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The Dynamics of Working Class Cultural Practice: 
An Ethnography of Media Activities in Women Textile Workers

Ubonrat Siriyuvasak

1. Introduction

In order to come to grips with how the audience and the notion of ideology are related in the complex process of transformation and formation in the economic and cultural spheres, we need both a critical perspective and a total approach. This exploratory study is therefore, grounded on the conceptualisation that the public and domestic spheres, work and leisure, are inseparably interwoven. They are necessarily parts of the same whole. Unlike most ethnographies of audiences, I want to argue that the audience are at once consumers and producers of various forms of representation. They are neither the passive audience entirely submissive to the manipulation of the prevailing ‘dominant ideology’ as theorists of the mass culture suggested (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973, Marcuse, 1964) nor the active actors whose culture is an ‘autonomous’ enclave as viewed by culturalists and sub-culturalists (Hall, 1977, 1981, Hebdige, 1979, for example). On the contrary, the consumption and production of culture in the symbolic sphere is dialectically connected to
the discursive formation in the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1977). The audience, on the one hand, is capable of negotiating the popular forms of representation to maximise pleasure. On the other hand, they can create or commandeer their cultural practices for struggle in the economic sphere. This opens the way for audience contestation in the ideological field. However, situated within the structure of social relations which is both constraining and enabling the dynamics of audience media activities are complex and multi-facet. In this vein, the conventional approaches to audience studies that tend to treat leisure and work as mutually exclusive are questioned. My inquiry thus, focuses primarily on how pleasure maximisation and discursive formation of the audience are articulated, and how inconsistencies and contradictions coexist in their media activities.

This exploratory study of a small group of women textile workers takes the foregoing argument as its starting point. It is based on a total contextualisation of the audience in the public and domestic spheres in which work and leisure are inextricably interwoven. Despite the structural constraint in the factory, the unionisation in 1981 introduced the oppositional discourse of the labour movement into the daily life of the workers which opened the way for an alternative cultural practice. By connecting the workplace with the domestic sphere the spectrum of cultural activities covered by the study is broadened. They include not only the domestic consumption of the mass media, but also leisure and social activities in which popular culture is incorporated or synthesised, and the cultural practices associated with economic struggle in which new forms of expressivity, for pleasure, and solidarity are created.

2. Women Workers and Media Activities in Everyday Life

The field study was carried out between January and April 1986 in conjunction with the Puanying (Friend of Women) feminist group. It employed an anthropological approach that combined group discussion, in depth interview, participant observation and casual conversation. The
sites of the research ranged from the union office (outside the factory compound), the dormitories and the factory, to observations on various festive occasions, and confrontations with the employers.

The respondents are either active members of the union or volunteers recruited by them. The initial group was made up of 9 workers, 7 women and 2 men, aged between 22-32, who had worked at the factory for 2-10 years (see Appendix 1). The interviews and discussions were in groups of three or four. Altogether, 8 sessions of 1-2 hours each were conducted. Six more workers were introduced at a later stage on the recommendation of the first group of respondents. I was informed that these were the 'real fans' of pop culture.

Since there was no way of arranging the listening or viewing of a particular film or programme, most of the data is based on the workers' and researcher's common experience at the moment of study, coupled with a survey of the general media consumption patterns of the workers.

2.1 The changing pattern of media activities

In attempting to understand the dynamics of working class cultural practices, the study focuses on the articulation between the economic constraints and the changing cultural competence, their media activities in particular. From the information provided by the workers and my own observation, the structural control of production (see Appendix 2) and the level of income (see Appendix 3) limited the range and pattern of media activities. The weekly rotation of shift work for example, hinders the regular consumption of certain forms of the media such as radio drama and the prime-time soap operas.

It is via the alternative networks in the domestic sphere that some of the constraints are modified. The workers usually fill one another in on the story-line through talking, as respondent (2) explained;

"...of course, when I miss an episode I must ask my friends how the story goes, when it will end, and all that... I can only watch it in the evening when I work the
night and morning shifts, not in the afternoon shift...
my friends would do the same when they miss the
programme and I'd tell them all about it (highly enthu-
siastic tone)..we always chat about dramas and films,
you know..'"

There is however, one senior spinner who brings her transistor
radio into the factory to listen to the drama when she works the
afternoon shift. It happened after the unionisation in 1981 (see Appendix
4). This exceptional case is condoned by the section supervisor so long as
it does not "interfere with or effect the production".

Another significant constraint is the lack of electricity in the
women dormitories. This is modified in several ways. First of all,
workers buy locally made transistor radios (with AM band only) which
consumes less power, and listening in with one another further reduces
the cost of batteries. This is evident in the room of respondents (1) and
(3) in which only a single set is usually on.

In this milieu, media consumption, particularly of radio and
television, becomes a public activity as respondent (1) Explained,

"...although I don't have a radio I could hear the
prime-time drama from nearly every room as I walk
along the corridor...some take their sets into the bath so
they can bathe and listen, and chat at the same time..."

This communual pattern of media consumption means that
collective tastes take precedence over personal preference. Although it is
apparently a continuation of the communual pattern of media consump-
tion common among the peasantry, in the factory context the power over
the 'choice' of programme shifts from the family and the village
hierarchy to a comparatively horizontal structure. It is also more gender
based, particularly in the case of television, as respondent (2) described;

"...I used to watch a lot of television when I first came,
all sorts-dramas and films...but not anymore...I am
annoyed with people zapping between channels and then I don't really get to watch what I want...when I try to switch channel others don’t like it...I am tired of fighting over the telly...I don’t like this kind of interruption...I sometimes go to the Union office to watch the weekend shows instead, or go to the cinema...”

Whereas drama is enjoyed largely in silence, music explodes in emotional and physical sensuality. The constrictive pattern apparent in the consumption of ‘women’s genres’ takes on a comparatively diversified direction in pop music. It is a public activity in which personal tastes compete against one another. On Sunday, several radios or cassettes are usually on at the same time, ‘blasting away’ music from a variety of programmes or vocalists. The two popular Luktoong stations on the AM band that the workers tune in to most are Sor Tor Ror Radio (The Voice of the Navy) and Por Tor Or Radio (The Army Artillery Radio). By combining listening with chatting and singing, the domestic work of ironing and washing is invested with pleasure.

The availability of a wide range of media in the area aroung the factory thus, compensates for some of the structural constraints inside it. This is in stark contrast to the lack of access in the rural areas. Ownership of a television set in poor peasant families is rare. One third of our respondents did not have access to a television before they came to work in the factory. In addition, beyond the central plains, reception is limited to a maximum of two channels (although this has changed since the study was carried out). In the factory, the workers are able to switch between all four channels to watch the soap operas. Newspapers are another rarity in the village. As one respondent recounted, “what newspapers!..we never see or read one..it usually comes in wrapping if we get it at all..”. Respondent (3) added that, “peasants like us don’t buy newspapers, only the village head or teachers do”.

The provision of television (by the employer) and the newspapers (by the Union), coupled with the independent income and the relief from domestic chores for other members of the family, enable the women
workers to have access to new forms of mass media. But the large majority remain loyal to the ‘women’s genre’ of romance as opposed to the ‘serious genres’ of news and literary reading. Some women workers read the ‘3 for 10 romance’ and the women’s magazines such as Kulasatri or Chiwit Rak. But as one pop fan respondent informed me, this pattern is well established prior to entering the factory, and extends to the few who have a higher level of education.

As noted earlier, the trade union’s efforts to introduce new cultural competence into the workers’ discursive formation are continually blocked by the fact that the women prefer to read the entertainment and the front page of Thai Rath, the popular newspapers, which contain news of the stars and programmes of popular culture and juicy news reports of crimes. By contrast, they consider the quality newspapers, Matichon, as ‘too intellectual’ since they are unable to match their cultural competence to its vernacular. The only kind of news the workers’ tune in to are the popular news commentary programmes such as Soon Ruam Kao, Ying Thai Kai Kao, or Kao Si Mum Baan on the grounds that they are “entertaining, not so boring like the official news”.

All the evidence we were able to gather suggests that the serious genres are largely ignored. Although two respondents indicated that they listen to Phra Payom’s cassette sermons (in a comedy style), nobody tuned in to either Siam Manusati or Pua Pandin Thai, produced by the military. Male workers are more inclined to read literate newspapers and magazines, but pornography and war magazines are also highly popular in the male dormitory. They are also keen on the entertainment programmes on the broadcast media. Their preference is for the ‘male genres’ including sports (boxing) and action-adventure dramas, together with variety show, concerts, and comedy.

The general preference for the oral and visual media over the literate media, coincides with the workers’ educational disposition as well as with the centrality of the ‘oral tradition’ of the peasantry. The significant change is the incorporation of ‘modern style’ of television.
drama and music into the consumption pattern. But talking remains the main means through which the workers exchange information, at work and in the domestic sphere. Oppositional discourse mediated largely by the Union continues to be diffused orally. This is reinforced by the fact that the alternative networks operate almost exclusively on word-of-mouth.

2.2 Division and cross-over in the production of meanings

Whilst the one-way representations of the dominant ideology in forms such as the official news, the military commentary and the religious sermon are simply ignored, within the forms they do consume the workers devise mechanisms that allow for the maximisation of pleasure and the variation of meanings or the multiaccentuality of interpretations (Volosinov, 1973). This is possible by traversing between emotional immersion and critical distance and between the world of fiction and reality. Or by the process of 'aberrant decoding' (Econ, 1981) in which the 'preferred meaning' offered by the text is challenged. The transmission of ideology is thus in collision with the notion of pleasure inherent in popular culture.

Most of the pop entertainment fans for example, prefer 'happy ending' stories and generally identify with the heroes and the heroines. As one respondent pointed out, "a tragic ending is too depressing although we must face it sometime". Another respondent said she rarely sided with the 'bad guys' in the dramas or the films. In the radio drama Kamsang Sawan for example, the political theme is subsumed under the love story. Our respondent is intensely immersed in the relationship between the Princess and the hero. Whilst she described in some detail the misunderstanding between the lovers, the political struggle interwoven into the romance is only mentioned in passing with the comment that, "...they will surely overcome all the obstacles...". But as the following instances illustrate, although the women workers are inclined towards emotional immersion in their production of meanings particularly in romance, they are compelled to confront the question of
the articulation between pleasure and discourse at some points within the cultural products on offer. In the process, the interrelations between the world of texts and the ‘oral information network’ of the workers, establish connections between pleasure and discourse and fiction and reality.

The examples I want to present are taken from discussions with our first group of respondents. In their efforts to present a ‘serious’ image of themselves they tended to devalue romance (in every form of representation) and to nominate ‘artistic’ or politically explicit films for discussion. These include; Nampu (the story of a teenage heroine addict); Tongpun Kokpo (the Thai version of Taxi Driver); and Wiraburut Kongkaya (the story of a poor Border Patrol officer). Discussion of the film Mia Tang (a love triangle, also a radio drama), which we attended together, was avoided. Instead, the respondents choose to discuss Kamsing in some detail. In the following discussion of Kamsing respondents (1) and (2) related the story to other members of the group who did not attend the film.

Kamsing is a film about a poor peasant who fled his village after he assaulted his creditor. He took up boxing in the capital city of Bangkok but was arrested and imprisoned. The hero’s mother entered a nunery with deep resentment. He went back to the boxing ring after he was released from prison and finally won his championship.

(2) “...Kamsing worked in the kitchen while he was imprisoned..this scene, his top is naked... then he went into the shower, another prisoner came to hug him (giggling and interruption - is he a gay?)..he fought but that man said it made him felt good..the warden came and put Kamsing in solitary confinement...”
(1) "...it's terrible...the police (the warden is collapsed into the same authority figure as the police) hit him in the middle of his back several times...it's not right..."

(2) "They were wrong to fight in the first place."

(1) "They over-did it...they did not even find out the facts...I am sure they framed him."

(2) "I don't think so. Kamsing didn't speak up...even if he did do you think the warden would believe him?"

(1) "But they did not even ask, remember?"

(2) "Yeh, they just hit him."

(1) "His mates saw what happened but they all kept quiet...they just stood watching."

The respondents disagree among themselves as to whether the extra penalty is justified, although both share a deep sympathy with the plight of the hero. Their emotional immersion in the story is extended into reality in two ways. Comments such as "unfair treatment" or "sheer exploitation", made while viewing, are related to the employer/employee relation in their own immediate context. Secondly, although their opinion on the main theme converges with the 'preferred meaning', they add their version of the story to it. This generates pleasure at the same time as the imagined reality is fulfilled. The following discussion is on Kamsing's final championship match.

(2) "I think he was going to die."

(1) "I think he was going to lose. I couldn't guess the ending, honestly. In the trailer he was cornered by the former champion."

(2) "But I want him to win. If he lost the match, he's got nothing left in life. I heard the bloke behind me said Kamsing would win."
(1) "There would be nothing left since he’s already a nobody."

(2) "He wanted to do something. To be famous, to be rich. And he did it for his mother’s sake."

(1) "I think he ought to win. Why should be die? If he lost that match there would be another match. The story would have to go on. He has to win. If he lost the first match he would win the next one. That’s what I think."

(2) "He has to win because he always lost. In real life I think he would win also. He has a strong will. When we are determined to win we’d most probably succeed, don’t you think?"

When we discussed the coup d’etats of 1981 and 1985, opinions on the seriousness of the remembered reality are merged with strong feelings. The workers were clearly divided between radicalism and conservatism, hence, the dichotomies;

the coup        the government
the radicals    the conservatives
change          status quo

At the time, the women respondents had gathered round the radio sets upstairs listening to news from the coup organiser, whilst down stairs, the ‘conservatives’ watched the television announcements from the government of General Prem Tinasulanond. Witnessing the suspense in making and the unveiling of the coup was an intensively pleasurable experience. Our respondent described the atmosphere in the dormitories as "hysterical".

(2) "...we were all very excited, nearly hysterical I’d say..."

(3) "I think we were hoping the coup might win, but when they (the government) took control Sister Tiem said, bloody hell, the coup failed again..."
By contrast, the male workers recalled that they were very quiet in front of the television set. Respondent (5) went home to follow the event. Respondent (6) read the newspapers the next day. During my discussion with them they talked earnestly and adopted a distanced position, whereas the women were totally involved, Their emotional immersion however, did not inhibit the discourse formed through this collective practice.

(6) "I did not take side. I thought how could generals like Kriengsak and Serm do such a thing. I doubt if they were abducted as they claimed. Is it possible? Who would dare anyway?"

(3) "We were on Serm's side (of the coup). But I really don't know why."

(2) "There were three labour leaders involved."

(3) "I think I hate Prem (the PM). Sister Tiem said let Serm be the winner. And then we put our heads together to talk about it."

(2) "The ones who watched the telly were on Prem's side. When Serm was defeated Prem's advocates said the coup was too violent. They said they shouldn't have shot at innocent people."

(1) "I wonder if they are from Korat they seem to be crazy about him."

(3) "Would Arthit (former Commander-in-Chief) make a return?"

(1) "Why can't anyone oust Prem?"

(3) "I think Arthit might succeed. He's got more soldiers."

(1) "Maybe someone changed his mind?"

(2) "You mean betrayal?"
"Yeah."

"Did you ever see it in the movies? When the crunch comes they turn against one another. I think there is some truth in movies. Like in a rebellion or something, the masters would always make the plan and their henchmen work their heads off."

"You don’t have to look very far, just here in our factory. Remember when we were trying to fight the house-keeper? Chuen and Luey were on our side in the beginning but then Luey betrayed us."

"Bloody betrayal!"

"Yeah, Luey had a row with Chuen. Chuen said Luey had changed and sobbed."

"I still think the coup failed too easily. There must be something wrong. They always said they’d help the working-class to get us on their side. Even if they didn’t talk about (stop to find the proper word)...the economy, working-class and things like that I want to see what they’d do if they succeeded. I want to see some change. Otherwise, it’s so static. No change, nothing could be done, it’s bloody stupid!"

In addition to collective confirmation, the articulation of the oppositional discourse with the workers’ discursive formation contributes significantly to the ideological cross-over and the incongruity of pleasure and ideology. As respondent (1) pointed out,

"In the last coup in 1981 I was whole-heartedly on Prem’s side. After we have the union I think I begin to learn more about politics. When I was at home we were really out of touch. We don’t have other sources of information so we believed what the government said on
the radio (referring to the 1973 student revolt and 1976 student massacre)."

Respondent (2) also described herself as "better informed in politics because of the Union and the press".

As these examples show the divisions between the political positions adopted by the workers and their consumption of serious vs popular entertainment are capable of converging or remaining intact. The dynamics of audience activity in the consumption and production of pleasure and ideology guarantee neither mutual exclusion nor synthesis. On the contrary, the cultural habitus is maintained whilst the articulation of new competences is gradually synthesised into a new formation.

3. Symbolic Power: Pleasure and Solidarity in Working Class Cultural Production

The workers' collective practices and the oral tradition central to pleasure seeking in everyday life, are taken a stage further when synthesised with the struggle in the public sphere. The workers express their class identity by disrupting and re-creating popular cultural forms, particularly music and drama. Despite the apparent divergences in the definitions and practices of pleasure in these spheres, the articulation of oppositional discourse after the unionisation in 1981 opened the way for a new cultural synthesis. The following examples contrast the mainstream with the emerging forms of alternative media. They illustrate how the incoherences complement and compete against one another in the formation of a working class culture.

3.1 The juxtaposition of popular forms for entertainment

Through the constant assertion of the male leadership of the Union, Carabao's music was adopted as the official definition of 'progressive' entertainment in opposition to the bulk of hits and love songs. The ex-president, a local resident, was enrolled as a political science student at the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University at the time of
our study. His taste in popular culture and the familiarity with the literate media, reconfirmed the 'intellectual' image of his role. His pop music preference for example, identified him with the Pleng Pua Chiwit of the intellectual and the Left. From the work of Carabao, he chooses the politically explicit songs, **Kon Jon Pu Yingyai** (The Great Poorman) or **Wanipok Panejon** (The Poor Wonderer), over the more humorous or satirical songs on the same albums. These are played on serious occasions such as Union meetings. But the incorporation of this oppositional-intellectual music as part of the attempt to establish an official definition of pleasure is far from straightforward in practice.

From our observations it was clear that the workers expressed their identity and sexual desire through pop music. The most popular hits of love and sex are sung among the women workers and on social occasions. In a mixed milieu, love songs are the currency of sexual dialogue. Since male workers are out numbered they are generally courted by the women. On the trip to the wedding ceremony of respondent (7) for example, the women workers sang a wide range of Luktoong love songs throughout the 7-hour journey. The handful of male workers at the back of the converted lorry were assigned the role of musicians. Their selections were all from the hits of the day. Songs by the Luktoong superstar, Pumpuang, |from the albums Haang Noi, Toi Nid (Budge a Little) and Krasae (Come on, Boy!)| were obsessively repeated. The men attempted to play some tunes from the band Carabao but failed. However, at the reception party on the eve of the wedding, Carabao’s music was played along with other Luktoong songs (on the hi-fi set).

Music making during the Pabha procession to Kalasin on the other hand, juxtaposed Luktoong with Lukkroong songs and the northeastern popular tune of Mohlam. At the start, the host (the elder brother) and hostess (the sister) working in two factories, had their separate plans for entertainment. The sister from Thai Textile brought along a drum and her core singers (respondent 4 included) and a lot of booze for a 10-hour entertainment programme. The brother intended to
present two videos, Tekkoh (a Thai film based on the life of a contemporary Don Juan who has six wives living together) and a Chinese kung-foo film. There was a long argument before a compromise was reached. The first part of the entertainment programme would be music and singing (and dancing along the aisle of the coach). The videos were shown after the break, half way through the journey. Workers seated at the front sang and clapped from time to time to the less physical tunes. The 'fun' was largely concentrated at the back of the coach. The singers attempted to announce their new class identity by singing Carabao's Wanipok Panejon (The Poor Wonderer) and Kon Jon Pu Yingyai (The Great Poorman), but they failed miserably as in our previous illustration. At the temple ground the next evening however, Carabao's music was played on the hi-fi as a prelude to the Luktoong performance. Dancing or ‘ramwong’ on the other hand, mixed the local music (a school band playing indigenous instruments) with Luktoong and Lukkroong music, though the hot dancing music of Pumpuang was excluded.

3.2 Organising pleasure and solidarity in the public sphere

The disjuncture of the 54-day strike in 1981, made the organisation of a new form of representation imperative. How could solidarity in the public sphere be sustained or intensified in this long and arduous struggle? Pop music became the essential medium that conjoined pleasure with the fighting spirit. The repertoire, consisting mainly of current Luktoong hits, provided the common cultural ground which all workers could easily identify with. The entertainment session in the evening was interspersed with updated information about the negotiation and ‘popular rhetorics’ from the leadership and representatives of other trade unions.

Through the assistance of external senior unionists a number of protest songs and Pleng Pua Chiwit were juxtaposed with the pop music. These included; Saksri Kamakorn (Dignity of the Working Class), Su Mai Toi (No Retreat), Pleng Riekrong (Our Demand) and Sam Prasaan
(The Three Coalition). But a new addition specific to the conditions of the strike was created on this occasion. The erotic song, Jud Tien (Light the Candle), was translated into the oppostional discourse.

JUD TIENT (LIGHT THE CANDLE)

We continue to strike for there is no settlement
They said 'fifty baht', we said 'peanuts'
They Said 'we are a big family', quite rightly,
The children starve and stare,
Our bald-headed Papa is coming in his Mercedes
We shall go on, fear not, my friends,
For we shan't retreat without a fair settlement

Although the erotic content of Jud Tien was transformed, its tune continued to provide pleasure whilst being articulated with the new satirical and defiant lyric. This and other protest songs emerged as expressions of collective identity against the structure of control. However, the verse mocking the employer was later withdrawn on his request and workers were told that the insinuation might damage the negotiations.

On the first anniversary of the Union, a Charlie Chaplin sketch was organised. Respondent (2) who acted the part recalled, "the funny looking outfit and the acting that makes everyone laugh". In these early years, the entertainments at various official occasions were mostly based on music and comedy. They coincided largely with the 'male genre' preferred by the male leadership. The turn towards the 'women's genres' was prompted by the new woman president elected in 1984 who assumed a social and cultural role.

The present duality in the leadership of the Union follows the division between male/intellectual and female/social, and parallels the serious vs entertainment dichotomy within media activities. Their counter-positions were clearly visible during our study, but paradoxically, the gender hierarchy in this case was fundamental to the creation of a new cultural synthesis that aligned more with the women’s discourse.
The President, in her youth, grew up around the Likae theatre in which her uncle was the main performer. For a short while, she was married to a Likae actor and was an actress herself. This artistic background, that she had ran away from, was invoked during the disjuncture of the industrial dispute. It became the necessary link in articulating popular form of representation with struggle in the economic sphere.

**Likae** is a form of popular theatre that juxtaposes the arts of singing, music and dancing with dialogue. Like other popular forms, it is entertainment with a critical edge on everyday life and high culture. Its semiotic excess in over-dressing and over-acting for example, is a parody of the socially cultivated. In **Likae** narratives, kings and queens are fools and the subject of mockery (P. Wongtes, 1984). During the military regimes of the 1960s and early 1970s, **Likae** was used as a form of social and political critique and it has become a convention for students and intellectuals to incorporate **Likae** into their opposition discourse (Hiranburana, 1977).

Given this tradition, it is not surprising that **Likae** was chosen as the favoured form of cultural expression at the general meeting of the Thai Union in 1985. The resulting productions are pastiches of everyday modernism since they have to compete against as well as be compatible with mainstream popular entertainment. In the two **Likae** productions that we observed, there was an apparent divergence in the ways in which a variety of popular forms and techniques were synthesised. Although the dual questions of class and gender were addressed they were carefully contextualised for the particular occasion and the specific audience.

The episode from *Khun Chang, Khun Pan*, “Saneh Soifa”, depicts the story of a triangular relationship between Khun Pan’s son, Jamun Wai, and his two wives Srimala and Soifa. The latter used black magic to win the love of her husband. She was prosecuted by the King after she lost in the ‘fire of truth’ ritual. The play was staged as part of the entertainment programme at the 1985 general meeting of the trade union and repeated for the general meeting of a nearby textile union the
following year. Both Khun Chang, Khun Pan and Jantakorop dramatise the double standard of sexual relation in which a sexually active woman is condemned as a whore. The choice coincided with the women workers' preference for romance and the recurrent dramatisation of love and sex in the popular media.

Although the Likae adaptation of Khun Chang, Khun Pan followed the original story-line, the narrative was re-scripted for a working class audience. The major parts were made up of a mixture of Pleng Luktoong and simple dialogue (in place of the Likae verses or the poems from the manuscript). The actors were fully dressed in the glittering Likae costumes but the acting was sometimes perfect and at other times, improvised. The audience enjoyed this traversing between the two planes of acting. They showered the amateur actors with garlands and money in the tradition of popular theatre. In this performance, the play began with a four-verse prelude celebrating the solidarity of the working class and then proceeded with the melodrama of "Saneh Soifa".

In contrast, Jantakorop was a first attempt to synthesise pleasure with the 'popular rhetoric' of the economic struggle. It was produced for the strike workers at Rangsit industrial zone, in April, 1986. The President of Thai Union was concerned to stage a pleasurable performance that was, "not too serious or over imposing because it would be improper for the audience and for us as producer." Yet the play had to be relevant to the strike situation. Interventions from the workers' intellectual allies favouring a realist narrative were rejected. As producer and script-writer, the President placed the central characters firmly in the context of the industrial dispute. In this deconstruction of the original story the actors had to improvise parts of the narrative in relation to the negotiation process.

The performance of Jantakorop juxtaposed Pleng Luktoong with a narrative in the style similar to "Saneh Soifa". Everyday humour and satire were interwoven into the dialogue and counterposed against the Likae costumes and the combination of 'ranad' (the xylophone used
as the main musical instrument for Likae) and the rhythmic percussion of Luktoong.

**JANTAKOROP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original characters</th>
<th>Amended characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Hero</td>
<td>Jantakorop, son of a working-class family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jantakorop, the prince</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Woman</td>
<td>Mora, the heroine, a textile worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mora, creation of the hermit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Father</td>
<td>A worker at Thai Olé factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The king</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Villain</td>
<td>A factory owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bandit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Hermit</td>
<td>Jantakorop’s teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prince’s teacher</td>
<td>Graduate of Law, Thammasat University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**THE STORY OF JANTAKOROP**

**The original**

The King sent Jantakorop to study the arts of kingship with the hermit in the forest. Upon completion, he was given a casket to be opened when he arrived at the palace. Mora emerged when Jantakorop opened it on the journey. They encountered a bandit who demanded Mora. Both men got into a fight but Mora handed the dagger to the bandit. Jantakorop was killed and Mora went off with the bandit. In time, the bandit abandoned Mora for fear of her infidelity. Mora hailed a passing eagle who would give her meat in exchange for her body. She agreed but the eagle turned into the God Indhra. He condemned Mora as a whore and turned her into a monkey.
The amended version

Jantakorop was sent to the hermit because his father was too poor to send him to the university. He missed home so the hermit used his third eye to find out what was happening. The hermit told Jantakorop that his father at the Thai Olé Textile was on strike. Jantakorop left with the casket. Mora emerged and they became man and wife. But Mora fell for the bandit/factory owner. Both men negotiated to settle the dispute. They signed a yearly contract for the possession of Mora. At the factory, Jantakorop found his father in good spirits. He and his comrades were ready to go on striking until a settlement was reached. Meanwhile, Mora refused to leave the factory owner. She denounced him before she returned to Jantakorop. But he disowned Mora. She finally confronted the audience to ask for their conciliation.

In this production, three quarters of the performance concentrated on the courting and love scenes between Jantakorop and Mora and the bandit. Whilst pop music was used as the major currency of the narrative, the producer contrasts their class relation by reversing the vernacular. The former is courted with Lukkroong tunes as opposed to the Luktoong used by the latter. Mora sings Puchai Nai Fan (The Man in My Dream) by the Luktoong superstar Pumpuang Duanjan to say how much she loved the factory owner. The play was however, anchored from the start in the class locations of the peasantry and the workers by its use of love songs that identify with peasants and factory girls.

By synthesising several devices the play's pleasure is maximised. The production of meaning is forever teasing and slipping in Jantakorop. Its multivocality binds romance with realism, fiction with reality, while establishing a direct dialogue with the audience at every twist and turn of the narrative as the following abstract demonstrates.

(B = Bandit, J = Jantakorop, M = Mora, A = Audience)
"What have you got?"

"Nothing. Only my wife."

"I want your money, hurry!"

"What kind of robbery is this, no gun, no weapon?"

(audience laughs)

"Stupid bandit!"

"I've come to scout first."

(the audience supplies him with a weapon, the others cheer)

"Now, there are well wishers who gave me a knife so you'd better hand me your possession."

"I said I have nothing but my wife."

(audience laughs)

"All right, if you say so. I'll take your wife. But not you."

(more laughers)

"I'll sign a contract."

"Go ahead. They are all brainless. They'd sign anything without really understanding it."

(audience shouts with disapproval)

"Yearly contract, this is."

"I don't want her back, actually."

"Is this my husband? How could he do this to me?"

"Well, all right."

(audience laughs)

"Brilliant, in every play my husband always has a mistress. This time I am going to have two husbands."

(audience laughs and applauds)

"Do you think it's all right?"

"Yes."

"Should I?"

"Yes!"

(strong approval)

"They said yes. That means it's OK."

The terms of the 'undesirable yearly contract' are made obvious in this scripted dialogue. The improvisation by the actor, the father,
however, advises the workers to agree to a yearly settlement (the general practice at the time was to bargain for a bi-annual contract, a more stable term of earning). The internal logic of the play therefore contradicts the reality of the situation. But as the President pointed out later,

"...we did not have any rehearsal and our actors were scared...so they got drunk before they went on stage...they wanted to do this improvisation because they think it's important...but she [respondent (2)] really made a blunder, didn’t she?...well, I hope our friends at Arrow Textile won’t mind...they know it’s only a play..."

The continuous code-breaking in this example generates immense pleasure while at the same time openly challenging the unequal sexual relation. However, despite its attempt to celebrate a more liberal image of women the characterisation converges with the conventional gender hierarchy in the division of labour and the general social structure. In the 'popular rhetoric' scene for example, the male characters, Jantakorop and his father, are presented as natural leaders in a similar way to the male workers. In addition, their reference to the struggle is juxtaposed with the conservative symbol of the 'nation'.

(F = Father, J = Jantakorop)

(F) "I need your help since we are on strike."

(J) "Have no fear, Father. Our comrades from Phrapradaeng will be here. We have friends everywhere. We shall win."

(F) "Yes, no matter how long it takes we will go on. We must stand up for our dignity."

(J) "That's right."

(F) "We are Thais but the factory owners are Thai and Japanese."

(J) "Why don’t they sympathise with us?"

(F) "How could they? A lot of Thai employees are on their side."
(J) "We must fight them. We don’t want them to call us dummies."
(audience cheers)
(J) "Right, Dad?"
(F) "Yes, I will unite with all my friends no matter how long it takes. We will fight as long as three months or four months. We shall not be defeated."

The above ‘popular rhetoric’ is directly addressing the audience in a call for unrelenting solidarity within the workers’ community. The synthesis of multi-cultural forms in Jantakorop thus, attempts to entertain as well as persuade and be relevant.

In this manifestation of symbolic power we note two significant implications. Firstly, that the struggle in the public sphere of work is necessarily and simultaneously related to the private-cultural sphere. Secondly, that it contests the exclusion of women and popular culture from the arena of the struggle. The notions of class and gender are the twin themes in this new problem. But although a working class culture based on mainstream popular forms and the realities in the public sphere is in the making, its emergence is not without specific problems some of which are demonstrated here.

4. Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to demonstrate the dynamics of audience media activities in their everyday life. Despite the women workers’ powerlessness in the social and economic hierarchy, their active engagement in media consumption and production challenge the conceptualisation of an ‘inert and passive’ audience who are easily manipulated and deceived. They are capable of negotiating and recreating meanings albeit within their cultural competence and economic and gender locations. It is evident that the women workers prefer the audio-visual media, radio, television and film, to print media which is in line with their tradition of oral culture. Moreover, the ‘women genre’ of romance
continues to be the main media fare over and above news and current affairs or the 'serious genre' which is male oriented.

Radway (1984) and Brown (1987) have argued that women consumption of romances and soap operas is an act of protest against patriarchy and a form of feminine empowerment. Our study directs attention to the latter. Notwithstanding the fact that women workers enter into the world of work which is essentially male-dominated they gain a sense of control over their own lives through feminine relationship in their social and cultural activities - including economic activities. For example, women rejected the mobile banking of the formal economy for their own friendship funds. They are more interested in love and marriage (as testified by the consumption of music and romances) than the institutionalised politics. In a critical situation such as a coup d'état the women response is uniquely feminine (as if it were only a political drama) as opposed to the serious reaction of their male colleagues.

Through feminine empowerment in their everyday activities women workers are able to take control over decisions in the public sphere. The connection between the economic and symbolic power is clearly forged when women workers create their own representation for their female colleagues who are staging a protest. It demonstrates how the incongruity of pleasure and ideology could co-exist without delimiting the plausibility of transformation. Similar inconsistencies also exist within the hierarchical arrangement in the union leadership and the discourses in their everyday life. While the workers comply with their class allies - the intellectuals and the Left - in forming an oppositional discourse, the cultural imposition is rejected. These are the ambiguities in which the media activities of the women workers are embedded with.

The investigation on audience activities suggests two important implications. Firstly, that audiences are not only capable of disrupting the transmission and the imposition of a dominant ideology, but they re-create their own cultural artifacts based on a synthesis of the mainstream popular forms and their situated conditions. The dominant ideology is both challenged and acquiesed to in this complex web of
articulation while a working class culture emerges. Secondly, in rejecting the dominant ideology and creating their own ‘relative autonomous’ cultural field, it confirms that the mass media in general close off the representational forms for the working class. They are structurally excluded from expressing their ideas and needs in the forms that are relevant to their situations.

Without connecting the study of audience media activities with social conditions in the workplace, our views would remain partial if not misleading. Far from producing an ‘autonomous’ sub-culture, or total submission to the ‘dominant ideology’ as many of its promoters have suggested, the workers’ symbolic power is contextualised within the general social structure. The incongruity of ideology and pleasure suggests that we should look more closely at the ways in which the ideological process is disrupted or acquiesed in relation to pleasure maximisation, on the one hand and the discursive formation and cultural competence delimited by the economic constraints on the other. This in turn suggests that we need to rethink the conventional approaches to audience studies that tend to treat leisure and work, pleasure and ideology as mutually exclusive and to explore the plausibility of how discursive formation, pleasure and political action are and can be synthesised.
## Appendix 1

### Dispositions of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ethnic</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Employ @</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Union Membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P*</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Chinese/Thai</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N/E</td>
<td>Laos/Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N/E</td>
<td>Laos/Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>W**</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>engaged</td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N/E</td>
<td>Laos/Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>married</td>
<td>regular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>N/E</td>
<td>Laos/Thai</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>active</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

@ = number of years of employment  

P* = peasant,  

W** = working class

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a) All of the respondents from peasant background, except respondent 3, are middle land-holders who farm by double-cropping and hiring labour for ploughing and harvesting.

b) Single respondents live in the dormitories provided by the employer. Married couples live in rented rooms close to the factory.

c) ‘Core’ union members are represented on the collective bargaining committee or members of the executive committee. ‘Active’ members are section co-ordinators or organisers of union activities.
Appendix 2

The Hierarchy and Gender Division of Textile Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Job description</th>
<th>Pay scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Shift-worker (non-skilled)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1,049</td>
<td>primary (90%)</td>
<td>shop floor</td>
<td>minimum wage plus grading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Section supervisor</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>shop floor supervision</td>
<td>minimum wage plus management evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Shift-supervisor</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>primary</td>
<td>shift supervision</td>
<td>------’------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Day-time worker (semi-skilled, skilled)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>secondary, vocational</td>
<td>servicing production line</td>
<td>minimum wage plus annual wage increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Staff</td>
<td>F/M</td>
<td></td>
<td>vocational</td>
<td>office work</td>
<td>salary commensurate with education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Management</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>vocational university</td>
<td>decision-making personnel management</td>
<td>salary commensurate with ed. bonus &amp; profit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) There is no vertical mobility in the job hierarchy especially between the worker and staff classification. There was a rare exception of promotion, however, when the shift-supervisor who controlled a large number of workers prohibited all of them from joining the strike.

b) Day-time worker designates male workers who work during office hours only. There are a few male shift-workers in the physically demanding jobs. The gender division is primarily between skilled and non-skilled labour in workers and clerical and decision-making in staff. The trajectory of the gender division of labour confirms the general structure of social hierarchy.
### Appendix 3

**Average Monthly Expenditure of Shift-workers 1986**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married Couple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Accommodation</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>500 (9.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Food</td>
<td>750 (31.0%)</td>
<td>750 (30.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Clothes</td>
<td>120 (05.0%)</td>
<td>100 (04.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Friendship fund</td>
<td>600 (24.8%)</td>
<td>400 (16.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Lottery</td>
<td>300 (12.4%)</td>
<td>300 (12.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Entertainment</td>
<td>200 (08.2%)</td>
<td>200-500 (8-20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(cinema, tapes, concert, gambling, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Personal hygiene, cosmetics</td>
<td>150 (06.2%)</td>
<td>150 (06.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Childcare</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Credit purchase</td>
<td>200 (08.2%)</td>
<td>100 (04.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Interests</td>
<td>100 (04.1%)</td>
<td>200 (08.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Other expenditures</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total expenditure</strong></td>
<td>2,420</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range of income</strong></td>
<td>---1,820-3,000---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In Bangkok and its outlying industrial zones, the minimum wage in 1986 is 73 bht/day (approximately £1.80)*
Appendix 4
The Unionisation of the Thai Textile Workers

1957 - The incorporation of the Thai Textile weaving factory in the Klongtan area

1971- - The expansion of Thai Textile into a weaving and spinning factory at Samrong

- The total workforce numbered 556 (320 women)

1975 - The first 'spontaneous' walk-out led by male technicians
- The workers receive a 0.50 baht wage increment

1980 - Approximately 300 women workers protest against the new house-keeper for introducing stringent disciplinary control in the dormitories
- The employer fires the house-keeper after two successive demonstrations

1981 - Approximately 800 workers petition for a fairer contract based on the Labour Law of 1975 but the proposal is rejected
- The '54-day strike' is the first industrial dispute involving legal negotiations
- The workers receive a 150 baht monthly living expense as against the 600 baht asked for
- The system of payment is changed to a combination of wages plus production performance
- The success of the legal negotiation leads to the unionisation of the workers

1985 - The shift-workers demand a higher rate of increment for those with more than 5 years of service
- The negotiations result in a 3-baht increment instead of the proposed 4 baht

* Since unionisation, negotiations take place every other year with the mutual agreement of the union and the employer, despite, the legal stipulation of a yearly contract

** Unionisation is legalised by the Labour Law of 1975 (its first legalisation in 1956 was short-lived) but the majority of industrial workers remain non-unionised. In the textile industry for example, there are 67 unions for a workforce of 567,765 (Termsrisuk, 1985). Among them, 36 unions, with a total membership of 22,165, are active (Patchimwet, 1986).
Bibliography


