
Notes on a Dilemma: Sukhumvit

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Abstract

Bangkok presents as a 'muddled', disordered place to the Western visitor; it does not follow the expectations of what an advanced metropolis should be like. Hence, as it cannot be categorised (familiar English words attached to its parts), it cannot be theorised in Western terms, as theory is always language determined. And because Thai urban scholars have in the main been educated in Western institutions (US, Australia, France, Germany), they too tend to bring Western interpretative models to bear on the city and on 'Thai space'. So neither do the Western visitors get much help from their Thai hosts in understanding – putting words to – the city. The present paper is a set of notes on elements of theory – albeit still Western – that might help unravel the dilemma of the 'unreadability' of Thai space. Peri-urban Nonthaburi and the ultra-urbanised *thanon* Sukhumvit (Sukhumvit Road) are the geographic focus of the paper.

Keywords: Reading, Space, Aquatic, Terrestrial, Tradition, Modernisation

There is nothing profound in observing that Bangkok was (is) an aquatic city – in largest measure even a floating city – that became (or perhaps still struggles to become) a land-based city. I spent the greater part of 2003 editing papers from a symposium, held in Bangkok in October 2002, on the intersections between notions of “modernity, tradition, culture and water” – intersections, indeed, that might well characterise Bangkok’s uncompleted transit from the water city to the land city.¹ Many papers reported fine empirical studies of communities in places that might be described as transitional between the water city and the land city; they described what might be called a ‘muddled’ space, that can be many things at once, where classic (Western) notions of land use make very little sense, and where (Western) expectations of what a city should be are thwarted.

Bangkok seems to challenge Thai scholars because of that incompleteness of its transition (the *thanons* bury the *khlongs* but still the traffic is snarled, and the disappearance of the water world is greeted with mixed emotions of modernist hope and pride, and yet profound nostalgia and sense of loss). And in turn it challenges the visitor because its space fails to fit the normal models of modernist neatness, segregation of functions, orderliness and familiarity.

What follows is not really a paper in the conventional academic sense, but rather some fairly random notes on the dilemma of incomprehensibility that Bangkok presents – in effect a ‘work in progress’.

Dialogicality, insisted Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), informs every utterance, every text (including the text represented in urban space):

An utterance, spoken or written, is always expressed from a point of view [a voice], which for Bakhtin is a process rather than a location. Utterance is an activity that enacts differences in values. On an elementary level, for instance, the same words can mean different things

depending on the particular intonation with which they are uttered in a specific context: intonation is the sound that value makes. (Clark and Holquist, 1984: 10)

The utterance reflects both the voice producing it and the voice to which it is addressed (Bakhtin, 1986: 99). Thus arises ‘dialogue’, the interaction of the ‘double logics’ of speaker and listener.

This insight can be translated to the information transmitted in built space, and in the case of Bangkok we can begin that translation at two levels. The first is in part analogous: wander through the villages of Nonthaburi and you will observe the water world of older (and still present) times, that has evolved according to its own ‘logic’ of the interactions of natural process and human settlement, production and culture. Typically paralleling the *khlongs*, on the slightly higher ground between them, and occasionally cutting across them, is the expanding and intensifying networks of the *thanons* and the new forms of institutions and development that they enable, all following another ‘logic’ (another political economy, as I will argue following). The two networks – variously paralleling, intersecting and overlaying – and the forms of settlement, ideas of progress and worldviews that they convey, can be seen as interacting (spatial) logics.

The second level at which dialogicality arises is in the lived experiences of the people themselves, not just in individual interactions but also in the broader relationships between those who still adhere to something of the lifestyles of the older water city, and the ‘new people’ of the *thanons*, the housing estates and the formal economy.

So we come to a four-way intersection of logics: each individual will be variously caught in the dilemma of traditional (vernacular, indigenous) values and their logic, but also and simultaneously in the intrusions of modernism; but then this ambivalence will confront a world of the villages, and thereby of two logics of space.

¹ BMB program symposium, on “Modernity, Tradition, Culture, Water”, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, 30 – 31 October, 2002.

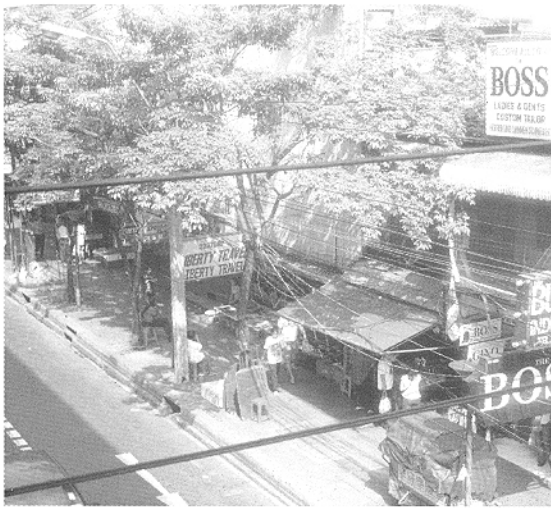


Figure 1: Sukhumvit as paradox: gridlock, the Skytrain as monster, but the street market as pedestrian wonderland

A reading of Louis Althusser (1918-1989) would suggest that this leaves the real question of Nonthaburi unasked. For the question is: how do these 'logics of space' refer to modes of production in a historical materialist sense? The question refocusses the story. For it is easy to argue that the space of the *thanons* with its

banks, offices, housing estates, factories, transnational franchises and the rest is 'modern' and a manifestation of the capitalist mode of production (surplus value, exchange value, commodity). But what is the mode of production (or reproduction of social life) of that earlier, presumably pre-modern, pre-globalised space of *khlong*, *wat*, subsistence agriculture and barter?

The Althusserian position firmly locates the sphere of *economic* relations at the 'base' of the social structure, on which then stands the 'superstructure' of *political* and *ideological* (cultural) relations. While there is always a 'basic' contradiction at the economic level, between the forces of production (typically dependent on collective action) and the relations of production (the egotistical appropriation of socially created wealth or, alternatively, the avoidance of one's 'fair share' of the labour of production), contradictions however also arise at the political and ideological (cultural) levels, and also between levels. These contradictions can compound, and there can be a 'ruptural fusion' of contradictions, and the mode of production itself is transformed (Althusser, 1969; King, 1996: 32).

Althusser, following Marx, could argue that relations at the economic level (i.e. the relations of production) determine the relations between the three levels; and they also determine which level is to be dominant in that mode of production. For different levels perform the dominant function depending on the economic relations of that mode. So in the ancient empires the political was dominant because of the role of the state in maintaining social stability; in the feudal mode of production it was the ideological, because of the central role of religion in maintaining unity; and in the capitalist it is the economic level itself that is dominant. While the economic is determinant "in the last instance" (Althusser's term), it never determines how each level will develop – each has some measure of autonomy, though each inevitably affects the others. So crucially important contradictions can arise in any level, or at any point in the complex relations between levels.

Finally, in this Althusserian understanding, there can develop contradictions between different, co-existing modes of production – Nonthaburi indeed! Any given society will manifest elements of a variety of modes of production – residual from previous epochs (prehistory, or Ayutthaya, or early Rattanakosin?), or from contact with different societies (while Siam was not *politically* colonised by the West, it could not really escape colonisation, nor the subsequent complexities of decolonisation and of neo-colonisation, in its thinking), or new experimentations ('sustainable development'), or forms of resistance (anti-globalisation).



Figure 2: *Ruin (deserted, abandoned hotel), and rebirth (carnival): Soi 13*

The real strength of Althusser's argument is that it forces attention on the idea of contradiction and instability in human society: social evolution is somehow to be linked to the continual working out of such contradiction. Yet the case of Bangkok might bring to focus a fundamental flaw in such logic. "Every thought of society and history," observes Cornelius Castoriadis (1987: 3), "itself belongs to society and history". So if in antiquity "the dominant categories under which social and historical relations are grasped are essentially *political* categories," while the economic gets only scant attention, this is not because understanding was less advanced or economic material was neglected; rather, "in the reality of the ancient world, the economy is not yet constituted as a separate 'autonomous' moment ... of human activity".

If we take the Castoriadis argument further and accept that the Althusserian (Marxian) idea of 'last instance' determinism is itself historically contingent – of its time and of its place – then we must relax the argument and ask what might indeed have been 'determinative' in ancient Ayutthaya, and what might be still residual (or, perhaps, even still determinative)? Is it "the economy" that governs the lives ('determines' where meaning, or social stability will be found) for the villagers of Nonthaburi?



Figure 3: *Green, shaded, noble: Soi 13*

One could still travel from Nonthaburi almost to *thanon* Sukhumvit by boat (*khlong* Bangkok Noi, to the *maenam* Chao Phraya, *khlong* Bang Lamphoo, *khlong* Mahanak, *khlong* San Sep which effectively parallels Sukhumvit); and it might still be faster than by grid-locked road. The journey would however negotiate a far greater distance in the historical times and the transformations that it would traverse.

By the time one reaches Sukhumvit, the spatial logics and their linked modes of production have seemingly multiplied infinitely (though of course this is an illusion, as the 'simplicity' of Nonthaburi coexists with the visual chaos of Sukhumvit – they are not of different times, and Sukhumvit is always already imminent within Nonthaburi). So, a brief description: While Charoen Krung ("Prosper the City" or New Road), from the Rama IV age, was the city's first constructed road, following the line of the river and opening it up to port expansion and the consequent expansion of foreigner settlements, it was soon

followed by the road into the eastern hinterland – the rice bowl from the earliest period of Krung Thep. It was then the extension of this latter in the 1930s that yielded *thanon* Sukhumvit, paralleling the east-west *khlongs* that had been cut to initially open up the area for rice production, and linking the capital to the eastern seaboard and onwards right to the Cambodian border. An aristocratic and middle-class exodus from the crowded capital had already dispersed along the east-west *khlongs* when, with the motoring age, the new *thanon* Sukhumvit offered yet greater attractions. Fashion, the desire for the new, and easy access to both city and countryside gave it a status as a locale for noble and merchant estates, though still interspersed with the rice growing and orchardist villages, so that by the late 1950s it could be described, in Western terms, as middle-class suburbia (see for example Askew, 2002: 54). The old secondary channels feeding into the main *khlong* alongside Sukhumvit were replaced by narrow *sois*, while the subdivided rice fields yielded the long, narrow blocks for urban expansion. Past logics – modes of production – ‘ventriloquate’ through those that follow.

Successive waves of new users weaved their way through the area: the ubiquitous rows of shophouses came to line Sukhumvit and, increasingly, the intricate maze of its *sois*; as Thailand came within the American sphere in the 1960s, hotels and entertainment venues inserted themselves; the Americans departed Southeast Asia and Sukhumvit in the 1970s (at least militarily), the tourists diversified, and with the new distribution of spending power that followed the OPEC oil price rises, the western end of Sukhumvit became a Middle East focus. Rather symbolically, the old GI-favoured Grace Hotel was purchased by Saudi investors, although there had long previously been an Islamic presence – Thai-Muslims had settled the old villages along the main *khlongs*, and the Indian-Muslim businessman A.E. Nana had largely been instrumental in the early land speculation and subdivision in the 1940s (Brown, 1994: 214–219). Especially after 1979, luxury condominium blocks began to be inserted into the *sois* of Sukhumvit, notably for the expatriate

business community, so that by 1989 the area accounted for an estimated 60% of all completed luxury condominium projects (Askew, 2002: 234); and there were the grand (and less grand) international hotels, department stores and shopping malls of a more globalising era. Yet all the time the older waves of users survived (though rice production might be replaced with other ‘peasant’ production and exchange). The area is high rise and low rise, simple and sophisticated, rich and poor, traditional and globalised, noble and common, five-star and backpacker, cultural capital (the Siam Society) and cultural shame (*soi* Nana, *soi* Cowboy).

It seems to bring together the history of modern Thailand, except that it is all together, in one place, co-existing. Also co-existing therefore are the multiple relations of production that characterise that history, correspondingly diverse forces of political organisation (remnant monarchical, nostalgic for the certainties of military dictatorship, liberal democratic, the power plays of the Khlong Toey slums), and diversities of beliefs and worldviews. There are, in other words, multiple, coexisting and intersecting spatial logics, of the kind implied earlier.



Figure 4: *Soi* 5

While Siam might not have been colonised politically by the West, it has not been immune from the experiences of colonialism,

decolonisation, or the multiple forms of present neo-colonialisms. While present attitudes to the Khmer hegemony of the Sokhotai period may be ambivalent (was it not all the same great empire?), there can be no similar ambiguity in the confused shame and pride of Siam's dominance of its old vassal states (variously Laos, Cambodia, the northern Malay states) or of Siam's own colonial subjugation (by the Burmese).

But Sukhumvit bears the marks of more recent colonisations. While King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r1868-1910) may have resisted British and French sovereignty, he was forced to bow to their power and to cede territory; but more significantly he joined the enemy at Althusser's *ideological* level. The Westernisation is in the road itself, in the dispersal of the aristocracy, in the stylistic hybridisations of their compounds. The anti-Western policies of the Rama VII government were nothing if not decolonising reaction (though it is admittedly difficult to discern its marks on Sukhumvit). The dictatorships of the 1960s and 70s are a different matter: the swings to and from the American intrusion into Southeast Asia are manifested in the hotels and the 'sex scene' – and whereas that scene far predates the Vietnam War (in Patpong, Sukhumvit and elsewhere), its Americanisation in that era gives it an aura of *farang* intrusion that clearly places Sukhumvit in the perceptual sphere of the corroding influence of 'the West'.

More recent times modify the impression (*soi* 5 is now Middle East decadent rather than American decadent), but perhaps more significantly they have brought the five-star hotels, the better restaurants (it is now an 'Italian' street), the office towers (though far more to *thanon* Silom than to Sukhumvit), and here there can be no doubt: Thailand is as subject to cultural and economic neo-colonialism as is Hong Kong or Shanghai or Jakarta.

So, in any attempt to 'understand' the richness of Sukhumvit (or of Nonthaburi, for that matter), in the context of the Thai denial of colonisation, we can usefully turn to ideas from postcolonial theory. The classic texts of that tradition (by Edward Said, Gyatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, for

example), while most typically dealing with the Middle East and India, have tended to focus on the European construction of Otherness (*Orientalism*, the noble savage, the sly and shifty oriental), and on the diverse experiences of colonialism, de-colonisation, and neo-colonialism (for a summary, see Moore-Gilbert, 1997). The first of these broad themes is especially illuminating in the case of Bangkok: the earliest European stereotyping of the city was of a place romantic and strange – watery, floating, exotic, utterly alien – but also uncivilised and backward. And the primitiveness of its technology might suggest that Siam, the superpower of its region, could fairly easily be subjugated. Such views and the threats they implied were not lost on Rama IV, Rama V and their governments – not only were the roads, bridges and Westernised architecture based on observed European models, and even more significantly on the *colonial* cities of Batavia, Penang, Singapore and Calcutta (Sternstein, 1976: 107), but a continual agenda was to impress the foreigners with the pace of Siam's modernisation – with the reality that Siam was becoming *siwilai* (civilised) (Thongchai, 2000). To mimic the effects of colonisation, as a defence against its reality, is surely to be seen as a self-inflicted colonisation of the culture itself.

(Even more significant may have been King Chulalongkorn's reform of the bureaucracy. With the construction of new buildings for the ministries, outside the walls of the palace, senior officials' workplaces were separated from their residences. The traditional link was broken, and subsequently descended through the culture, to yield typically Western patterns of the journey to work, the commuter suburb, and road congestion in a city not suited to such degrees of separation of functions. Yet home-based work persists in Sukhumvit, and even more so in Nonthaburi – but for how long?)

While Sukhumvit might reflect the suppression of an aquatic for a terrestrial world in the ambivalent pursuit of modernisation (desired for its own sake, but also as a defence against its imposition), and while its various waves of occupation reflect the reality of Thailand's economic colonisation/neo-colonisation (the

expatriate ‘experts’, the Americans, the Middle Easterners), its present life reinforces a newer *farang* stereotyping – of Bangkok as a clogged, traffic snarled, polluted, disordered, unsustainable megalopolis. As Sukhumvit carries the marks of cultural (self-)colonisation in the abandonment of an aquatic for a terrestrial world (or for the hybrid world that Nonthaburi still manifests), and of the old integration of work and home, so it also displays reactions to their next wave of stereotyping, in the BTS Skytrain opened in 1999, in the in-progress MRT and in the elevated highways cutting across it.

The second major theme of the postcolonial literature – the experience of colonialism, decolonisation and neo-colonialism – can also throw light on the transformations of Southeast Asia, as of India and the Middle East. In presently decolonised Asia there are complex mixtures of lingering resentment, a sometimes profound sense of loss of both real and imagined (falsely recalled) culture, yet often a nostalgia for the ‘old [colonial] days’ (also falsely and romantically recalled). Such ambivalences can be sensed in present Indonesia, or Malaysia, or Singapore, or Vietnam; but especially in Indonesia and Malaysia this explains only part of present experiences. For in these cases there are other, less theorised but more abiding forms of colonisation: in both cases the diaspora Chinese assumed effective economic dominance through relatively similar processes whereby the (European) colonisers exercised policies and practices (of variously encouraged and enforced immigration, then racial stereotyping, role segmentation and spatial segregation) to allocate specific social roles to specific racial groups, setting up effectively divided polities – easier to rule! The decolonisation may have partly removed the Europeans and their *political* dominance, but the other has remained; and, in Althusser’s terms, it is at the economic base.

Thailand is different. The Chinese are there, and their merchant role and economic power is similar to that elsewhere in Southeast Asia; but the segregation is less, identity seems more compromised, and resentments seem less (these of course are all matters of degree). While

Bangkok has its Chinatown and Chinese enterprises are very visible, Thais will readily admit to strands of Chinese ancestry, and the seething resentment that one might detect among the Malays or the only partly suppressed hostility of the Javanese is not in evidence. The cities show the signs of economic competition, but it is less visible in the manifestations of the polity and the culture.

The varied forms of (globalising) neo-colonialism are however ubiquitously impressed on Thai urban space, and nowhere more so than on *thanon* Sukhumvit. Expats, both European and Asian, are concentrated in the luxury condominiums; the Western tourists are sprinkled throughout the area, those from the newly affluent Middle East gravitate to *sois* 3 and 5, and from India to *sois* 9 and 11; the bars and entertainment complexes both follow the tourists and in turn focus their attention. The built fabric reflects the waves of investment, and the abandoned, half-completed projects reflect the 1997 (and continuing) collapse of the Thai economy to the winds of an increasingly integrated world economy as the mode of production itself shifts. There are also the reactions to globalisation: foreign architects are not permitted to practise in Thailand, and so the diversity of responses to local conditions that one finds in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong or Jakarta, and their impact on local practice, are altogether missing in Bangkok.

Gyatri Spivak (1996: 19), while recognising the destructive force of colonisation, views it somewhat ambivalently, as it tends to come as an “enabling violence” or “enabling violation” that can engender new creativity. The same would surely be the case with the cultural colonisation of globalisation: the impact of external attempts to interpret a culture (Kisho Kurakawa or Cesar Pelli in Kuala Lumpur, for example) compels indigenous responses – either to assimilate the intrusion or to reject it and, if rejecting, then to advance an opposing representation appropriate to the culture and the times. To read traces of cultural innovation in Sukhumvit (or Bangkok more widely) is difficult. It carries the unfinished towers, but the creative impulses of their designers may have withered long before.



Figure 5: Soi 7

The ambivalence that runs through the postcolonial experience runs equally though differently through that of neo-colonising globalisation, and to understand something of the logic of ambivalence it is useful to turn again here to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin.

Much of Bakhtin's early work had addressed the phenomenon of 'carnival' as it existed in the pre- to mid-Renaissance period in Europe – "[t]he logic of carnival is ... not the true or false, quantitative or causal logic of science and seriousness, but the qualitative logic of ambivalence, where the actor is also the spectator, destruction gives rise to creativity, and death is equivalent to rebirth" (Lechte, 1994: 8; commenting on Bakhtin, 1984a).

Further, "[c]arnival logic (the logic of ambivalence) is not restricted to the limitation of binary oppositions which set limits, but is equivalent of the power of the continuum (positive and negative)" (Lechte, 1994: 9); and, one can observe, the seriousness of academic discourse is based on the repression of ambivalence.

This notion of an ambivalent logic is different from the co-existing, mutually contradicting, autonomous logics discussed earlier and identified in part with modes of production. This is the logic of yearning for what is resented (the

poverty but romantically recalled happinesses of an earlier time – Sukhumvit's backward glance to Nonthaburi, as it were), and the irreversible fascination for what is seen as destructive of the culture (Sukhumvit's proliferating internet cafés, or the mindless rhythmic beat from the go-go bars – Bakhtin's carnival).

Bakhtin also studied the novels of Dostoyevsky, identifying in them a 'polyphonic' structure whereby, as with carnival, it always contains the other's voice within itself (Bakhtin, 1984b). As Lechte (1994: 10) observes, polyphony has no fixed point but is the interpenetration of sounds; it is multiple, not singular; and in language (including spatial languages) it is dialogical (even multi-logical), not monological. Every unique utterance, for Bakhtin, is of one voice speaking ("ventriloquating") through another voice or voice type in a "social language" (Wertsch, 1991: 57-59). So, as the *sois* of Sukhumvit replaced the old secondary *khlongs* that flowed to the main channel paralleling the present road, and the labyrinthine network of minor *sois* has replaced the *troks* and pathways through the rice fields, and the pattern of the fields themselves is preserved in the present land subdivision, we can similarly read the old aquatic landscape "ventriloquating" through the terrestrial present. While this earlier, originary text is still readable, the question is whether it is, in fact, read – does it enter dialogically into the observer's engagement with the world?

Jacques Derrida (b1930) sees this intertextuality – one text or voice speaking through another (voices within voices in Dostoyevsky, Nonthaburi always implicit in the cacophony of Sukhumvit) – but in a different way. He refers to "grafting": "To write means to graft – it's the same word". But to graft is to change the meaning of both the source (the water world) and the site of the graft (Sukhumvit) – though immediately there is a paradox, because the grafting is in two directions simultaneously: an alien, always neo-colonising modernity is grafted on to the *khlongs*, rice fields and orchards of Sukhumvit, and then, in the search for lost meaning, the imagery of Nonthaburi is grafted (ghosted) on to the cacophony. "Each grafted text continues

to radiate back toward the site of its removal, transforming that too, as it affects the new territory" (Derrida, 1981a: 355). There is a sort of reversible temporality at play.

So, finally, Gregory Ulmer (1985: 88) quotes Derrida (1981b) at length, to conclude that there is an interweaving of collage/montage wherein each element is "... being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system." Though complexity marks both Nonthburi and Sukhumvit, it is the sheer proliferation of traces that distinguishes the latter.

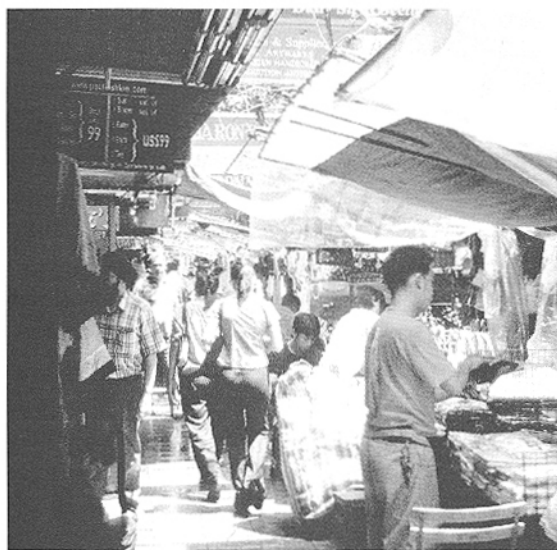


Figure 6: Street market as labyrinth

The point to be made from all this is that we are not seeing Bangkok as a series of 'overlays' or 'replacements'. Rather, each new insertion into the city and its culture is just that – an insertion or 'graft', horizontal as it were rather than a vertical, overlaying superimposition. Indeed 'horizontality' is a keyword that seems to represent the reality of Bangkok and, in turn, to give us an insight (pathway) to that reality. So what further thoughts might such an insight provoke?

Georges Bataille (1897-1961) speaks of two axes of thought. The vertical is the axis of the vain climb towards (Western Enlightenment) Absolute Knowledge – it is most clearly identified with G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). But the 'illumination' of such knowledge is ultimately blinding, "... the end point of a kind of delirium of reason" (Lechte, 1994: 98), hiding what

Bataille calls the very real obscurity of non-knowledge – sacrifice, the sacred, loss, chance, and eroticism – practices that open up the horizontal axis (Bataille, 1986). It is the axis of *difference*.

Horizontality of thought becomes radical in the work of Gilles Deleuze (b1925). Such thought, in Deleuze, does not lead to sameness (everyone and everything on the same level), but to the instability of differences (comparison becomes problematic), there is no firmness of boundaries, but rather all boundaries and barriers are permeable (Deleuze, 1962; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The idea of the rhizome is central to such thought, as is "the labyrinth of horizontality" (Lechte, 1994: 102).

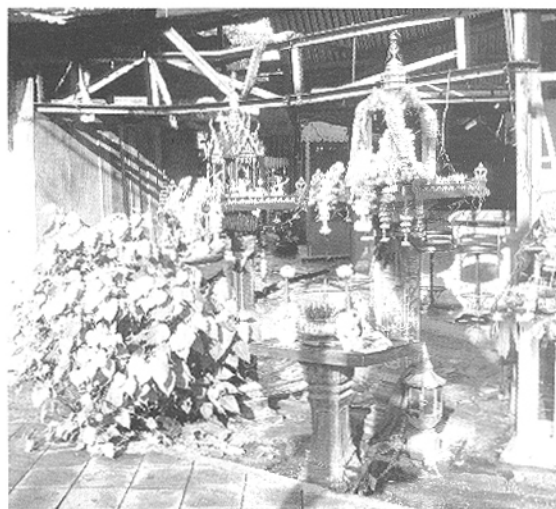


Figure 7: The sacred and the profane, and the principle of non-contradiction: Buddhist shrines and Go-go bars at Soi Cowboy

These ideas, opposed as they are to the suprematist exclusions of classical Western thought, could well be a description of the reality of Sukhumvit – labyrinthine, no barriers, constantly unfolding difference, proliferating (and, as Lecercle observes, “proliferation is always a threat to order” [1985: 95]).

The “threat to order” gives an important clue to understanding the significance of Bangkok to ideas of cities and their planning more broadly. For Bataille’s placement of eroticism on the horizontal (anti-rationalist) axis is precisely to recognise its role in destabilising order. Eroticism is a violation, a transgression, of interdictions: the interdiction is made know by the transgression, which thereby confirms the rupture of boundaries and frontiers. There is at least a *claimed* high rationality in the Western ‘science’ of planning cities; there is certainly an elaborate regime of controls and interdictions, even where money or influence can overcome them; and these would unquestioningly be placed on the vertical axis. But Bangkok is different: there is an absence of development control, and anything can go anywhere – it is a space opening up to otherness, without boundaries or frontiers – horizontal, indeed.

So, to those Western visitors who throng it, the ‘radical horizontality’ of Sukhumvit defies the order of other places thereby making manifest those orders – and the more insidious, self-imposed orders of self-discipline (Foucault, 1975). It throws ‘the city’ into question. Bangkok is a city of *chance* (Bataille again) rather than of order; and thereby order itself comes into question – becomes problematic. (There are lessons from Bangkok that other cities have yet to learn.)

Of course these generalisations are dangerous, for Bangkok does indeed have an order. There is the order of its foundation, of its sacredness, of its institutions (monarchy, religion, family), and these might indeed be caricatured as being on the vertical axis. But the important point is that what constitutes these various dimensions and their axes, in the sense suggested by Bataille, is different from what the Western city seems

to display. So our question is: How do we ‘read’ the seeming disorder of Bangkok?



Figure 8: Sukhumvit of the spirit: near soi 20

With any thought of a city as labyrinthine horizontality, the mind is likely to turn to Walter Benjamin’s vast, unfinished, also labyrinthine project of the “Arcades Project” (*Passagen-Werk*). Here Benjamin (1892-1940) set out to address ways of seeing – reading – the historical space of Paris in the 19th century, as a city of life and desire masked by illusions of progress. The method would be the juxtaposition of “dialectical images” –

Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show. (Benjamin, 1982: 574)

What is displayed is a massive kaleidoscope of seemingly random scraps from the city – bits of poetry, aphorisms, anecdotes, visual images, architecture and fragments of the city’s fabric – images on images, untheorised. The oppositions of ideas and images are to set up dialectical tensions that compel the reader/observer to distrust what the cacophony of the city purports to be (that is, human progress). Susan Buck-Morss suggests that there are four fundamental “ways of seeing” the city, or “image spheres”, that arise out of Benjamin’s display, and that these come from the intersections of *myth, nature and history*.

Whether similar intersections underlie the cacophony of Bangkok is not the point. But rather the issue is whether the search for intersections similarly throws the space of Bangkok into deconstructive doubt – challenging the assumptions and calling unquestioned values into doubt. The first of these, in Buck-Morss's recognition, is "Nature/History: Fossil" – the world of industrial objects viewed as fossils, from whose surface we can read the origins of the present – the past stands as fossil, with traces of past economic epochs running through the present. This first reading of the city makes its fabric seem ancient because of the rapidity of (technological) change – innovation, new commodities, new ways of marketing them (architecture). So we forget the exploitations, oppressions and tyrannies that lie beneath them (and for an example of such a reading of one aspect of Bangkok, see Dovey [2001] on *thanon Rachadamnoen*). Natural history is unmasked as delusion. The second reading, "Myth/History: Fetish", reveals that all the 'change' of the present ('progress') is but the surface shifts on the unchanging fetishisation of change itself – "hellish repetition". Benjamin sees this indeed (in 1930s Europe) as "... the eternity of Hell and its sadistic craving for innovation" (1982: 1011).

The translation of such insights to Bangkok leads to an immediate doubt. For the experience of *nature* and of *history*, and the notion of *myth*, is surely different for Thais than it is for post-Enlightenment, post-industrial French. Whether myth attaches more to the spiritual or to the material realm is constantly in question (King, 2003: 17-18); time may be perceived more cyclically; the natural world may be more animate than for the hyper-rationality of the West. Modernity seems more recent (but this too might well be in need of challenge), and the fetish of progress and of the world of commodities emerges differently. Desire is to be neither suppressed (by that chimerical delusion of progress) nor gratified, but transcended (the Buddhist vision). So different "dialectical images" leap to the fore.

The third way of seeing is "Myth/Nature: Wish

Image". Every time we imagine the future, we get it wrong, for we imagine it in terms of present possibilities and a mythic past:

In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it, the latter appears coupled with elements of pre-history – that is to say of a classless society. The experiences of this society, which have their store-place in the collective unconscious, intersect with the new to give birth to the utopias which leave their traces in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions (Benjamin, 1973: 159).

While Benjamin dismissed the 19th century's representations of dream futures (bourgeois interiors, Eiffel's wildly decorated iron and glass Paris Exhibition Hall of 1878) – "Fashion, like architecture, ... stands in the darkness of the lived moment" – nevertheless he sees that ruptural breaks do come. Epochs do end (the fall of Ayutthaya, the fall of the absolute monarchy ...).



Figure 9: ...and the Erawan Shrine

We can seek another perspective on the idea of ruptural change.

It is a fact that great revolutions are born of the contradictions between that which is old, that which is directed at the destruction of what is old and a striving of the most abstract kind for that which is new, which must be so new as not to contain even a grain of the old, and the more abrupt such a revolution, the longer will be the time during which such contradictions will persist. (V.I. Lenin, *Better Less, But Better*, quoted in L.A. Zhadova, 1982)

The idea of three-way contradiction has strength, but Benjamin's is a subtler notion of revolutionary break than that suggested by Lenin. For Benjamin, "that which is new" is always forged out of "mythic dream states" ("Myth/Nature: Wish Image" – the unrealised past, and always containing a great deal of the past – albeit the old suppressed by the power relations of the present, the dreamed past against the real past – what the past could have been), and "mythic new nature" (the now-possible relationships to external phenomena and technology to enable old dreams now, finally, to be realised, by yielding the requisite new languages in which new spatial experience – achievable dreams – is to be represented). So, observes Buck-Morss (1989: 124), Benjamin is identifying a dialectic that develops in the 'cultural superstructure' (in Althusser's terms) as a play between the imagination and the productive potential of still-uncomprehended "new nature". And it is a dialectic that develops not by attempting to *bury* the past (Lenin), but by re-energizing it. It is to redeem the past rather than to respect it or yearn for it.

So attention can turn again to those hybrid communities of Nonthaburi. Rather than indulging in romantic nostalgia, we need to ask what dreams from the past – from the naïve hopes of modernity or from the water world – remain unachieved in the present; and where do we find clues to the "new nature" – technologies and potentials that may be very new or indeed very ancient, but still unrecognised – to reactivate those older dreams?

If the third of Benjamin's "ways of seeing" is to view the city as dream, the fourth is to see it as ruin. The ruin is antidote to the dream. This is "History/Nature: Ruin", the counterpart of all visions and utopias. As Benjamin is ostensibly writing about Paris in the 19th century, it is not surprising that he devotes much attention to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), whom he sees as writing in an essentially ancient mode of representation (allegory) peculiar to periods of prolonged war and destruction – a turning away in horror from a world of chaos and decay. But Baudelaire's time was not one of destruction but of progress – indeed a

property developer's Paradise. Baudelaire's *subject* however, as distinct from his representational mode, is of the interweaving of the image of women commodified (in prostitution, decoration, fashion), traces of a final emptiness of death, and the streets – venues of voyeuristic idleness – that are the theatre of these erosions. Paris in its Golden Age was more a city of despair than of hope, destruction than of progress, and the streets tell that story.

Bangkok, for all its magic, is also a city of ruins. Too obviously there are the omnipresent ruins of a recent political economy in the abandoned, unfinished, eroding office and condominium towers, housing estates and infrastructure projects (the Hopewell project, for instance) – a previous utopia of unregulated economic freedom, with its monuments unable to be completed, and unable to be removed. Equally insistent is the physical decay of a utopia of smaller ambitions, but more widely held, in the ubiquitous rows of four-storeyed shophouses that line Sukhumvit and virtually all its *sois*. While they are endlessly recycled and reused, it seems that each new use is lower than the preceding one – lower profit, lower rent, lower maintenance. There are no signs of the old *khlongs* and the irrigation and drainage channels that gave the city its birth, now buried under the concrete, with just the constant flooding to remind the observer of nature's vengeance and of sinking cities. And of course Bangkok is also a constant display of ruined lives: women here too are commodified, and with the beggars line *thanon* Sukhumvit.



Figure 10: Erawan Shrine as street market...again without contradiction.

But while the fourth reading is antidote to the third – ruins against the vain utopias – nevertheless it does not excuse the designer from the task of redeeming the promise. The point of all this is that the city (Bangkok, but also any city) is to be read in many ways, simultaneously, and without contradiction (though the readings will assuredly reveal contradictions in the reality of the city).

In the light of all this, the concluding question is: To what extent does the lost promise of the older water world of Sukhumvit (still thriving in an already hybridised, water-land world of Nonthaburi) ventriloquate through the lives and expectations of the present observers of Sukhumvit – whether local users, passers-by, or voyeuristic tourists? How does the observer's logic address, dialogically, the present polyphonic (cacophonous) babble, and the memory of an earlier logic or mode of production still half seen, albeit in an always already hybridised form, in places like Nonthaburi? And oppositely, how is Sukhumvit to be read as imminent within the already transforming villages of Nonthaburi? Does the Nonthaburi observer's logic react dialogically not just with the seemingly simple (but already complex and hybridised) spatial logics of Nonthaburi, but also with the recollections of what has been seen in the most urbanised territories of Bangkok itself and which must seem at least a possible prospect for a future Nonthaburi? Is present Sukhumvit also the future of Nonthaburi, in some vast, coming megalopolis?

This last may be the ruin ahead – or, in the eye of the potential and ever hopeful property investor, the promise (despite the always confronting ruin of the abandoned towers on Sukhumvit and elsewhere). But there is another possibility, namely that the observer, seeing the unredeemed promise of Thai culture still poignantly displayed in the water-borne villages, will imagine a different future – that intersection of “mythic dream states” and “mythic new nature” that emerges in Benjamin's ways of seeing the city. And to show what these possible alternative futures can be – alternative spaces of everyday life (and see King, 1996: 247-250) – is the clear task ahead of us as urban designers.

But the key point is that the ‘horizontality’ of Thai space, whether Nonthaburi or Sukhumvit, is not to be comprehended in simple terms of binary opposites (water-land, tradition-modernity) nor of fixed categories. Bangkok, rather, is a city of shifting meanings, where questions must be of a different order from those asked of other cities. It is an important point on which to conclude these notes. The Sukhumvit sex scene – in *soi* Nana, *soi* Cowboy, *soi* 22, and liberally sprinkled along it and into various others of its *sois* – is founded on the display of ambivalence: for example, one does not ask if a person is a boy or a girl, as they might be neither yet both simultaneously. The ‘entertainment’ lies, in the main, in the absence of the question. It is Bakhtin's carnival. Some land possesses no built structures (cleared for the pre-1997 boom or even after its collapse, and now awaiting a new boom that will come but will certainly not be like the last), but much other land has two forms of structures: utilitarian buildings for the present or some preceding economic era, and the spirit houses (King, 2003: 17). One does not ask which is the real world – the material or the spiritual. One does not ask if Bangkok is sacred or profane, for it is both, and neither; and it is the question that would not be real. Ambivalence is its reality. In Nonthaburi, likewise, one does not ask if this is a water world or a land world, for yet again ambivalence is its essence, as one does not ask if it is sacred or profane, or antique or modern. Ambivalence, it seems, is of the very essence of the city, and its embrace must inevitably constitute the task of its design.

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