

## **Exploring the Audiovisual Essay as a Tool for Design-historical Inquiry: *notes and reflections on theory and practice***

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### **Abstract**

Audiovisual essays are a novel form of cultural production based on the re-sampling and re-editing of existing media texts for analytical and interpretive purposes. For the most part, the approach has served to develop understanding of individual or groups of movies and, more generally, to extend the critical language of film studies. In this article, however, I argue: 1) that the audiovisual essays might also serve as a means of social and historical inquiry; 2) that the approach might have particular uses for the study of past design and material cultures; and, 3) that the approach has the potential to both compliment conventional textual approaches as well as provide new critical and creative methodologies for producing and presenting knowledge about the past. I discuss these issues in relation to a set of experimental audiovisual essays made by the author in response to a popular Thai fiction film made in 1957. The article sets out a theoretical framework within which research of this kind might be situated and suggests a tentative theory of practice by which it might be actualized.

Keywords:  
*audiovisual  
essay  
design  
history  
montage*

### **1 Introduction**

This essay is animated by two core concerns. The first, and more general of these, explores the potential contribution of narrative cinema to the development of critical histories of design in Thailand. In the interests of clarity it is important to note that what is under discussion here is not film or cinema history in a conventional sense. Rather it is movies as resources for historical memory—ways of coming to explore and understand past material cultures—that is at stake. Clearly there are two issues here. On the one hand, the question of design and history in Thailand and, on the other, the potential of narrative cinema to throw light on this subject.

The second focuses critical attention on a relatively new and somewhat controversial cultural form—the audiovisual essay—and explores if and how this might be put to use as a tool for inquiries focused on the history of design and material culture. This article sets out to elaborate on and synthesize these concerns, locate them within appropriate theoretical contexts and discuss some initial discoveries arising from practical explorations of their actual and potential interactions.

### **2 Cinema/ Design/ History: clearing the ground**

To a large extent, the first aspect of the inquiry sits comfortably within conventional text-based approaches to academic research. It is located within a broad tradition of interpretive historical inquiry (Groat & Wang 2002: 135), deploys widely accepted archival methods to identify documentary evidence and uses established theoretical tools with which to interrogate them. Crucially, the outcomes of this process take the form of texts—articles, papers, and reports—vouchsafed by standard academic

procedures such as peer review or editorial decision.

This work consolidates and extends our previous investigations into the socio-political of significance of design in postwar Thailand using as evidential sources a range of cultural forms, for example, literature (Juthamas 2016), advertising (Power and Juthamas 2010) and newspapers (Power 2012). What these studies have in common is their focus on the roles played by material and semiotic artefacts—designed ‘things’—in the production of a peculiarly Thai instantiation of capitalist everyday life and the new subjectivities fit for its requirements. Elsewhere (2010), I have summarized this as follows:

Often called the ‘American’ era, the 1950s and 1960s in Thailand was characterized by rapid and profound socio-cultural and economic change. It was also the time in which design emerged as a profession in response to an increasingly urbanized and consumption orientated society. Above all, the period was 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 and historical loss.

The decision to extend our investigation to movies of the American era was both logical and speculative. We recognized that economic texts provided essential evidence of change in Thailand’s political economy (see for example Akira 1989) and that historical works described, in broad terms, shifts in class structure and mental conceptions during our period. Moreover, we also recognized the value of our previous attempts to construct cultural histories using the theoretical resources of social semiotics and critical theory. Analyzing and contextualizing advertisements, for example, provided evidence of a transforming visual culture, the production of consumption and the potential of designed things as markers of social integration and differentiation (Krippendorff 1989). Interpreting period photographs grounded this in the material culture of everyday life and provided some measure of anthropological credibility. Oral history studies deepened understanding of the lived experience of Thai modernity (Juthamas 2016).

Nevertheless, we reasoned, something was missing and that more sophisticated means of investigating the interplay of a rapidly expanding market economy, the proliferation of products and images, and changing everyday social practices and relations, were necessary. Thai fiction films produced and set in the period of interest, we hypothesized, promised a more nuanced—though not uncontroversial—means of registering an emerging visual and material culture, the social practices it perturbed and entailed and the promises and tribulations of its domestication (for further discussion of the concept of domestication, see Pantzar 1997).

In general, popular narrative films of this kind operate within a broadly realist tradition. That is, they attempt to establish for their audiences convincing stories in which recognizable characters interact in credible ways within identifiable material and social settings. That is not to say that films of this kind are simply neutral reflections of the real world. Fiction films are highly mediated cultural artefacts and realism, in this sense, is best seen as a set of conventions for representing the social world with all the ideological possibilities and consequences that this entails (see, for example, Comolli & Narboni 1971). Nevertheless, movies set in the period in which they are

filmed and making some claim to social realism, necessarily—although, as we shall see, not always intentionally or consciously—capture and reproduce aspects of material culture and everyday life. This is as true of a comedy, melodrama or action movie.

According to Arthur Marwick, historical evidence comprises two forms of testimony: the witting and the unwitting (Marwick 1989: 216). The witting testimony refers to those aspects of a record related to the intended message of the record's creator. In our case, choices about script, performance, costume, props and settings are all, in part at least, witting testimony. That is, they are paradigmatic choices—selections from a range of culturally plausible signifiers—arranged according to narrative demands and audience expectations. Now, in 1950s Hollywood, productions were characterized by (relatively) big budgets, industrialized forms of production and extensive material and symbolic infrastructure, for example, costumes and props departments and industrially organized set production (see, for example, Bordwell et al. 1982). Production design—the construction of the *mise-en-scène*—was a highly developed symbolic practice and choices about costumes, props and settings were made on the basis of a nuanced understanding of their semiotic and dramatic potential within the constraints of the particular cinematic form often referred to as classical narrative cinema (see, for example, Bordwell et al. 1982).



Figure 1. *Setthi Anatha* (1957)



Figure 2. *Setthi Anatha* (1957)

In Thai film production of the period a rather different practical and cultural logic prevailed. Much Thai film production at this time appears to have had an artisanal, improvised and opportunistic character to it. Film crews were small and crewmembers played multiple roles. And, whilst the semiotic and dramatic potential of objects and spaces was clearly recognized and utilized, the material infrastructure of the movies was frequently ‘borrowed’—from participants or connections—rather than selected from curated collections, in the case of costumes and props, or constructed to order, in the case of sets.

According to Juthamas (2017), for example, in the popular and award winning 1957 movie *Setthi Anatha* (*The Poor Millionaire*), automobiles play a range of dramatic and symbolic roles. On the one hand, American cars serve as markers of progress, wealth and status, as signs of social integration and differentiation. On the other, the automobile figures in explorations of shifting gender roles and expectations at play in this period (see Figures 1 and 2). Intriguingly, Juthamas (2018) notes that, all the cars used

in the film belonged to Suriyon Raiwa, a prominent business man and husband of the film's producer, and that key scenes were also shot in the Raiwa home.

Here witting testimony takes on a dual and complex form. On the one hand, material objects and spaces were chosen and used in particular ways because of their anthropological credibility—to their audience they would be recognizable components of a recognizable social milieu because they were borrowed from that milieu or had come to stand for it through other related and contextual media such as magazines, newspapers and other movies. On the other, these choices themselves were made within ideological frames whose significance and implications may not have been completely apparent to the makers of the films themselves. To this extent it is possible to argue that fiction films have the potential to provide insight into both the conscious and unconscious significance of material cultural practices—the preferred, idealized and mythologized meanings of things.

Marwick terms the second category of historical testimony unwitting. The significance of this concept for our interests has been most clearly articulated in the work of Karsten Fledelius (1979: 9):

Often the most interesting evidence is the “unwitting testimony” of the cinematographic recordings, all those incidental aspects of reality which have just slipped into the camera without being consciously recorded by the cameraman.

Arguably, under industrial conditions of studio film production two factors limit the scope of unwitting testimony. Firstly, there is a high degree of directorial control over what appears in the shot and how appearances are realized cinematically through position, framing, focus and so on (though this can be overstated as other influences are important in industrial film production). Secondly, as mentioned above, production design is highly professionalized and settings and props are conceived in their entirety to chime with the overall aesthetic values and visual language of the scene and movie.



Figure 3. Setthi Anatha (1957)



Figure 4. Setthi Anatha (1957):

Whilst not all the material objects within a given scene will have been chosen for their dramatic or symbolic potential, all will have been chosen. In the domestic scenes in *Setthi Anatha* and films like it, on the other hand, it is not at all clear how or if the

rooms and their contexts have been significantly dressed. Whilst further research is required to resolve this, our working hypothesis is that only minor alterations in position or the addition of dramatically necessary objects were routinely carried out in productions of this kind. If this is the case then the ensemble of material and semiotic objects and the interactions they afford take on an evidential quality (Figures 3 & 4).

On the other hand, in location scenes it is always more difficult to control what appears within the frame. As Fledelius (1979) notes, content always exceeds the conscious intentions of a film's makers and meaning in movies "should not be viewed as one single message but rather as a spectrum of possible meanings." Passers by or background figures are always bearers of cultural meaning in their gestures, gait and clothing. Street scenes are alive with social interactions that figure against particular material and semiotic grounds. Interiors always point to the production of a particular form of domestic or public space. With this in mind we believe that movies such as *Setthi Anatha*—where all scenes are, in effect, locational—are rich in both witting and unwitting testimony about the role of objects, images and spaces in everyday social practices.

To conclude, films can provide important insights into the history of material and cultural practices. They provide evidence of the ways in which people used designed things in their everyday lives for pragmatic, representational and performative purposes. They locate designed things within the multiple contexts and ensembles of social and material relations, within they always and only make sense.

Seen in this way, the film archive is, as Catherine Russell (2018: 1) recently argued:

[...] no longer a place where films are preserved and stored but has been transformed, expanded and rethought as an "image bank" from which collective memories can be retrieved. The archive as a mode of transmission offers a unique means of displaying and accessing historical memory, with significant implications for the ways we imagine cultural history.

### **3The Audiovisual Essay: form and epistemological status**

The second aspect of this inquiry—and the main focus of this note—is animated by two seemingly simple questions: firstly, in which ways might the formal and aesthetic techniques associated with the audiovisual essay—and hence, as we shall shortly see, with cinematic technique itself—contribute to the intellectual project sketched above; and, secondly, what are the methodological and epistemological implications of adopting such an approach to inquiry? In this section I will describe the audiovisual essay and introduce some of the key debates around it that are relevant for this article. I will conclude this article with discussion of the author's attempts to deploy the techniques of the audiovisual essay for design-historical purposes.

The audiovisual essay is a relatively new and, in academic circles at least, a somewhat controversial form of cultural production. Methodologically, the term refers "[...] to the use of images and sounds—sampled, reedited, remixed—to help carry out the work of analysis, appreciation or critique of cinema and media texts [...] work that was once, traditionally carried out mainly in written-word forms (Martin and Álvarez López 2013)". Media only examples are common particularly in popular forms such as the supercut and, as we shall see in the penultimate section of this article, my own work in the genre frequently adopts this approach for analytical and speculative purposes.

Most usual, however, are those that combine re-edited image and sound with critical analysis and reflection in the form of visible or spoken language. Whichever, the results of this process are critical and cultural works—media or multi-media essays—made from and about other works. Although referring to another cinematic context, Rancière (2006: 5) neatly encapsulates the practice: “making a film on the body of another.”

To this extent, the audiovisual essay is a particular expression of forms of intellectual and cultural production with both historical and contemporary significance. Examples abound. One might consider, for instance, the heterogeneous compilations of quotations by Walter Benjamin (1999), the archival installations of Thomas Hirschorn (see for example, Foster 2004: 6), and the creative compilations of film fragments made by Bill Morrison (see, for example, Russell 2018: 19). What these examples indicate is a set of concerns and approaches closely associated with critical and experimental approaches to cultural production.

Firstly, such practices are frequently founded upon critical engagements with archival and other overlooked historical materials. At the risk of oversimplification, the purpose here is to interrogate and destabilize official histories—and in many cases dominant understandings of history itself—exploring in their stead alternative reckonings of historical processes, subjects and events. Such works *détourn* historical documents to reanimate unresolved questions and illuminate issues obscured by the accumulated sediment of ideology or dimmed by common sense.

Secondly, they frequently make use of artistic procedures that challenge naïve forms of realism (for a detailed discussion of cinematic realism, see Williams 1980). On the one hand, such avant-garde practitioners ‘play’ with the temporal and material qualities of the shot itself through, for example, slow or accelerated motion and the deliberate manipulation of formal and material properties of the medium such as grain, tonality and focus. On the other, and of particular importance here, is the procedure known as montage. In a general aesthetic sense, montage means to assemble an artistic whole from disparate parts or the results of so doing. In mainstream cinema montage is usually associated with the process of editing—the splicing together of different shots to create a scene and of scenes to create a whole movie—and, in its nominal form, as a sequence of shots. In film theoretical terms, on the other hand, montage is a more complex, nuanced and contested concept. It is, at one and the same time, a semantic engine and a technical procedure. As Álvarez Lopez and Martin (2013) note, “montage, as we all know (at least in theory) makes meaning (at least in theory)”. Whilst theoretical accounts of exactly how meaning is made through montage differ, the following broad descriptions of the phenomena are adequate here: aesthetic and semantic experiences can be produced by the juxtaposition of heterogeneous images; the form and structure of the juxtaposition affords particular kinds of experiences; the meaning produced in this way exceeds the content of the juxtaposed elements and is, therefore, a form of semantic and aesthetic production.

These dual aspects of the audiovisual essay enable Russell (2018: 5) to locate the form within a broader range of cultural practices that she refers to as ‘archiveology’. According to Russell, archiveology is “a means of returning to the images of the past that were produced to entertain [...] and reviewing them for new ways of making history come alive in new forms.” In the context of this note, this is an uncontroversial

claim. The audiovisual essay does provide new means of engaging with and re-presenting cinematic history and history through cinema. In comparison with text-based forms of academic publishing audiovisual essays are dynamic, multi-modal and non-linear. However, Russell's claim that such work is able "to produce new knowledge", that the form is equivalent in some ways to traditional "written word forms" and opens up the possibility of new means of producing knowledge is controversial. Not surprisingly, Álvarez López and Martín (2013) point to "an intriguing resistance to this work [...] within various pockets of the academic world."

In the following sections I will return to these questions of form and epistemological status through discussion of a small set of audiovisual essay inspired experiments that use as their source material a single Thai fiction film from the late 1950s.

#### **4 The Audiovisual Essay as Design-Historical Method: *Premonition of a Theory of Practice***

In mid 2017 in response to the ideas and approaches discussed above I began to experiment with a number of Thai feature films from Thailand's so-called American Era. My aims were twofold: first, to mine these largely forgotten cultural artefacts for insight into the role of design and material objects in everyday social relations and interactions; and second, to explore the methodological potential of the audiovisual essay as a means of so doing. In particular, my approach was influenced by Jean Luc Godard's monumental 2008 experimental film essay *Histoire(s) du Cinema* and Jacques Rancière's analysis of it (see Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5. *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (2008)



Figure 6. *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (2008)

As Rancière has it, Godard's approach is founded upon the conviction that fiction films are virtual historical resources, "encyclopedias" of often forgotten everyday lives that are inscribed in the objects, products, gestures, interactions, spaces and symbols that are depicted and performed in—but in excess of—a particular movie's ostensible content and narrative (2006: 173).

Methodologically, Rancière argues, Godard adopts a set of operations that I can, at the risk of oversimplification, set out as follows. Firstly, Godard abstracts images from their context so that they are no longer bound by the "narrative/ affective strategies" of both their host movie and, consequently, the broader representational regime of which it is part (2006: 175). Now, freed from their specific role within a plot or story or genre, Godard transforms these movie fragments into, on the one hand

‘image-material susceptible to infinite transformations and combinations’ and, on the other, ‘an image-sign capable of designating and interpreting every other’ (2006: 178). In other words, Godard mobilizes the productive power of montage to animate associations between objects, gestures, symbols and so on and so forth and, by so doing, analyses, explores and speculates about both the history of cinema and what cinema might tell us about history itself. Rancière (2007: 225) summarizes this theory of practice as follows: “disconnecting images from stories, Godard assumes, is connecting them so as to make history.”

These ideas and approaches formed a broad ground against which my own praxis figured. Methodologically, this drew upon experimental, playful and intuitive processes associated with the contemporary and historical approaches to montage and formal experimentation discussed above. Images, sounds and text were, for example, juxtaposed, combined, superimposed, zoomed, panned, frozen and slowed down in order to identify correspondences, disjunctions, patterns and other forms of significance in the interplays between people, signs, objects, spaces and ideas. Whilst the aesthetic dimensions of this process should not be underestimated—a point I will return to later in conclusion—these productive moves were framed—consciously and unconsciously, perhaps—by an ongoing inquiry into design and material culture at a historical moment when new forms of products and practices were impacting upon existing social forms and relations. In other words, the inquiry was driven by a dialectical movement in which creative production informed critical inquiry and critical questions animated creative production.

The outcome of this process was a set of audiovisual essay fragments and experimental essays that explored and interrogated Thai movies from the American Era. In what follows I will set out some broad findings/ discoveries that resulted from this process. In so doing I hope both to clarify the significance of my own inquiry and suggest some broad ways of conceptualizing and approaching research using the same or similar creative and critical methods.

These findings—and the title of this section—were influenced by two further theoretical approaches. On the one hand, Noël Burch’s attempt to map the various ways in which space and time, as well as image, sound, voice and text, might be articulated in the post-production process and the potential these have for the production of meaning and affect (Burch 1983: 3). On the other, Jacques Rancière’s intriguing proposal that montage is a kind of aesthetic machinery that operates according to two semantic registers (Rancière 2009: 56). Whilst dialectical montage, comprises operations that fragment wholes and collide differences in order to demystify the image, symbolic montage produces interactions, associations and analogies in order to expose obscured relations. In what follows then, I describe some of the particular machineries I have developed in the course of this inquiry. I do so using examples from the 1957 movie *Setthi Anatha*.

#### 4.1 *Machineries of Scrutiny*

Digital media provide the researcher with powerful tools for controlling the speed at which footage played back. Complex and subtle accelerations and decelerations, slow and speeded motion, freezing and extracting frames, are relatively easy to implement in software. In cinematic language, techniques such as these serve a range of narrative, expressive and affective purposes. In the context of this inquiry these temporal articulations served as tools for scrutinizing various aspects of the *mise-en-scène*.

The simplest of these articulations was the extraction of still frames. In the flow of a narrative movie much potential evidence—particularly but not exclusively unwitting testimony—appears fleetingly in the frame or is lost in the background of a scene. Abstracting and enlarging potentially interesting frames meant that various formal operations could be applied. For example, blurred or obscured objects or settings can be sharpened or lightened using digital filters thus clarifying the image and enabling analysis.

A second form of temporal articulation, slow motion, aided identifying potentially interesting frames. Maya Deren’s description of cinematic slow motion as “the microscope of time” is significant here. According to Deren (2004 :67):

[...] slow motion can be brought to the most casual of activities to reveal in them a texture of emotional and psychological complexes. For example, the course of a conversation is normally characterized by indecisions, defiances, hesitations, distractions, anxieties, and other emotional undertones. In reality these are so fugitive as to be invisible. But the explorations by slow-motion photography, the agony of its analysis, reveals in such an ostensible casual situation, a profound human complex.

Central to my approach was the viewing of potentially relevant scenes in slow and super-slow motion thus making available for scrutiny micro-/infra- aspects of a scene that might otherwise be overlooked. In *Setthi Anatha*, for example, close readings of the movie at normal speed drew my curiosity to the interactions between people and things and, in particular, the ways in which characters interacted with objects—and other people through objects—in various ways and for a variety of purposes. By extracting these scenes and decelerating them dramatically I was able to raise questions and pose hypotheses that called out for further research through conventional and creative means. For example, Figures 7 and 8 are treated stills from a series of decelerated sequences in which male and female characters touch each other.



Figure 7. *Setthi Anatha* (1957)



Figure 8. *Setthi Anatha* (1957)

#### 4.2 *Machineries of inventory*

A key concept in social semiotics is the semiotic resource (Van Leeuwen 2004: 3). The concept replaces the familiar and limiting semiotic concept of the sign. As Van Leeuwen (2004: 4) explains it, semiotic resources are, “signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication.” That is, they

are socially, culturally and historically situated meaning potentials that are enacted or performed in real life settings. Once identified, semiotic resources are harvested from their setting and this resource inventory serves as the basis for analysis and interpretation.

With this in mind, I hypothesized that movies shot in the period in which they were set might provide a window onto the semiotic resources of past cultures and might throw light on otherwise obscured, invisible or lost social meanings and memories. In the example above, machineries of scrutiny were deployed to identify a particular semiotic resource, forms of interpersonal bodily contact or touch. An inventory was made of each example in *Setthi Anthana* and these were cut together at normal speed and slow motion in the form of the supercut. From these categories of bodily contact were developed and the individual instances cut together to afford comparison and interpretation. Of particular interest were: moments in which men and women interacted in ways that appeared to run counter to social norms and conventions of bodily conduct promoted as essentially Thai (Juthamas 2016<sup>1</sup>); and, the ways in which products of various kinds—cushions, glasses, clothes, toys and so on—served as psychological props or mediated social interaction.

#### *4.3 Machineries of Juxtaposition & Composition*

In cinematic contexts montage is usually understood as a form of temporal articulation. In Lev Kuleshov's classic experiment, images of an expressionless man's face were cut together with a variety of other scenes—a plate of food, a child's coffin, an attractive woman. Kuleshov argued that, on seeing these various films clips, audiences invariably related the shot pairs to produce meaning. The invariant character was described as hungry, distraught and lustful depending upon which image succeeded him (for discussion of the Kuleshov Effect, see Pramaggiore and Wallis 2005: 162). Whilst this temporal form of montage played a role in my research, of far greater importance was spatial montage.



Figure 9. Still from *Pillowtalk* (1957)

Spatial montage, or split screen, involves the simultaneous combination of two or more films clips within a single frame. Cinematically, the technique is most frequently used to depict simultaneous action occurring in different locations. The ways in which this is realized vary enormously and examples abound of split screen techniques

advancing plot, building tension, disorienting the viewer, playing for laughs and even social critique. In the 1959 movie *Pillow Talk*, for example, the director deployed split screen as a comic device and a way of critiquing and side-stepping the US film censor's rules that forbade the depiction of sexual content (see Figure 9). In my own work, split screen served to juxtapose scenes and scene fragments in such a way as to aid analytical thought—comparison and contrast, for example.

In *Setthi Anthana* a poor man is gifted a fortune by a philanthropic businessman. The film reworks and domesticates well-known tropes about sudden wealth, class difference and social change. Removed from the familiarity of their humble working class lives, the characters are thrown into a world of unfamiliar settings, objects, forms of self-presentation and interaction. Split screen composition afforded two main operations. First, combining similar reactions to and interactions with new and unfamiliar objects, for example the way in which the poor family react to money (see Figure 10). And, second, comparing the ways different social groups—young and old, workers and bourgeois, men and women—interacted with and through objects and settings.



Figure 10. Interactions with wealth: still from AV essay. Power (2018)

#### 4.4 *Machineries of Connection*

According to Akira (1989: 136), the period from 1946 to 1957 in Thailand can be characterized as one of “bureaucratic capitalist development”. Put simply, this term signifies a restructuring of the Thai economy through the reconciling of the growing business interests of the Thai military and the Sino-Thai capitalist class. This economic development brought with it both the decline of the old ruling elite, the consolidation of Chinese businesses—albeit greatly influenced by the military—and the emergence of a sub-class of the newly wealthy (Pasuk & Baker 2009: 144). This period also witnessed the growing importance of American patronage for Thailand's social, political and economic affairs as the country was integrated into the Western bloc involved in growing tensions ignited globally by the Cold War and locally by the increasing significance of labour, socialist and communist movements.

Whilst the period did not witness change as rapid and profound as that associated with the internationalization of the Thai economy from 1957 onwards, significant social changes were set in motion at this time. Bangkok began to grow substantially in terms of population and economic significance. Private capital emerged as the key driver of the Thai economy. The beginnings of consumption of new modern material goods as an indicator of identity and status for the newly emerging urban middle classes hoves into view

With these points in mind I set out to investigate if and how these socio-economic changes might show up materially and semiotically in moving pictures of the period. To do this I drew upon the work of Henri Lefebvre (Power 2009: 2197):

Lefebvre contended that capitalism had transformed the everyday, and with it the world, first by rationalizing it (fragmenting, sub-dividing, atomizing), then by industrializing it (transforming each fragment into a production-consumption circuit) and finally by imposing this new reality upon it (through advertising, the media, ideology and myth).

From this perspective, the relations and interactions between economic and social change register in the ways that objects, representations, settings and practices are connected to each other materially and ideologically. In Setthi Anthana, for example, automobiles consistently connect particular systems of material things. The poor man's newly imported American car connects with the source of his wealth—the bank—the signifier of his social status, the new home. Other cars connect office scenes with swimming pool parties. Within these settings, imported alcohol and the glasses, decanters and trolleys needed to serve it in a Western manner, mediate interactions between characters. Hats—designated by the Thai dictator Phibun as markers of civilized behaviour—are taken off and put on. By cutting together these examples it was possible to sketch out configurations of material objects that appeared to point in two ways (see Figure 10): on the one hand to the ways in which networks of goods figured in the everyday; on the other changes in the local economy (the importation of automobiles, the production and distribution of alcohol and the repatriation of banking were all captured by the new economic forces during this period).

### **5 Conclusion: Machineries of argument & affect**

Thus far I have focused attention on the use of formal and aesthetic techniques for investigative, analytical and speculative purposes—ways of manipulating visual material to raise questions and explore issues. Audiovisual essay practice, however, aims to articulate these types of post-production and experimentation into rational or poetic 'arguments'. The most common medium for giving structure and direction to these arguments is language in its spoken—voice over—or visible—inter- or subtitles—forms. To this extent, the audiovisual essay appears closer to the conventional academic essay than to video art, experimental film or found footage movie. After all, most conventional essays and articles in the arts and humanities combine text and imagery, albeit still and in a printed form.

However, as Banks (2001: 143) notes, the text-image relationship within the conventional essay is far from as obvious and transparent as it may first seem. In the vast majority of academic texts images play a subordinate role to writing, serving as “mere illustrations.” Barthes (1977: 35) theorizes this attempt to tame the affective and aesthetic qualities of imagery by subordinating it to text, “anchorage.” Captions and

in-text references anchor the preferred reading of the text and, in the process, attempt to silence other actual and potential meanings. In the same essay Barthes introduces a second way in which images and texts might interact, “relay”.

Here text [...] and image stand in a complementary relationship; the words, in the same way as the images, are fragments of a more general syntagm and the unity of the message is realized at a higher level, that of the story, the anecdote, the diegesis.

The more complex and open semantic productions made possible by relay are explored most fully in the minor printed genre known as the visual essay. Banks (145) argues that visual or photographic essays, “drawing [...] on film as a model” turn the conventional academic essay on its head by making images the semantic star and text the supporting actor.

And there’s the rub. To what extent can such image (or media) led works be considered as academic publications? Can creative production be equated with knowledge production? Is the written text the only valid form of scholarly publication or is the audiovisual essay—like the photographic essay before it, a premonition of new, multi-modal scholarly forms and new means of knowledge production? And, more specifically, what might this novel practice-based approach to inquiry afford researchers like myself interested in films as historical resources?

At this stage, I would like to suggest two possible answers. Firstly, the application of montage principles to media texts for historical purposes proved useful analytically and speculatively. That is, the abstraction and manipulation of objects, symbols, gestures, settings, and so on from the film footage served descriptive, inferential and exploratory analytical functions. Secondly, the construction of small audiovisual essays from these abstracted and manipulated fragments began to address the epistemological issues raised above. Some of my works adopted an experimental and poetic approach, with language playing only a minor role. Others were more analytical in intent, montaging historical information, quotation and fragments of the written research of Juthamas (2016<sup>1</sup>) with the visual materials. In both cases, they enabled the visual and material fields of culture to be explored in relation to other modes of research—historical, political, economic. In other words, a lost everyday world had, in part at least, been reinserted into historical discourse.

To conclude, even in their most analytical modes, audiovisual essays are by their nature aesthetic artefacts. Consequently, as Virginia Khun (2012) argues, they draw from “a broader notion of pathos, logos and ethos than that which has been reified in the age of print literacy.” The extent to which this opens up new avenues for knowledge production remains open to question. What is clear, is that the form produces scholarly works with the potential to appeal to intellectual, ethical and sensorial dimensions of human knowledge and experience.

## 6 Coda

The irony of the textual dominance of this essay or the use of images as “mere illustrations” is not lost on me. This speaks to contexts of intellectual production in which the visual is distrusted. The video fragments and mini-essays referred to above are available on-line. A longer audiovisual essay that treats the issues, ideas and debates discussed above, is in production.

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