped everyday life under the new conditions of consumer capitalism.

3 Historical background

The period of our study is bracketed by two dramatic political moments. It begins in 1957 with a military coup and comes to a close with the popular uprising that overthrew military rule in 1973. The period between is characterized by a wave of profound and far reaching socio-economic transformations, conflicts and developments, the repercussions of which, as we shall see, are still felt to this day.

In 1957 Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat seized power. One year later, Sarit moved decisively to consolidate his position. The declaration of martial law in 1958 granted the Field Marshal personal executive power, abolished political parties and trade unions, and set in motion a campaign of vicious persecution against progressive opposition forces. Central to the Sarit program, were the *reorganization of* Thai capitalism and the *reordering* of Thai society. These two complex, and as we shall see contradictory, strategies were embodied in Sarit's twin mantras of *development (phatthana*) and *revolution (pattiwat).*

Samai phatthana – the era of development – was set in motion with an unprecedented political urgency. At its heart was a restless desire to modernize the Thai economy and with it society as a whole. Yet this was modernization as seen through particular ideological lenses. On the one hand, it conflated modernization with economic growth through the rapid expansion the capitalist economy. Whilst the country's infrastructure developed in many areas and ways as a result of this process, social, cultural and democratic development was actively and brutally curtailed through the authoritarian ideological and social practices of the dictatorship. This conflict is often referred to as "modernization without development" (Jacobs, 1971). On the other, modernization American-style – for this was what it was in economic terms at least – served global strategic purposes (Pasuk & Baker, 2009, p. 140). Fostering industrialization and free market capitalism in under-developed, poor and often despotic Asian countries was seen as a vital counter measure to the egalitarian appeal of a resurgent communism. Thailand's proximity to a set of actual and potential communist-linked conflicts gave it a strategic cachet that the Sarit system exploited to attract the maximum of foreign support. The combination of U.S. military aid and massive financial and logistical support from the American foreign policy proxy the World Bank, played crucial roles in the development of the Sarit system (Akira, 1989, p. 182).

In 1958 a World Bank report made a series of recommendations for improving the socio-economic situation in Thailand. These were; long term economic planning, the development of infrastructure through public spending programmes and the creation of incentives to stimulate foreign investment and, through this, technological development and industrialization. These ideas were hard-wired into Thailand's first Economic Development Plan of 1961. This six-year statement of intent legitimated a number of profound and robust changes in the Thai economy and society (Akira, 1999, p. 179).

Firstly, it signalled an end to the state-led industrialization and bureaucratic capitalism of the Phibun period. In their place, would be an expanded, diversified and internationalized capitalist economy based on market-led industrialization and the growth of private enterprises. Secondly, it demonstrated a commitment to modernise both infrastructure – roads, irrigation, supplies of power and water, for example – and aspects of social policy, notably education. For very many people these welcome aspects of modernity ushered in radically new ways of life. As Giles Ungpakorn (2003, p. 23) notes, "It is imply not true that development has made the poor poorer." Thirdly, it stressed the growth of the domestic market, which, in turn, entailed the cultivation of new forms and patterns of consumption and an increasingly significant role for the service sector and communication media such as TV, radio, print and through these advertising.

Yet despite its modernising force and rhetoric, the Sarit *revolution* was erected upon deeply conservative and authoritarian foundations. Exhortations to modernise, to develop and to internationalise Thailand, ran alongside reactionary narratives that emphasised or invented normative images of Thai culture and identity. Campaigns were launched to protect particular narratives of tradition, values and culture. For example, whilst the regime encouraged Americanisation through its economic policies, it reacted strongly against attempts by local youths to appropriate American fashions and behavioural codes.

Groups of young working people began to tap into and make use of American popular culture, mainly fashion and music, to differentiate themselves from the conservative norms (Sawangchot, 2009, p. 11). These overt statements of difference were suppressed – often brutally – by the regime. According to Thak Chaloemtiarana (2007, p. 121) the government attempted, "to intimidate young people into adopting a more "traditional" social life through forced re-education, prohibitions on rock and roll music and clothing, and appeals for police vigilance against threats to national security and identity posed by popular dances such as "the twist". In similar

ways, the growing student movement began to draw on the symbolic armoury of American counter culture to carve out a distinctive identity that rejected the despotic government and challenged the very basis of the particular regime of capitalist accumulation that it had established to modernise the country.

Moreover, regular radio broadcasts and print articles by leading intellectual such as M.R. Kukrit Pramoj offered ideological support for the regime's repression of difference. In particular, he championed the idea that social position and rank was a product of karma and, therefore, beyond question. Significantly, the – until this day – non-negotiable ideological pillars of *nation*, *religion* and *monarchy* were revived and mythologised. In the name of anti-communism, widespread repression and political persecution of left and labour forces and figures was carried out. Arguably, the production of the unitary and exceptional notion of national identity that still haunts contemporary society and politics in Thailand can be traced back to these ideological initiatives.

On Sarit's death in 1963, Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn succeeded him. Initially, Thanom made clear his plan to continue the carrot and stick strategy of economic growth and authoritarianism (Pasuk, 1980, p. 74). And, for a good while, Thanom managed to hold the show together. Economic growth continued more or less at the unprecedented levels enjoyed under Sarit. American military support continued to grow and foreign capital to flow into the country. But dark clouds were gathering, and the seemingly monolithic system that carried Sarit's name was increasingly beset by contradictions that ever more escaped the narrow confines of doctrine and the dark arts of repression.

By 1973 – a time of world economic crisis – Thailand was primed for change. Gradually at first, but with growing impetus as the 1960's unfolded, the new social actors began to flex their muscles and grow in confidence. The urban middle class became increasingly uneasy with an authoritarianism that figured grotesquely against the ground of consumer capitalism with its promises of American style *freedom*. The business community began to rail against the return of Thailand's political repressed, as nepotism, corruption and parasitism undermined the economy (Pasuk, 1980). The urban proletariat reacted against the truth of *phatthana*; that is, that despite the remarkable growth of the economy and pledges to spread the benefits to all Thais, the rich had become immeasurably richer while the lot of the rest had improved much more slowly (Giles, 2003, p. 13). But it was the student movement that proved the catalyst for change.

In October 1973, 11 academics and students were arrested for publically arguing for a return to democracy. In response, over half a million students, workers and other Thais took to the streets of Bangkok to protest. The junta desperately offered concessions to student leaders, but on the morning of the 14th October soldiers attempted to disperse the crowd by force, killing 77 people and injuring many hundreds in the process. With the last vestiges of its legitimacy already spent, the dictatorship was, in effect, defeated when the first shot was fired. A new chapter in Thai politics had begun (Pasuk & Baker, 2009, 187). But it would be a chapter that would unfold under the long shadows of capitalist modernity, a resentful authoritarianism and competing notions of national identity and development.

4 Promises, promises …

"Promise, large promise, is the soul of the advertisement." Samuel Johnson

Figure 1: press advertisement from Thai Rath (daily newspaper) 1965

We will begin by considering a single press advertisement. The image in figure 1 appeared in the popular Thai daily newspaper Thai Rath in 1965. In terms of its production methods and layout it is a fairly typical publicity

image for this period. Its rhetorical strategy is also relatively conventional and as a semiotic construction it appears – from the vantage point of our own complex spectacular society – disarmingly simple. A particular relationship between images of a person and products is established through the use of visible language; typography or more pragmatically, advertising copy.

Setting aside the cluster of unwanted connotations that the image has accrued with the passage of time – quaintness, retro charm, a certain innocence – we will proceed as follows. In the section we will laying out a fairly straightforward 'reading' of the image. Then in the next, we will seek to construct a richer interpretration of it by locating it in relation to historical and cultural discourse of the period.

Firstly, the description. A young woman is framed by a series of novel and presumably desirable electrical consumer products. A fan, food processor, toaster, a rice cooker, iron, a washing machine, form a halo of commodities, a ground of products against which she figures. Scanning the various textual components – headlines, straplines and so on – we identify two key messages, "*National will add beauty and comfort to your family*" and more baldly, "*happiness, beauty, progress and comfort*".

How might we construct an initial analysis of this image? We propose to *skim off* the various messages at play in turn, to fashion an interpretation of each before attempting to reintegrate them into a more phenomenologically valid totality. Firstly, the *iconic* imagery. The strongest single image is the woman herself, who peers out from the page. The woman is looking back at us, over her right shoulder, as if we have surprised her, caught her in the act of contemplating the objects of wonder that float behind her. Yet our interruption has not discomfited her; her gaze meets our own confidently and her facial expression is knowing, combining both poise and contentment. This, and her placement in relation to the commodities implies that these personal feelings and qualities can, in some way, be traced back to the products that she owns or has a mind to purchase. Her assured presentation of self is grounded on an array of actual or potential purchasing decisions.

Moreover, the image suggests that it is not only the products on display that are desirable. The woman herself is presented as an object of desire. Her pose is erotically charged, echoing both film star studio shots of the period and the classical paintings on which they drew. Her clothing reveals her back and arms in ways that whilst fashionable in international terms, could be read as'provocative'or culturally transgressive in the local context.

Likewise her hairstyle and make-up. The former is an example of the popular bouffant style du jour at this time in the West. The latter, with its painted eyebrows, lipstick, long thickened eyelashes and beauty spot adds to the knot of Western connotations. Either these products have liberated the woman in some way, given her the confidence to express her full identity, or the domestic environment itself is libidinised by virtue of them. Perhaps it is both. In either case, the implications for both female and male viewers is suggestively ambiguous.

The product images themselves are fairly typical representations. Most are presented in canonical view in order to provide the maximum of information about the form and design of the product. Only the food blender – whose distinctive shape is best revealed front on – and the electric fan that, like the woman's gaze directly targets us, deviate from this presentational convention. Nevertheless, the visual organization of the products is distinctly odd to modern eyes, and is we believe worthy of two tentative and speculative readings. The scaling of objects to fit the available space might have been a result of pragmatic choices by the designer. Yet it renders a surreal scene in which an iron is the size of a refrigerator and all the products appear to float freely in a non-physical space. This, it appears is the abstract space of imagination, of dream and fantasy. In this way, we suggest, that the products appear not as simply objects of use but as psychic components of a life project with all the implications that this has of personal development and change. Moreover, the products are displayed paradigmatically. That is, as a series of potential choices. Arguably, the insertion of the woman into this commodity set identifies her as one of the potential choices on offer, a point we will return to briefly below.

What now can we say about the next layer, the layer of visible language. One textual component fulfils an important, but for our purposes rather uninteresting function. Stripped in along the bottom right of the image is contact information for the supplier of the products. The rest of the linguistic material is semiotically richer and combines, at one and the same time, three vital functions. Firstly it guides our interpretation of the imagery, furnishing the advertisement's 'preferred reading', a function Barthes refers to as 'anchorage' (Barthes, 1977, p. 39). Thus the word 'beauty' serves to constrain our response to the image of the woman; seeks to filter out alternative, possible negative or transgressive readings of her posture and appearance. Secondly, the text explicitly articulates what we refer to as the advertisement's 'promise'. That is, it sets up an ideal and idealised environment, situation and identity – a whole style of living – that can be accessed by buying these products. It is in this sense that advertisements can be said to project us into a possible and desirable future whilst at the same time encouraging dissatisfaction and anxiety about our present circumstances. The third, provides warrant

for the promise, attempts to support our decision to purchase by more conventional appeals to quality and price. The products themselves are emblems of modernity and readers would have been aware of the contemporary design through the imagery and the anchoring text. The final paragraph adds weight to this aesthetic appeal by locating the appliances at the cutting edge of production. These are the latest appliances made with the most modern materials using the most advanced manufacturing processes.

As Henri Lefebvre (2002) was at pains to point out, the various messages we have skimmed off are products of our analysis and the process by which we have revealled them is different from the way by which the image would be engaged by its original readers. The messages are, in fact, coextensive and 'appear' to us not in layers or parts but as a totality of interactions. We turn the page of our newspaper and there before us is an array of modern products and a confident, desirable and thoroughly modern woman who returns our gaze. "Look", she seems to be telling us, "This is what I desire, this is who I am!".

5 New ways of living, new lives led

The complex interaction of the political, social and economic forces sketched in Section 3 above, gave rise to a profound set of changes to everyday life. At the macro level, they required the rapid creation of urban settings sympathetic to the rhythms and relations at play within the new economy.

In order to suggest the impact of these transformations we will quote from an acclaimed novel, *Letters from Thailand* written by Botan (1999). The novel was first published in a woman's magazine between 1967-1968. In it, Botan described the changes to the shape and form of the city and the life of typical middle class city dwellers in the form of letters written by Tan Suang Ou, a Chinese immigrant, to his mother. Tan Suang Ou is typical of the formerly marginalised Chinese immigrants who, through a combination of entrepreneurial spirit and government policy began to assume great significance in the new middle class.

Writing in 1959, Tan Suang Ou observed "The area I stay in is called the old town. Some people call it China town, there are gold shops everywhere and Chinese restaurants too […] There are seven storey buildings and nine storey buildings too." Elsewhere, he portrayed the emergence of new kinds of shopping, "In the new town of Bangkok there are many exclusive shops, with very beautiful decorations and displays of goods. But things are so expensive. They are for high-class people (Botan, 1999)."

The automobile-centred city of today with its nexus of malls, freeways, offices and suburbs began to take shape and the traditional water-based ways of life, already marginalised by earlier urban developments, were pushed ever further from the city. To quote Botan (1999) once more, “Ang Bua’s new shop is rather magnificent. The building is painted white and looks clean. Unlike the old shop the new one is located far from the *klong* [canal] right on the main street. Many strange vehicles pass by like tricycles and motorcars. I would like to have this kind of shop also.” By the late-1960s developers were already pushing the next wave of urbanisation with the first of myriad new suburbs and the city expanded outwards to accommodate a massive wave of inward migration (Askew, 2002). As it grew exponentially, Bangkok’s position as the pre-eminent centre for accumulation and consumption in the country was greatly enhanced. Along with this, urban problems and rural-urban inequalities became increasingly visible (Thak, 2007, p. 227).

At the level of everyday life, these developments stimulated the emergence of important new social and political actors. Some, like the rapidly growing urban middle classes were essential to the Sarit system, and were nurtured economically, socially and culturally by it. Economic incentives encouraged the growth of domestic businesses, whilst educational reform opened the doors of social mobility for both new local capitalists and the army of technocrats and professionals required to turn economic development plans into a reality (Pasuk, 1980, p. 95).

Yet unlike earlier aristocratic and bureaucratic elites whose identity and status hard-wired into the system, the new middle classes were forced to actively cultivate theirs. To a large extent, this process rested upon new patterns of consumption and the organization and display of social difference that they made possible. The availability of luxury goods – clothing, electronic appliances, foodstuffs and so on – increased dramatically in the period in question (Pasuk, 1980, p. 271). Their purchase and display rapidly became a significant means of social integration and differentiation. The impetus towards new more Western forms of living based around mass consumption was clearly visible by the mid-1960’s.

It is our contention that design made a significant but largely overlooked contribution to this process. Moreover, we argue, it was of particular significance in the construction of the identity and social reality of the urban middle class. Publicity design contributed to the period in three main ways: through its distinctive function in

the new economy; through the naturalization of a culture and ideology of consumption; and by reflecting and modulating contradictions inherent in Thailand's particular mode of state-led modernization. We propose to briefly examine each of these aspects in turn.

Whilst design existed before Sarit assumed power in 1957, it emerged as a significant social and cultural force in the early years of *Samai phatthana* and continued to develop in tandem with the expansion of the Thai economy and the myriad changes in society that flowed from this. The structural importance of design within this phase of consumer capitalism more generally, is well known. The large investments required to plan, manufacture and distribute new products at an ever-quickening pace, forced producers to seek ways to, "control all the conditions and variables" which affect the viability of these products (Hebdidge, 1989, p.93). Central to this process was the so-called 'production of consumption' (Gorman & McLean, 2009, p. 69). Planned and systematic mass production required the preparation and control of the mass market. Put simply, this involved the stimulation of demand through the organised 'creation of dissatisfaction' (Hebdidge, 1989, p. 94). In the West, this was achieved via the growth of an ever-larger design sector that used a variety of increasingly sophisticated and integrated methods for mediating consumption. These included the integration of advertising, publicity, marketing and various forms of promotion for rapidly changing product lines.

The development of the advertising industry in Thailand reflected this general pattern. Whilst the first modern advertising agency was established on the eve of the Sarit period, in 1954, most commentators locate the emergence of advertising design as an industry in the early 1960's. In 1963 the first US and Japanese agencies opened in Bangkok and by 1967 the industry had grown to such an extent that the Advertising Association of Thailand was formed. The increasing importance of design for the production of consumption is evident in the proliferation of image-led advertisements across old and new media throughout our period (Sunate, 2006).

This leads us on to the second aspect of design's role, the naturalization of consumption. According to Lefebvre, the particular power of publicity and advertising design is based upon a double movement (Lefebvre, 1971). At one and the same time, the advertisement naturalises our desire for a particular product *and* for consumption in general. This pincer movement is plain to see in figure 1.

The woman we have disturbed was is not only contemplating a particular purchase, but a total way of living, an aestheticised everyday, in which every purchasing decision – food, clothing, automobile, appliances, home, holiday – would play its role in the construction and projection of social status and personal identity (Lefebvre, 1971). The halo of appliances in this image is emblematic of a shift towards a symbolic superstructure in which consumer objects and the publicity that introduced and valorised them, became bearers and embodiments of 'myths'. Thus to select from the paradigm of appliances was a visual confirmation of one's modern and western outlook and, though this, an indication of one's social status and rank. Design's role here was a familiar one: to establish around particular brands and products a discursive apparatus, a particular configuration of words and images capable of mobilising connotations and myths that stimulated actual and potential needs and desires in consumers. As elsewhere, Thai everyday life was primed for commercial colonization through the creation of a new regime of the visible based upon the mythologisation and fetishisation of the commodity (see figures 2, 3, 4). The result was a particular cultural instantiation of what Guy Debord describes as the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1995).

Figure 2: Myth; Freedom/ romance
Thai Rath (1965)

Figure 3: Myth; Desire
Thai Rath (1964)

Figure 4: Myth: Conjugality (1964)
Thai Rath (1964)

Yet this aestheticised everyday life was, of course, radically different from the one that preceded it. Its texture was more complex and fragmented, its rhythm faster and more disconcerting. Whilst it reflected, and to a large extent embodied key ideological features of the Sarit system, namely *progress, internationalization and modernity,* it rubbed the wrong way against others, in particular those non-negotiable ideological narratives that stressed conservative and nationalist values. The third aspect of the development of design during this period

then is located within this web of contradictions, the *fragile synthesis*, as Pasuk Phongpaichit (1980, p. 126) describes it, of contradictory economic and ideological positions. To explore this complex idea further, we propose to look briefly at a cluster of issues that arise in relation to the family.

The notion of *family* was a central ideological pillar of the Sarit system. According to Thak (2007, p.164), the 1958 revolution sought legitimacy for its conservative ideology by drawing on historical precedent, in particular the paternalistic polity of the Sukothai period. As Sarit repeatedly claimed, "The Prime Minister is the father of the largest family. [He] has the greatest responsibility and must oversee the happiness and welfare of his brothers and sisters (Thak, 2007, p. 164)." This appeal to indigenous principles of government legitimated the regime's authoritarian paternalism. The leader-father knew best, and the duty of the rest of the big family was obedience to his decisions and the displacement of their own opinions and wishes. For Sarit, each household was the nation state in miniature and its proper form was, therefore, both patriarchal and hierarchical.

Yet this model of traditional conjugality was at odds with that celebrated in very many advertisements of the time. Few images depicted traditional extended families or drew on traditional iconography or representations of behaviour, that might meet Sarit's own normative standards of propriety (*riap roy*) and pride in the national civilisation (*khwam pen araya prathet)* (Thak, 2007, p. 148). Rather they projected images of a yet to emerge and idealised nuclear family (see figures 2 and 4 above).[1] Very many advertisements portrayed romantic or eroticised encounters, promised emotional fulfilment, or celebrated the freedoms made possible by this or that consumer product. The eroticised pose and Westernised appearance of the woman in figure 1, for example, is difficult to reconcile with Sarit's conservative pronouncements and policies on fashion and femininity. Yet they are products of the increased openness to Western ideas and artefacts ushered in by the Sarit-led shift towards an internationalised economy.

It is interesting to speculate about how these competing behavioural norms played out in the lives of Thais at the time. Not surprisingly, the responses reflect the contradictions at play in a period of rapid change. Conservatives such as Kukrit (1964, quoted in Saichol, 2007 p. 21) railed against the cultural permissiveness:

> I would like to say that our individuality or the identity of Thai people nowadays [...] I feel that it is disappearing little by little, and this is a worry. Thai people are changing rapidly whether in

> terms of traditions, clothes, living, the way we talk including the way we interact with each other and the way we think. We are losing our identity […] the things that our forebears did, we don't do any more and we are adopting new things without choosing through careful and good consideration […] we are forgetting ourselves. We are forgetting the Thai identity more and more each day.

Many contemporary writers offered critical perspectives on the relationship between Thailand and America. Lao Kam Hom (1958) and Rong Wongsawan (1961), for example, drew attention to the clash of tradition and modernity and the dangers of crass American materialism. For others, criticism of modernisation took on more radical tones and synthesised critiques of domestic authoritarianism and imperialism with that of the capitalist colonisation of everyday life. The anti-Japanese movement of the early 1970's makes an interesting case in point. Capitalist penetration of Thailand was not the sole preserve of the Americans. Japan had long played an influential role in the Thai economy and with its own consumer markets saturated by the early 1960's, began to increasingly expand its presence in Thailand through exports and joint ventures (Harvey, 1989, p. 141). Elsewhere we have discussed how young Thais began to fear that everyday life was being drained of significance, "becoming a series of moments of consumption moving from one Japanese product to another (Juthamas & Power, 2005)". This concern was reflected in a poem called "Norm" which was published in the popular Thai daily Thai Rath 17.12.1972 and captured something of the mood of the times.

> Waking up in the morning
> grabbing first 'White Lion' to brush teeth
> 'National' to cook rice and make tea
> Styling my hair with 'Tan Jo'
> Dressed in 'Thai To Rae Ta To Ron'
> […]
> I began to wonder …
> find a mirror named Asahi
> Am I a Thai person, or not?
> *Watashiwa Thaijin Desuka*

Arguably, a range of new subjectivities was forming at a time when twin ideologies simultaneously interpellated subjects with contradictory – irreconcilable even – expectations and promises. Periods of rapid and profound

change always give rise to anxieties. Raymond Williams (1973, p. 40) introduced the idea of two cultural impulses that ebb and flow at times of social change: the *residual* – which harks back seeking comfort in the known – and the *emerging* – which peers forward to a seductive but unnerving future. And this is a useful lens with which to view the situation in Thailand and other countries undergoing parallel processes of rapid and profound socio-economic change. Echoing Lefebvre, Ross (1996) argues that in the France of this period consumption and the promises it held out for personal growth, happiness and fulfilment, served as compensation for the anxieties that accompany social and cultural dislocation. Moreover, she proposes a particular role for advertising imagery in this process. Discussing the promotion of the automobile, she argues that advertising, "reveals a discourse built around freezing time in the form of reconciling past and future, the old ways and the new […] With such and such a product, the ad reads, traditions, the French way of life, are both conserved and gone beyond; past and future are one, you can change without changing (Ross, 1996, p. 21)." The ultimate promise, then, is not simply material well-being or status but the replacement of the anxieties of loss and uncertainty, with an endless 'present' realised through consumption.

It is plausible to register similar processes at play in the advertising imagery we have referred to in this paper. However, further inquiry will be needed to ascertain their theoretical validity. What we can suggest with some confidence is that the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity, stability and change, democracy and despotism, that characterised the birth of the urban middle classes and are at play to varying degrees in the imagery we have considered, are still evident in the social, cultural and political practices and outlooks of this social class to this day. Moreover, given the leading role constructed for it during this period and consolidated since, it comes as no surprise that these contradictions continue to cast a long shadow over the socio-political landscape of today's Thailand.

6 Discussion and future work

In this paper we have attempted to establish and explore interconnections between three usually discrete areas of knowledge: design, everyday life and Thai modernity. We identified three major areas of interconnection. Firstly, the emergence of the image-based and spectacular culture that continues to play a significant role in Thai social reality. Secondly, the appearance of new social actors, such as the focus of this paper, the urban middle classes. Thirdly, the growth of new subjectivities in response to economic change and the more complex, fluid and contradictory civil society that resulted. In our opinion, these themes provide fertile ground for further

research. To fully grasp their significance, however, requires research that is both deeper and broader: research that finds ways to address the other vital social actors and subjectivities that emerged in this period, for example, the urban proletariat, women and young people; that produces a more nuanced picture of the texture of everyday life; and develops a deeper understanding of the historical development of design and its role in these processes.

To a large extent, the coalition of forces that led the overthrow of the regime in 1973 comprised social actors and forces unleashed by the economic and social policies of the self same military government. That these developments prefigure important aspects of contemporary Thai politics and culture, provides ample reason for further research and suggests the possibility and usefulness of a critical history of design and everyday life in modern Thailand.

Footnotes

[1] The construction of a new form of conjugality based on the nuclear family was central to parallel examples of state-led modernisation such as that unfolding during this period in France (see for example, Ross, 1996). There the traditional family structure was increasingly recast as a privatised domestic sphere, optimised for consumption. In Thailand it was not until the 1970's that the traditional extended family form was seriously challenged through the exponential growth of suburban housing developments (see Askew, 2002).

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