

A Matter of Distribution: Design & Politics in 1960s Thailand

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Abstract

Through analysis of a set of 1960's newspaper spreads we speculate on points of contact between design and society in Thailand. Often called the 'American' era, the 1960s is characterized by rapid and profound socio-cultural and economic change. It is also the time in which design emerges as a profession in response to an increasingly urbanized and consumption orientated society. Above all, the period is characterized by attempts to reconcile a set of deep social contradictions resulting from the troubled coexistence of competing conceptions of the world: liberal economics and social authoritarianism, the desire for progress and modernity and the fear of cultural dilution. By examining newspaper spreads against this shifting social backdrop, we explore ways in which the *selection* and *distribution* of visual representations at the level of the page might reflect the broader *re-distribution* of social subjects, roles and rewards happening at this time. We proceed from a recent theoretical move made by the philosopher Jacques Rancière. In the short essay *The Surface of Design*, Rancière argues that, "by assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world." We demonstrate that this theoretical apparatus has the potential to cut across traditionally discrete disciplinary boundaries and suggest new forms of investigation. In so doing, we establish the important—though usually overlooked—role of design in society politics and culture.

1 Setting the scene

The train stopped at the station. There was time enough for me to wander up and down the station platform. After drinking some iced black coffee as I waited, I began walking along the platform again and passed a newspaper kiosk. The papers and magazines stacked in heaps filled the entire semi-circular kiosk. My gaze swept over them picking out the names of weeklies, fortnightlies and pocketbooks, as well as daily newspapers. I don't really know whether it was my loneliness or the fact that my mind was still preoccupied with thoughts of Si that made me see clots of blood, hear women screaming, see the innocent look in the eyes of village farmers, the breasts and pale flesh of women, knives and guns and smell a nauseating stench suffusing the kiosk ... Even though I was gasping for breath, I rushed back to the train.

Chatcharin Chaiwat, The Book Learners

In his 1968 short story *The Book Learners*, Chatcharin Chaiwat relates the story of a rural Thai boy and his older female cousin Si. The account tells of parallel lives that are given meaning through the practice of reading. For the boy, reading provides an engine for social and geographical mobility. His *book learning* opens up a passage through the expanding and increasingly integrated educational system of 1960s Thailand. His ability to read, we are told, carries him from district school to provincial high school and sets him on course for the ultimate achievement: a university education in Bangkok. For Si, recently arrived in the small district town from the family's jungle orchard and working as a domestic maid in the home of her uncle—the boy's father—such book learning makes little sense given the limited social possibilities available to her.

Reading, however, does to come to play a central role in Si's life. Not for her though, the edifying and social possibilities opened up by the textbook. Locked into the limited and limiting world of domestic work, Si turns for escape to other forms of popular literature proliferating at this time: newspapers, pocketbooks and magazines, with their stories and images of the city, of glamour, crime and romance. As the boy discovers—tragically too late due to his own sense of self-worth—Si has turned fantasy into reality and lived out the remainder of her life through the plot of a serialized romantic novel at the denouement of which, the heartbroken heroine commits suicide.

Whilst, in the story at least, the boy does not reach Bangkok—deciding instead to divert his journey to the jungle orchard of his ancestors—his acute moment of anxiety on the station platform shows how forcefully Bangkok has reached the boy. That Chatcharin expresses this moment so cinematically, as a montage of fragmentary and contradictory images and sensations, is I believe significant. What the boy experiences at that remote railway station is a profound premonition of the sensory and social explosion awaiting him in a capital city in the midst of social upheaval. It is a powerful intimation of an emerging urban modernity where an increasing flow of signs thickens the visual stew of city life, animates peculiar everyday urban practices and begins to establish a “*social reign of appearances*” (Debord, 1995). That this existential experience is animated by an array of throwaway picture books, novellas, magazines and newspapers, frames the rest of our discussion.

Chatcharin's story then is illuminating for us for a number of reasons. Firstly, it simultaneously articulates significant socio-economic processes at play during this period *and* dramatizes them within the shifting rhythms, textures and anxieties of everyday life. Secondly, it draws attention to the increasing significance of ubiquitous yet ephemeral semiotic and material artifacts and their role in mediating between these realms of social reality. And thirdly, in doing both of the above, it suggests spaces for *design* within discourses about Thailand from which it is usually absent: discourses of politics, history, economy and society. In other words, it opens up for exploration a largely overlooked aspect of this important period—the relationship between design and politics in an increasingly urban everyday life.

2 The Surface of Design

2.1 Clearing the Ground

Before turning our attention to a particular example of this semiotic ephemera—a series of newspaper spreads from a 1965 weekday edition of the Bangkok daily newspaper Thai Rath—I want to establish a theoretical framework that will enable me consider these three aspects—design, everyday life and politics—as an ensemble of relations rather than separate entities.

It is important at this stage, to clarify the concept of design as I use it here. This is because despite its apparent simplicity, design is a complex and contested concept. According to Julier (2000: 30). The word is used to signify both a *process*—the act of designing—and the *outcomes* of this process—this or that particular ‘design’. It also serves specialist and everyday functions as term of aesthetic judgment as in, “*I like the design.*” Moreover, the term is axiomatic to very diverse fields of cultural and material production, for example, graphics, engineering, fashion and architecture. In somewhat vulgar Marxist terms—design plays significant roles in both the economic base and the social superstructure.

Design then can be studied in its philosophical, professional and social contexts and each of these adds to our understanding the subject. Here I seek to cut through this semantic and professional undergrowth by adopting a deliberately (if somewhat deceptively) simple definition of design. By design I mean both the conscious and unconscious configuration of mass produced images, words and forms and the meaning of these configurations in everyday life. Whilst in professional terms, my focus is on what we now know as *graphic design*, it is interesting to note that the artifacts we will consider predate the adoption of the term design in Thailand and were produced by non-professionals—editorial staff, illustrators and typesetters—at a time when the design disciplines were in their infancy.

2.2 From 'Layout' to Perceptual Politics

Conventional approaches to graphic design practices use the notion of 'layout' to explain the organisation of verbo-visual material at the level of the page (see for example, Ruder, 1967). At the risk of oversimplification, as it is usually understood, layout is a technical skill by which a designer organises visual materials according to formal principles such as balance, proportion and symmetry and informational requirements such as hierarchies of importance. However, whilst this is—as we shall see, true in part—this functionalist approach reduces a complex semiotic practice to a series of formal operations divorced from semantic significance and social context. Moreover, conventional notions of layout see it as a specialist skill, the sole preserve of the designer. In reality, of course, editorial and other issues impinge on design decisions and, as noted above, the expert designer had yet to emerge as a significant actor in the production of visual artefacts such as newspapers and books in Thailand.

Here I want to suggest an alternative way of thinking about the way that pages are conceived, produced and read. This way sees layout less as a technical activity and more as a complex and multiply determined practice that concerns itself with the distribution and structuring of signs. It is important to stress here that signs, as I see them, are social phenomena and are always and only located within particular historical and material contexts and relationships. It is in conversation with these, that the meaning of signs takes shape in everyday life. Signs then are material entities that connect human subjects to social realities. Seen in this way, the various determinants that must be balanced in page production—the editorial, the aesthetic and the pragmatic—are always framed by social, ideological and, ultimately, political concerns. However, it is important to emphasise that there is more at play here than the overt or covert promotion of this or that ideological project by 'designers', editors or owners.

According to Jacques Rancière, the very act of distributing signs in two dimensions is 'political' in a deeper sense. In the short essay *The Surface of Design*, Rancière (2009: 91) argues 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." In other words, the representational logics that bind visual forms with socio-political contexts, projects and agendas, reflect and affect what shows up for us in the world as well as what escapes our attention or is obscured or rendered invisible. The everyday and often throwaway printed products so vividly described by Chatcharin above are, at one and the same time, complex and subtle expressions of social relations and contributors to the reproduction or disruption of them.

Rancière (2004: 12) terms this perceptual politics *the distribution of the sensible*: "Politics revolves around what can be seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." Moreover, the self-evident facts of perception—what shows up as natural in everyday life—rest upon an a priori *socio-political distribution* that parcels out or shapes social roles, responsibilities and rewards (as well as exclusions and punishments) and inscribes these in material, spatial and semiotic forms and the rights of access to them.

Our suggestion here then is that the period of our study is underpinned by a radical social re-distribution and that the possibilities and anxieties inherent in this process might register in a parallel reconfiguration of *self-evident perceptual facts*: that array of signs, symbols and signals that Henri Lefebvre (2002: 276) usefully described as the *semantic field*. Throughout, we seek to demonstrate that the products of design—seen here simply as conscious and unconscious configurations of images, words and forms for use in everyday life—played a particular role in these twin perceptual reconfigurations: the semiotic and the social.

3 Contradictory Visibilities: Distributions and their Anxieties

3.1 Constellations of signs

As Chatcharin's story made clear, print publications—though one part of an increasingly significant and integrated spectacular visual culture—assumed particular importance during

the period. At the level of everyday life, they flooded the quotidian with signs—images, words and forms—changing its visible register profoundly. At the socio-economic and political levels, they simultaneously served as the subjects and objects of consumption, mediating between consumers and commodities by visualizing myths of modern, international lifestyles.

Amongst these, newspapers grew in significance with the subject of this article, Thai Rath, assuming a vital role both as a political lightning rod and organizing centre for the rapidly changing visual culture. Founded in 1962, Thai Rath was—and is—a popular tabloid, “accessible and interesting to readers who come to it with a range of literacy levels across social classes.” (Knox et al, 2010) The pages of Thai Rath—then, as today—offered the reader a bricolage of sensational and popular stories, advertisements for new products and movies, glamour features and political commentary. As Boonrak (quoted in McCargo, 2012: 12) put it, “[...] the main tendency of newspapers in this period was to imitate all popular features adorned by the mass mind.” A brief look at one or two pages from a 1965 edition will serve to illustrate this point and lay the ground for analysis.

On page one, we encounter, through a montage of words and images, a young woman student, eyes blacked out to protect her identity, the sister of a child rape victim pleading for justice, a politician intervening in a civil case, a boxer shot in the street, another prize fighter in a street fight with teenage gang members, a father and son murdered, various robberies, an attempted rape and murder of the perpetrator, a car accident, war in Laos (see figure 3). Elsewhere, on page seven, a government order for brothel ‘madams’ to attend reeducation lectures, advice on beauty and manners, an advertisement for a technical college, another for English lessons and in another an eroticized woman stares out at us from a halo of Japanese electric fans (see figure 4). And scattered throughout, bikini clad women, sports events, advertisements for international flights, aspirin, Hollywood movies, hotels and banks, a Royal cremation, a small ad offering beach front land for sale, a request for readers to report improper usage of the Thai language, the King and Queen on a visit to Songkla, a successful space launch by NASA.

What do these constellations of visible language, photographs, illustrations and graphic forms tell us? Or, to return to Rancière’s formulation, what do these semiotic configurations make visible and what ‘forms of inhabiting the world’ are displayed? To answer these questions requires socio-economic and historical context.

3.2 Socio-semiotic redistributions

In 1965 Thailand was in the midst of a process of profound and rapid change: a radical redistribution of roles and rewards was well underway. This process was set in motion by a restructuring of Thai capitalism through a new policy of economic liberalism. Liberalism loosened state control of the economy and opened the country to foreign capital. This move simultaneously fractured the existing bureaucratic-nationalist polity and created new social actors fit for the new functions required by a changing economy. On the one hand, technocrats and entrepreneurs—educated in an expanded higher education system at home or in universities abroad—formed the basis of a new, predominantly urban, middle class. On the other, large numbers of labourers poured into the capital with the promise of work in the construction and servicing of a new urban setting.

As Akira (1989: 178) reminds us these changes were underwritten by the USA for strategic reasons. Thailand was seen as the West’s bulwark against a resurgent South East Asian communism and the ‘great game’ known as the cold war. Much of the physical and service infrastructure constructed at this time had military significance, be that airstrips, highways or entertainment. Locally, the change was legitimised by an ideology of national development (phattana) and animated by the rhetoric of modernisation and progress. Yet despite this, the revolution was fundamentally conservative in nature. It was set in motion by a 1957 military coup led by Field Marshall Sarit and its liberal economics and social restructuring were framed by a deeply authoritarian politics that became known as the *Sarit System*.

In the midst of this socio-economic maelstrom, Bangkok itself was changing rapidly and profoundly. 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. As the city immersed itself in circuits of capital exchange it increasingly beat to its rhythm. Bangkok became visually denser. In everyday life, signs and symbols of many kinds proliferated whilst the capital itself became more and more image-like. In a convulsing semantic field that chimes with our newspaper pages, movie stars jostled with generals, prostitutes with princesses, the seductive appeal of the commodity with the official exhortations of the government, western conceptions materialized in images, products and spaces, with older forms of communication. This seismic semiotic shift fed off and fed the rapid and profound change remaking the economic and political spheres. It also fed itself, with increased consumption building the appetite for imagery. This in turn stimulated the expansion of existing forms of image production—notably artisanal printers and freelance illustrators—and spurred the growth of new professional design studios, TV channels and the growth of cinema as a medium of entertainment and propaganda.

Yet for all its desire for absolutes, the system was, as we have seen, shot through with contradictions. For example, the Americanisation of the economy enabled rapid economic growth and provided the means for major developments in physical and social infrastructure. Yet the Americanisation of culture brought with it the promise of more a modern, open and liberal society. Whilst, in one way, access to a growing culture of consumption was a reward for the new middle class, in another it brought with it the troubling promise of modes of living at odds with the conservative-nationalist mindset of the régime. Throughout this period exhortations to modernise, to develop and to internationalise Thailand, ran alongside reactionary narratives that emphasised or invented normative images of Thai culture and identity (Pasuk & Baker, 2009). For example, the regime encouraged Americanisation through its economic policies and bought into the new visual culture that this required. Yet at the same time it sought to discipline the visual realm by proscribing semiotic display deemed inappropriate or dangerous. For example, the regime repeatedly repressed local youth's appropriation of American fashions and behavioural codes. As Thak (2007: 121) notes, "People with long hair, tight pants and flashy clothes, which were then in vogue in the US and had found their way into Thailand, were arrested as antaphan (hooligans)."

Sarit himself recognised the significance of the visible for his politics and strongly equated social order with personal and community tidiness and proper self-presentation [riap roy] (Thak, 2007: 122). Not only did he take personal responsibility for policing the representational strategies of youth culture but he also sought to cleanse the urban visual field itself by removing the "eyesore" of pedicab drivers who had migrated in large numbers to the capital from the provinces. It is instructive, I believe, to view these policy initiatives in the light of the theoretical framework suggested above, in particular, Rancière's (2004, p 85) suggestion that the *distribution of the sensible*, "refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of representation and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed." The pedicab drivers offended both the sense of visual order at the heart of the regime and the social distribution of labour desired by it, "Sarit wanted these men, usually from the North East, to return to the village farms, back to what he considered their proper place and role in society" (Thak, 2007: 122). Of course, the drivers were in the city precisely because of changes in the structure of Thai society and the emergence of new social actors. Removing the pedicab drivers from view could not hide the fact of a growing proletariat necessary for an emerging urban reality.

Chatcharin's characters illustrate these contradictions well. For the boy, an expanding education system opens up the possibility of a new 'urban reality', of a role in a growing class of social actors necessary for the new economy. For Si, the modern and international are modes of living at odds with her allocated role. Yet they cannot—in an increasingly pervasive visual culture—be avoided. They are there, in the imagery of romance and freedom filling local shops, appearing on traveling cinemas showing American and Thai movies, on the platform of the railway station that connects the country to the site of modernity even: they are objects of desire that occupy the intimate folds of her everyday life. The commodity and its animating myths—freedom, choice, romance, eroticism—appear everywhere. Si's suicide and

the boy's existential crisis play out in the semantic field: visible evidence of the anxieties given shape by the contradictions between the promise of the new and the fear of loss of cultural identity. As the conservative intellectual Kukrit (1964, quoted in Saichol, 2007: 21) noted:

I would like to say that our individuality or the identity of Thai people nowadays [...] 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.

Seen in this light, our newspaper pages are diagrams of these unruly social forces and unintended social relationships. Arguably, these diagrams served as maps of the semantic field (see, for example, (Jameson, 1990) for a discussion of mental or cognitive mapping). Writing about another class of visual artifacts in France at a similar period of modernization, Ross (1996: 140) writes, "The glossy visuals of its photography serve to prepare the magazine reader for the saturation of visual images to come." Something similar is going on here. In reading a newspaper one navigated social reality in advance, refreshing and producing one's understanding of social geography. Yet these maps were always incomplete: the semantic field, as we have seen was convulsing in response to a broad and profound social redistribution, the creation of new social actors and the prevalence of a new visual culture. The distribution of signs at the level of the page then gives us insight into the contradictions at the heart of this process and how these figured in everyday life. On our newspaper pages, a morbid fascination with crime runs up against a palpable fear of violence. Images of eroticized bikini-clad women and beauty tips, sit uneasily opposite stories bemoaning prostitution. Fear of cultural loss collides with an enthusiasm for the new, the modern, the international. Echoing the city itself—with its changing class structure, social relations and urban morphology—its social and spatial redistribution, these pages diagram and dramatise the uncertainties and anxieties of the period.

It is, perhaps, then not entirely accidental that in his major historical appraisal of this period Thak (2007: 232) should resort to a visual metaphor to describe its contradictions and anxieties, "The rapid growth of the Thai economy created in turn, changes in the Thai social structure—a prismatic diffusion of the *prachachon* [people] [...]." And, necessarily, a prismatic diffusion of the signs and symbols that comprise the distribution of the sensible and reset the semantic field. To bring this argument to a close, I will return to our newspaper once more to discuss these ideas in relation to women.

4 Women: forming social subjects

Scanning the pages of our edition of *Thai Rath* one is struck by the presence of women (see figures one to 3 to 7 for examples). At first sight it is images—photographs and illustrations—that catch the eye. Few pages are free from images of women and many are dominated by them. The question is why?

Both Barmé (2002) and Onozawa (2000) note that anxieties about women's role in Siamese/ Thai society long predate the Sarit period. However, whilst new possibilities for work and self-expression presented themselves during earlier periods—notably during the Pibul dictatorship—these were largely associated with a relatively limited stratum of aristocratic and bourgeois women. From the late 1950s onwards, however, a trialectic of changes radically refigures Thai society. Firstly, social change quickens, deepens and extends its reach. We have noted already the emergence of new class actors necessary to meet the needs of the new economy. On the one hand, the systemically desirable educated middle-classes fit for a more technocratic and entrepreneurial system. On the other, an equally

necessary but socially undesirable proletariat. Secondly, social change is driven by urban change and in emerging everyday urban practices, women loom large as the prevalence of women in our newspaper pages demonstrates. Chatcharin's story, though it takes place in the shadow of the city, is interesting here in that it illustrates the reach of urban lifestyles. It is an imaginary encounter with urbanity that drives Si's quest for a different life. Within the urban milieu itself, the experience must have been more potent still. And, finally changes in the mode of semiotic production—television, the growth of cinema and the proliferation of print—produced, as we have seen, a semantic field replete with contradictions and in which women take on a particular significance.



Figure 1: product advertisement (courtesy Thai National Archive)

Whilst there are any number of ways we might explore this in our newspaper pages, one image will suffice. In figure 1 we present a product advertisement from page 11 of our newspaper. In the form of an illustration, a young bare shouldered woman is framed by a set of novel—and presumably desirable—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—readers would have identified two key messages, “*National will add beauty and comfort to your family*” and, more baldly still, “*happiness, beauty, progress and comfort*”. From the perspective of our all pervasive spectacular society, this might easily appear to us as an all too familiar—indeed rather quaint—rhetorical strategy. Through a well worn combination of words and images, the promises of material consumption are intertwined with the realms of the erotic and the socio-political register of modernity.

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 contemporary presentations of Thai women in the media, international and local film star studio shots of the period, the Westernised looks of the first Thai Miss Universe and the classical paintings on which these models of beauty drew (see figure 2). Her clothing reveals her back and arms in ways that whilst fashionable in international terms raise questions about local customs and mores. 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 and contradictory. A quotation from a contemporary novel by Vivhitvakan captures this ambivalence powerfully:

/pra prim pan/ manages to maintain her beauty. Being in police custody and imprisoned for three weeks have not lessened her loveliness. wherever there is beauty, there will always be something pleasant to the eyes and the mind. Even though, /pra prim pan/ is in prison, the way that she dresses so well, her clothes, her make-up, her face and lips, make it look like that she is not in the prison at all.



Figure 2: Internationalising beauty Thai Miss Universe and Sophia Lauren

Our mundane image then figures against a ground of social upheaval. It directed its promise towards the new urban middle classes: it both made them *visible* and demonstrated appropriate *forms and modes of visibility* for them. Unlike earlier aristocratic and bureaucratic elites whose identity and status were already 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, automobiles, foodstuffs and so on—increased dramatically in the period in question. Moreover, new forms and patterns of consumption entailed the growth of and increasingly significant role for communication media such as TV, radio, print and through these advertising. The purchase and display of commodities rapidly became a significant means of social integration and differentiation (Pasuk, 1980: 271). Within this process, women play a significant role as both objects and subjects.

5 Conclusions

In this paper I have made a number of moves. Firstly, I have attempted to draw attention to the increasing significance of ubiquitous yet ephemeral semiotic and material artifacts at a particular moment in Thai history. Secondly, I have attempted to establish connections between these and broader socio-political forces and processes at play at this time. And thirdly, in doing both of the above, I have attempted to carve out some foot holes for *design*

within discourses about Thailand from which it is usually absent: discourses of politics, history, economy and society. In other words, I have sought to open up for exploration a largely overlooked aspect of this important period—the relationship between design and politics in an increasingly visual and urban everyday life. At a time when, once again, the Thai semantic field is convulsing and anxieties about what and whom should be seen or heard, critical investigations into the role of design in establishing or critiquing the perceptual dimensions of politics in particularly important. I hope this inquiry makes a small contribution to this process.

6 References

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