

Cars and Carts: Marketing, Circulation, and Fluidity in Bangkok's Central Business District¹

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Abstract

Bangkok began as a shop and boomed as an international market. As a consequence, a variety of trading, storing, and retailing techniques shaped both historical and contemporary Bangkok's social and urban landscape. This article analyzed Skytrain cars and street-vendors carts as central vessels of opposing and competing retail structures, forms of circulation, and relations between goods, people, and the city itself. The article explores how, in their movement across and around the city, they reshape social and physical spaces and offer a way to rethink perceptions of the urban landscape and modernity in Bangkok.

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Introduction

A buzzing sound knocks at the side of my head. I open my eyes. The alarm is vibrating on the floor, a mechanical call to run for work, 6:30, just in time. Still asleep, I slide in and out of the shower, put on my clothes, and leave the room. Walk down the corridor, make a right, three flights of stairs, pass the laundry machine, another right. Take out the card, scan it, nod to the security guard. I'm out. The city teems with life in front of me, intent in her own activities. I walk down the street, drops forming on my forehead. I can't wait to reach the Skytrain and its air conditioning. I leave the *Khao Na Ped* shop behind me and take a left at the *Isaan* corner shop. 6:52. Walking down the small alley, I dodge motor-taxis; a woman in a suit, riding one of them with her legs on one side, smiles at me, disappearing on my right. I pass Pi Job and her delicious *Ba Mii* while glimpsing silent movements behind unknown windows. The smoky soup in her stall makes the alley smell of home. I still have time. *Ba Mii* today. I sit at a table a few meters away from the cart and order distractedly while I observe the expert hands of Taa, Job's sister, dipping into a bowl full of spiced meat, wrapping dumplings three tables away, a few steps from the 7-Eleven. I eat calmly, washing down my breakfast with coconut aromatized water. On my left, street-vendors emerge from their homes pushing ingenious carts. In silence, I leave 20 *baht* on the cart's serving space, to the left of Job, who is soaking greens in the boiling soup while a bowl is waiting to be picked up by a client on her other side. Going to Aree station I pick up a small bag of green mango with sugar and chili from an itinerant vendor, then I run up the stairs to the Skytrain platform, jumping the steps, two by two. While I wait for the train, with a multitude of sleepy workers directed downtown, I notice a new ultra-modern gym in front of me on the fourth floor of the Starbuck's building. Through the window I see an older man riding an immobile bike. Soon all I can see is my face reflected on the Skytrain car's window. I get in and the cold air slaps me, crawling up my spine. I sit still and enjoy the sensation. In front of me an LCD screen is broadcasting a perfume advertisement. I try to stare at the screen not to meet the gaze of the person sitting in front of me, but I

notice an older woman looking at me as she pretends to read the newspaper. Outside the window, the city flows like a post-card, a silent yet chaotic landscape that the train cuts like a cartographer's knife. Seen from up here, Bangkok seems a moving map, a distant reality. The train brings us across the city, over and the Royal Sports Club. I get off at Chitlom and walk back down the skywalk, try to hold my breath until Central World, ready to be welcomed again by air conditioning. I go straight in on the fifth floor, walk to the elevator, bright goods and price tags around me but no people walking through. The department store is still closed. I can hear the sound of my steps, and those of many others, echoing down the corridor. I walk pass the furniture store, turn right, take the elevator, turn left and right again. I'm in front of the bookstore. Breathe in, breathe out. Stare at my hand opening the door. I say hello to Pi Pla, I pin the name-tag on my chest:

Asia Book Store
Dood
Selling Assistant

Another day of work, another stream of people passing through, questions, scanning, a coffee break upstairs in the food-court, maybe a chance to see Sindy, the cell-phone girl from the fourth floor.

Bangkok began as a shop. Founded on the mouth of the Chao Phraya River as a Chinese trading outpost during the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767), the town of Bangkok preceded the 1782 foundation of Krung Thep, the new capital of Siam under the Chakri Dynasty. Mistakenly called Bangkok by foreign traders, the new city developed around national, regional, and transnational trade. As a consequence, a variety of trading, storing, and retailing techniques shaped Bangkok's urbanism, both in the past and in contemporary times.³ Focusing our attention on the vessels that allow the circulation of goods and people in Bangkok seems, therefore, a viable way into a historical, social, and spatial analysis of the city.

³ Peeradorn Kaewlai, *Modern Trade and Urbanism*, Doctoral Thesis, Design School (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007).

In this paper I compare the street-vendors' cart and the Skytrain car as semiotic objects, condensing and incorporating competing retail structures, forms of circulation, and relations between goods, people, and the city itself. A question seems to arise: why start from two 'mere' objects and not from retail models to speak about competing retail techniques and their effect on people's experience of the city? As Arjun Appadurai proposed, we "have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories."⁴ Analyzing the street-vendors' cart and the Skytrain car as objects, or rather vessels, that carry and reconfigure social relations offers a chance to reflect upon conflicting but coexisting conceptions of the city and mobilities in it. On the other hand, using retail models as a starting point could lead us to understand the co-existence and competition of the vendor's cart and the train car as an instantiation of a Manichean struggle between tradition and modernity. (Figures 1-4) In this approach, often presented in the literature,⁵ street-vendors' retail system comes to represent the endangered tradition, unsuccessfully and ineffectually fighting against the quick march of modernity, represented by the so-called 'modern retail business'. As a consequence, their co-existence has been conceptualized as a transitory phase when 'tracts' of the previous system crawl around the city in their desperate attempt to survive. On the other hand, if we look at street-vendors' carts and Skytrain cars as entry points, a radically different scenario surfaces.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 5.

⁵ Terance G. McGee and Yue-man Yeung, *Hawkers in Southeast Asian cities: planning for the bazaar economy* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1977); Paisarn Tepwongsirirat, "The Vendor and the Street," Doctoral Thesis. Design School, University of Pennsylvania, 2006; Paritta Chalermpong, *Urban life and urban people in transition* (Bangkok: Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation, 1994).

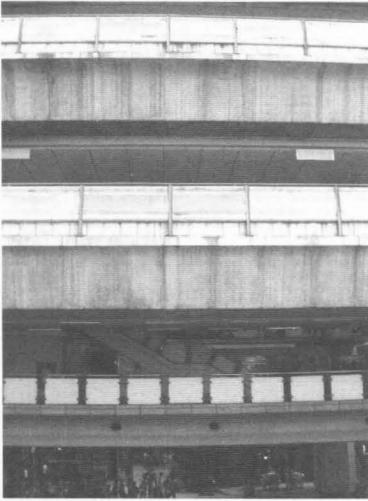


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

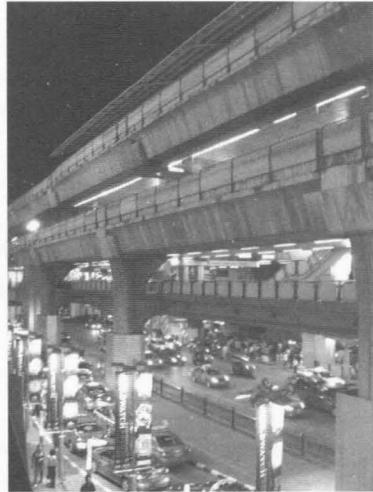


Figure 4

Both of these objects, in fact, proliferated or appeared, in the case of Skytrain cars, after the 1997 financial crisis as answers, and possible solutions, to the socio-economic effects of a crisis triggered by the fluctuation of the *baht*, but caused by a transnational conjuncture of deregulated financial markets, foreign currency loans and reckless speculation. In response to this crisis, almost by definition a product of modern capitalism with its neo-liberal 'open' markets and 'free-floating' capitals, people and institutions came up with equally modern solutions, although based on previous know-how. The number of workers under the category of "hawkers, peddlers, and newsboys" increased between 1997 and 2000 from 310,500 to 390,600,⁶ injecting a large number of carts into the city's circuit, demonstrating the viability of street-vending as a modern retail technique and, in many cases, successfully reinventing it inside widespread franchise structures.⁷ In the same way, the Skytrain project, concluded and inaugurated on December 5th 1999, was revived, both symbolically and materially, around the idea of injecting new blood into the slackened economic circulation of post-1997 Bangkok and providing a fresh start to large-scale retail operators such as Siam Group and MBK.⁸ In allowing retail operators in the area to connect directly to the Skytrain platforms, the Bangkok Municipal Administration (BMA) linked residents' mobility and shopping malls indissolubly, institutionalizing Skytrain cars as vessels of conspicuous consumption. Adopting these units of analysis allows us, therefore, to overtake simplistic dualisms, such as modernity and tradition, and to face our questions without needing to negate the "coevalness"⁹ of the economic forms they partake in.

⁶ *Report of the Labor Force Survey* (Bangkok: National Statistical Office, Office of the Prime Minister, 2000); *Report of the Labor Force Survey* (Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister, 1997).

⁷ Paisarn 39; Narumol Nirathorn, *Fighting Poverty from the Street* (Bangkok International Labour Organization, 2006) 42.

⁸ Peeradorn[0] 127

⁹ Johannes Fabian and Matti Bunzi, *Time and the Others* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

This article is organized in three sections: in the first part I analyze the street-vendor's cart as a material object and as a mobile retail structure, in its internal organization of space, its mobility across the city, and its effect in reshuffling public space around it; the second part focuses on the Skytrain car, reflecting on its structure as well as its elevation from the city and its effects in changing perception of urban landscape, relations with fellow travelers, and directionality of economic fluxes; the third section explores, as a conclusion, the different relationships between bodies, goods, and commodification that the two objects incarnate and focus on the different experiences and conceptions of modernity that they suggest and invoke .

Circulating Commodities, Communicating Carts

In the early Bangkok period, mobile vending took place both in the canals and on land. Vendors sold their goods in fixed locations in the floating market and itinerant vendors moved from house to house carrying their merchandise. Street vending, in the contemporary forms, became more popular after the development of a road system during the reign of King Rama IV and Rama V.¹⁰ As such, this activity proliferate in relation to a capillary network—very much embedded in the Royal discourse of modernization—that not only connected, but also created the city as an experienced entity, bridging different districts and boosting land values in newly created areas, such as Patunwan and Bangrak. As Jane Jacobs has argued, circulation has a central role in the life of cities¹¹ and Bangkok is no exception. In this “circulatory system”, “the mobility patterns of hawkers, their customers, and their goods within urban space make up an important portion of the spatial flows of the cities.”¹² As streets offer the infrastructure for the movements of people and goods around the city, mobile-street vendors’ carts function, today as two centuries ago, as

¹⁰ Narumol 13.

¹¹ Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House Press, 1961).

¹² Terence G. McGee, *The Southeast Asian city; a social geography of the primate cities of Southeast Asia* (New York: Paeger, 1976) 80.

vessels for the capillary distribution of goods across it. Following their trajectories, as de Certeau proposed, reveals specific strategies and tactics of engagement with space, as well as ways of mapping, navigating, and experiencing social space.¹³

Mobile street vendors direct interaction between commodities and consumers toward the latter; vendors mobilize commodities, reaching out for consumers in their house fronts, at their corners, or at the entrance of their alleys. The directionality of the retail system they propose and partake in is centrifugal and tentacular. Commodities become a function of social presence, circulate in relation to it, and condense around specific nodes of human networking, such as street corners and *pak soi* that offer a number of potential customers. On one hand, their presence reshapes and redirects micro-mobility and social space; interstitial spaces, such as those nodes, become not only permeable frontiers of an alley or a neighborhood, but also create their own micro-sociality through the interaction between physical space, economic transactions, commodities, and bodies. As the population of Bangkok experiences every day, the presence of street-vendors transforms a sidewalk into a restaurant, a market, a bar, a shoe shop. On the other hand, agglomerations of street-vendors have a centripetal attraction; they push local dwellers to move from their houses to those nodes. Their presence affects physical and social space, navigating existing social and spatial networks, but also interacting and reconfiguring them. As McGee has argued, “hawkers operate at a micro-level relying upon close relations with the shops and markets near which they are located and the population of the surrounding neighborhoods.”¹⁴ The circulation of carts, with a variety of origins and an almost complete coverage of the cityscape, not only represents a peculiar marketing method,¹⁵ but also fosters, when vendors stop and set up shop for the day, distinct modes of engagement between

¹³ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁴ McGee 76.

¹⁵ By marketing I mean: “the performance of business activities that direct the flows of goods from producer to consumer or user.” In Stuart Plattner, *Economic anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) 222.

goods, vendors, and clients. Those modes of economic, social, and political engagement are embedded into the carts, their design, and their internal organization of space.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

The design of vending carts stems out of an ingenious attempt to maximize manageability, flexibility, efficiency, and space. Usually relying on limited resources for setting up a business, designing a cart is a creative activity based on available and mostly inexpensive material. Used advertising boards (Figures 8, 9, 11), converted private means of transportation (Figure 6), recycled bicycle tires (Figure 7), are common construction elements. Often personalized and opened to a wide degree of variations, carts are the products of a continuous process of negotiation and testing, improved through years of usage. For this reason, any description of their design can only suggest

certain common features and is intrinsically open to an endless number of disclaimers and exceptions. Generally, vending carts tend to share an attempt to ‘interact’ or blend in with their surroundings. Communication and openness, maximization of opportunity for interactions between vendors, commodities, and clients, as well as display, are central features of these carts, regardless of their variations (Figures 5-12).



Figure 9



Figure 10

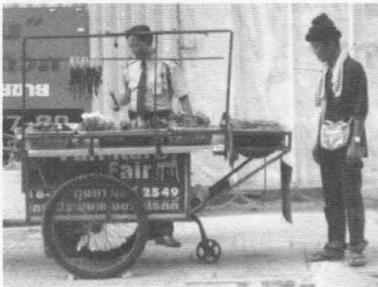


Figure 11



Figure 12

In all of these different forms, increasing opportunities for communication is central for street-vendors’ success and determinant for the carts’ design. Not only appearance (e.g. cleanliness, efficiency, number of customers) but also ‘hearing’ (e.g. calling out to customers to try their goods), sight (e.g. seeing the merchandise), smell (e.g. smelling what the vendor has prepared), taste (e.g. free samples), and

touch (e.g. testing the condition of fruit),¹⁶ have an important role in their economic success. Moreover, other messages, such as signs presenting the commodities sold, awards received, or a spatial disposition of goods, are central to effectiveness, or the “felicity”¹⁷ of vendors’ communicative acts. The internal organization of space in vendors’ carts both reflects (being as we saw the outcome of the feedback process between technical ability, experience on the ground, and use) and fosters (directing and consolidating social and physical spaces around them) these specific social, economic, and spatial interactions through three different kinds of internal spaces: storage space, service space, and display space.¹⁸

Storage space is usually away from customers’ sight. Hidden under the display table (Figures 5-12), on the street between two parked cars, or behind the cart, storage space tends to be the more negotiable and problematic part of a cart. In order to guarantee a high degree of mobility, central for reaching more areas and for disappearing fast in case of a police raid or any other problem, storage becomes an issue and varies widely depending on the specific merchandise. If carrying around pineapples under the cart is fairly simple, moving heavy loads, such as books, or fragile goods, as flowers, needs alternative solutions. In these cases, either carts change their design in order to turn into storage during the night or street-vendors negotiate their storage space with stable vendors and shops in exchange for a small fee or through established relations with local shopkeepers and dwellers.

Service space is the vendor’s working area. This is the ‘private’ space of the vendor and, even if sometime shared with customers, it

¹⁶ Paisarn 241.

¹⁷ The concept of “felicity” was first presented by John Austin in his most influential work, *How to do Things with Words*, an outcome of his William James Lecture. In this book, Austin explores speech acts in their ability to be performative and have an effect on reality. In this sense the concept of “felicity” came to represent for him the successfulness of those speech acts in “doing things” that go beyond the speech event. (John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).)

¹⁸ Paisarn 101.

tends to be separated either by a glass structure (Figure 9) or by the objects' disposition on the cart (Figure 8). In order to have the most space available for displaying, service space is often opposite to the main flows of customers. Some vendors, however, set up their carts to serve the greatest possible surface to the point of getting almost trapped inside their carts during their working hours, surrounded by their own carts.

Displaying space is absolutely central to foster communication around the cart. As noted above, communication is of primary importance for street-vendors and, therefore, prioritized by arranging the other two spaces so as to maximize the laying out of merchandise and make it more attractive to customers. The capacity of the display area to reach out is, in fact, symptomatic of the vendors' ability to reach out for customers, bringing the commodities directly to them. Display space, often in the form of a board, can be folded, removed, or become storage and service space when the cart is moving or during the preparation of goods before setting up somewhere else.

In conclusion, the internal space of these carts needs to be highly negotiable and flexible, two central features of their design, as well as of the retail system that the cart embodies and of the social interactions street-vendors create with their presence. This system, being customer-oriented in its conceptualization, social fabric, as much as in its trajectories, finds in the cart, its forms, and its uses not only a perfect vessel, but also an embodiment of its peculiar marketing strategy.

Centralizing Goods, Isolating Customers

The Skytrain opened for public use on December 5th 1999, on the occasion of HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 72nd birthday. Designed and realized by the Ital-Thai Development on the model of Vancouver's Skytrain, operated by Bangkok Mass Transit System Public Company (BTSC), Bangkok's Skytrain consists of a 55 kilometres elevated railway system. Behind the Skytrain realization was an attempt to revitalize circulation with a specific trajectory in

mind, a trajectory radically opposed to the one travelled by vendors' carts. The Skytrain pumped labour and consuming force from residential areas on the outskirts of Bangkok into a post-crisis stagnant Central Business District (CBD).¹⁹ Centralizing in nature, the Skytrain cars move people, workers, and consumers from their homes to downtown, concentrating commodities in a few massively equipped spots. Where vendors' carts turn every space into a market-place, Skytrain cars condense and consolidate specific established market-places, destabilizing the center of gravity from local markets to the CBD.

It is not by chance that the Skytrain was designed, both spatially and conceptually, in close relation to shopping malls and mega-store chains and, in fact, as Kaewlai stated, "the opening of the BTS Skytrain as an alternate form of transportation in Bangkok provided a new beginning for modern [*sic*] retail operators the Skytrain was opened to all retail operators to connect directly to Skytrain platform."²⁰ Inverting a longstanding phenomenon by which retail conglomerates develop around existing communication arteries, the location of Bangkok's Skytrain followed and mapped existing shopping malls, to the point that many of the BTS stations are located in close proximity to, if not exactly in front, a department store. Besides the peculiar primacy of shopping malls in Bangkok, the relation between rail-based transportation and shopping malls is not new and in fact dates back to the birth of the department store in nineteenth century France.²¹ While Haussmann was reshaping traffic circulation in Paris, a similar reshaping in commodities circulation was taking place: the first department store, Bon Marché, opened in Paris in 1852. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch argued:

¹⁹ Bengtsson Magnus, "The Bangkok Skytrain," Master Thesis, UMEÅ University, 2006.

²⁰ Peeradom 127.

²¹ William Lancaster, *The department store: a social history* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1995); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

The simultaneity was not coincidental: the department store, as a new form of retail merchandising, was predicated on the well-developed intra-urban traffic system. As Haussmann's traffic arteries were connected to the rail network by means of the railway stations, and thus to all traffic in its entirety, the new department stores, in turn, were connected to the new intra-urban arteries and their traffic... that supplied them with goods and customers.²²

Two centuries and a half later, on the other side of the world, shopping malls and rail-based transportation still develop hand in hand. Every day, Bangkok's Skytrain, with its apparently fluid and continuous circulation, refurbishes shopping malls with a fresh stock of customers, regurgitated directly from the cars into glimmering corridors stuffed with merchandise. However, centripetal condensation of commodities and economic transactions is not the only characteristic that connects Skytrain cars and shopping malls. As street-vendors' carts embody a marketing system based on inter-personal interactions, repeated communication, and customer-oriented trajectories, the design of Skytrain cars responds to and produces a marketing system based on anonymity, serialization, and commodities-oriented circulation.

Skytrain cars are designed to offer a standardized, repeatable, and predictable experience, to circulate according to an established schedule—at least theoretically—and to offer an interstitial space, a space theoretically restricted to its primary function: transport. The significance of the Skytrain, however, extends beyond the decongestion of traffic.

As Neil Smith argued, “[t]he production of space also implies the production of meanings, concepts, and consciousness of space which are inseparably linked to its physical production.”²³ An analysis of Skytrain car design could, therefore, help us reflect upon those meanings, concepts, and perception of space. Organized around a

²² Schivelbusch 188.

²³ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development* (New York: Blackwell, 1984) 77.

sliding door, the interstitial space between the air-conditioned, clean, and impersonal interior and the hot, chaotic, and buzzing external landscape, the car design creates nuclear spaces of ‘public privacy’ through the disposition of chairs juxtaposed and facing each other (Figures 17-18). Passenger’s bodies are directed to an imagined and empty center of the car, often crowded with handles. Basic rules of social engagement, such as not showing your back to people around you, greeting when entering an already established social environment or not standing higher than people sitting around you, are broken down and the gaze is left to wander. The stranger’s face, framed into the car’s windows, melts into Bangkok’s flowing landscape. All of us have experienced the discomfort and difficulties of avoiding or ducking other gazes when traveling on mass transportation systems. The gaze, in these spaces, becomes dangerous, a source of discomfort. Breaking out from the landscape view, a staring face calls for an inappropriate and problematic acknowledgement of the fellow passengers’ humanity and otherness²⁴ and provide a glimpse to a crack into the cars’ design and social imagination as a functional place for transportation.

In the scheduled, isolated, and socially engineered space of a train’s car not only do fellow passengers turn into landscape, but also the urban landscape itself loses its intensity. As Schivelbusch argued, “the speed and mathematical directedness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroys the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space.”²⁵ Urban landscape, normally experienced on the ground and navigated through “routes that [one] can trace by imagining the flow of adjoining objects on particular pathways”²⁶ becomes *geographical space*.²⁷ Geographical space, as Ewing Straus argued, “is closed, and is therefore in its entire structure

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

²⁵ Schivelbusch 53.

²⁶ Neferti Tadiar, “New Metropolitan Forms,” *Polygraph*, Vol. 8 (1996): 289.

²⁷ Erwing Straus, *The Primary World of the Senses* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

transparent. Every place in such a space is determined by its position with respect to the whole and ultimately by its relation to the null point of the coordinate system by which this space obtains its order.”²⁸ Space, as seen from the car’s windows, is re-organized and experienced in cartographic terms rather than as a succession of landmarks (Figures 19, 20). In this sense, the Skytrain’s elevation (Figures 13-16) plays a central role in developing a new perception of the city. Strongly influenced by modernist aesthetics and its obsession with functionally distinct spaces, the Skytrain carries an ideology of stratification and isolation that separates the travelers in the comfortable and air-conditioned Skytrain cars from the ‘urban excess’ of the metropolis. Seen from the car’s window, Bangkok’s cityscape starts blurring and become an “aerial sight-space deprived of detail and content and reduced to abstract texture from which one can extract a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure,”²⁹ the pleasure of distance, enclosure, and elevation available to Thai middle class travelers for a price higher than that charged for other means of mass transportation in Bangkok.

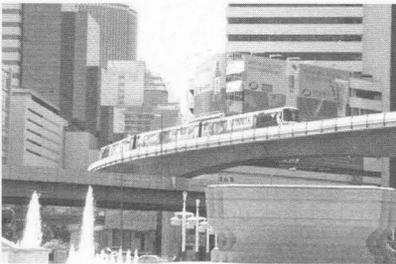


Figure 13



Figure 14

²⁸ Straus 320.

²⁹ Tadiar 292.

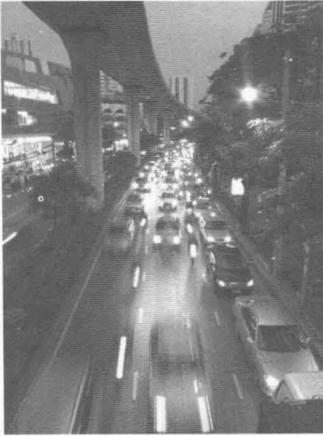


Figure 15

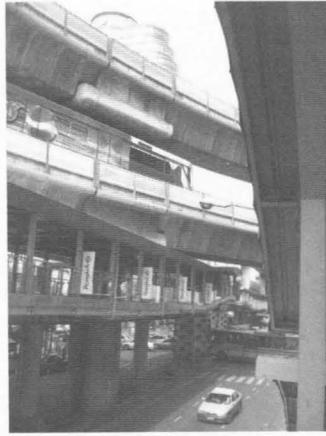


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

In this sense, the Skytrain's cars "[disrupt] the travelers' relationships to each other as it disrupted their relationship to the traversed landscape,"³⁰ transforming them into nothing more than consumers ready to be unload, as a parcel, into the department store's arms and engage in conspicuous consumption with the same feeling of isolation and silence, protected in a perennially air-conditioned bubble.³¹ As Smith argued, in the shopping mall "capital achieves [...] the production of space in its own image."³² Economic transactions in department stores occur without any necessity of long-standing and reiterated social relationships. These relationships, as Ara Wilson showed,³³ develop in the midst of a shopping mall, but they are not, as in the case of street vending, essential for the 'felicity' of economic exchange between shops and clients. Where street vending 'dialogues' with surroundings and with customers, "the department store put an end to this sales conversation, as travel by rail put an end to the verbal exchange among travelers. The latter were replaced by travel reading; the former by a mute price tag."³⁴ The sound of vendors-costumer interaction is taken over by the silence of the shopping mall and the Skytrain cars, filled by music prompted into an amplification system to shut this silence.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that street vendors' carts and Skytrain cars embody and constitute two coeval, yet competing retail systems, trajectories of circulation, and relations to urban landscape. In other words, they are essential for two different kinds of 'market channels', which Philip Kotler defined as "a set of all the firms and

³⁰ Schivelbusch 67.

³¹ As Schivelbusch reported, "Thus the rails, cuttings, and the tunnels appeared as the barrel through which the projectile of the train passes. The traveler who sat inside the projectile ceased to be a traveler and become, as noted in the popular metaphor of the century, a mere parcel." Schivelbusch 168.

³² Smith xiii.

³³ Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

³⁴ Schivelbusch 189.

individuals that cooperate to produce, distribute, and consume the particular good or service of a particular producer.”³⁵ Those channels have specific structures, tactics, and strategies adopted by the subjects that navigate them. In his analysis of marketing channels, Stuart Plattner differentiates between passive and aggressive marketing strategies.³⁶ While in passive marketing channel sellers “sit back and wait for customers” in aggressive channels “traders engage in active marketing and promote channel coordination.”³⁷ As Plattner argues, “hawkers that [sic] move from city ward to city ward in search of customers practice active marketing ... also large retail outlets practice it.”³⁸ In this sense, both street-vendors and Skytrain-department stores are examples of a form of retail, distinct from passive marketing strategies represented in Bangkok’s economic landscape by shop-houses and corner-shops, based on aggressive marketing and typical of contemporary economies. Their difference, however, is signaled by the distinct directionalities of their trajectories; while vendors actively reach customers with their itinerant goods, the Skytrain transports customer directly into commodities’ agglomerates, such as department stores. Centrifugal and tentacular in the case of mobile street vendors, centripetal and axial in the case of the Skytrain-shopping mall conjuncture, their circulation is opposed not only in the relations they constitute between landscape, goods, and bodies, but also in their centers of gravity. Besides their differences, however, they both partake in active forms of circulation that are characteristic of contemporary and more aggressive capitalist economies, oriented toward products’ availability, conspicuous consumption and mass consumerism. As Plattner argues, “this typology is more than a classification. There is also a dynamic element involved, for it also reflects a progression in channel evolution as an economy expands and matures.”³⁹ In other words, these two retail systems, as

³⁵ Philip Kotler, *Marketing management: analysis, planning, and control* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1984) 47.

³⁶ Plattner.

³⁷ Plattner 232-233.

³⁸ Plattner 233.

³⁹ Plattner.

instantiations of aggressive marketing, both present a reaction to modern capitalism and incorporate different and, sometimes opposite, conceptions of 'the modern'.

The two forms of spatial, social, and economic fluidity that they embody, sustain, and propose are emblematic of their different conceptions and discursive depictions of modernity. The building of the Skytrain was predicated upon a desire for smoother and continuous flows, efficiency, and predictability entangled with conspicuous consumption. The realization of the Skytrain, with its desire for unhampered flows (and the idea of progress that it implied) resonated with neoliberal discourses and provided "a relatively exclusive suspended network which allows the ghettoized, privileged, metropolitan subject to 'breathe,' granting them, in the language of capital, (upward) 'mobility'." ⁴⁰ The mobility that the elevated railroad proposes and attempts to offer is the fast, regular, and free-flowing circulation that Appadurai's -scapes prophesized,⁴¹ and seemed to be found in the fluidity of financial markets and information flows. However, as often happens in our disciplines, the social scientist's thesis tells us more about the author's ideology and desires than about the social contexts he analyzes. In this sense, Appadurai's celebratory tones and faith in friction-less mobility were no exception, as the present international economic crisis, as well as the myriads of fairly successful attempts by authoritarian powers to control and constrain information flows, is unquestionably demonstrating. His theories had to be tempered by a number of scholars who focused on the lumpiness and friction of social, political, and economic circulation as central features of

⁴⁰ Tadiar 297.

⁴¹ In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Appadurai speaks about five -scapes defining the social imaginary in a transnational world: 1) ethnoscaples; 2) mediascaples; 3) technoscaples; 4) finanscaples; 5) ideoscaples. These -scapes, in his view, defined the fields in which global flows happen. (Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).)

modern capitalism.⁴² Those scholars, in a varieties of ways and contexts, spoke of experiences of ‘being stuck’ and blocked in the fold of modernity, of a form of intermittent fluidity, characteristic of modern capitalism and its expectations—fulfilled and unfulfilled—that the street-vendors experience in their urban landscape’s navigation. The carts’ mobility, in this sense, is the perfect icon of this ‘lumpy modernity’. Based on a stop-and-go mobility that constantly experiences static phases, lumpy movements, rapid transits, and sudden disappearances, their fluidity, in other words, is less consonant with the emphatic tones of modernity, but more resonant with contemporary capitalist fluxes as experienced on the ground by the majority of world’s population: a hampered fluidity characteristic of modernity as much as its unhampered and idealized twin.

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⁴² James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity* (University of California Press, 1999); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Anna L. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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