A critical analysis of the themes of disability, welfare and community in the Thai documentary series
Kon Kon Kon

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Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

<u>Abstract</u>

The study extracts themes from ten documentary films about disabled poor individuals produced and broadcast in the television documentary series *Kon Kon Kon* in Thailand during 2007-2011. Recurrent themes are those focusing on individual performance and personal characteristics of resourcefulness, patience and positive attitude. These themes are argued here as demonstrating common themes of human interest stories which aim at agency empowerment or at encouraging self-change in order to gain control over structural constraints or predicaments. Such stories of personal triumphs and struggles are a main feature of media in late modernity. Late modernity is a period when human beings gain a central role and individuals are given autonomy to construct identities when those issued by traditional meta-structures such as religion, nation or gender are competing and none can hold exclusive authority any longer. However, human interest media texts represent part of a late modern contradiction: the belief in the rights of self-assertion yet the inefficient address on structural conditions conducive to the actualisation of such rights. The study then provides a commentary to the human interest stories/films about the disabled poor in Thailand. It outlines the physical and ideational conditions that contribute to poverty and social injustice experienced by a large number of people in Thailand and, in turn, to the resourcefulness and resilience of many of poor people with disabilities, such as those featured in the films. The co-evolving structural conditions relating to economic liberalism since the 1960s, the structures and politics of welfare, and socio-cultural ideologies of self-help and individualism are discussed as weaving

positions and relations that the poor with disabilities are situated in. These positions and relations both influence and interact with agency and other intrinsic factors of an individual such as the nature of impairment. Thus a cultural representation of an experience of living with disability should provide an intimation of how intrinsic factors of a person with disability, such as the nature of impairment, aspirations and competence, are to a large degree influenced by and at the same time actively interact with structural forces. The account then can avoid being both overly voluntaristic and fatalistic. The former places insurmountable responsibility on an individual to do well regardless of constraints, while the latter deprives an individual of a capacity to transform or even to be reflexive of any institutionalised social relations. The thesis provides a commentary to the films, hoping to facilitate the viewing of a surface event of a heroic act of a person with disability as neither purely individualistically nor socially determined, but rather as a result of an active interaction between the social structural conditions and agency both in the past and present of her/his life.

Chapter 1: Introduction

David Clapson was found dead last year after his benefits were stopped on the grounds that he wasn't taking the search for work seriously. He had an empty stomach and just £3.44 to his name. Now thousands of other claimants are being left in similarly dire straits by tough new welfare sanctions (*The Guardian,* Sunday 3 August 2014).

News articles reporting a death such as this are highly unlikely to appear in Thai news media as they seek to uncover the truth by attempting to forge direct links to the performance of the state and the collective in general. Thailand has no government welfare provision that people can rely on for everyday survival and moreover the idea of welfare is alien to Thai culture. Cultural expectations and social arrangements (political, economic and ideational structures) function through the belief that ordinary people are psychologically programmed to rely on themselves and that the state does not bear the responsibility to provide basic rights. Welfare is a choice the state makes, not a right people are entitled to. Furthermore, poor people are readily considered lazy and inactive. 'People with hands and feet but who sit idly should be ashamed of themselves' is a statement directed to Ake, a disabled artist drawing caricatures in a Bangkok night market, and is meant approvingly.[1] The proclamation reflects the characteristic social appraisal that recognizes individuals who are committed to self-responsibility, resourcefulness and resilience against all odds. A popular maxim in Thailand is that 'living fishes swim against the tide, dead ones only flow along' which demonstrates a central aspect of Thai culture in the approval of the ability to relentlessly strive to survive hardship and to rise above obstacles. This is not uncommon for human beings, to try to survive and defy

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[1] In the film *Ake the Penguin: A Man Who Draws Life with His Feet.*

unyielding natural conditions; human beings have been challenging the limits placed on them by natural terrain for thousands of years. But in many parts of the world, the recognition of injustice and inequality has long been evident. Many recognise the unjust distribution of resources in relation to the capability to survive, not to mention the conditions that subject some to more hardship than others in the first place, such as physical or mental impairment. There has been an increasing awareness of how structural conditions also affect lives; the state of affairs of a person is not shaped by her/his personal quality of resilience and resolution alone.

In Thailand, however, social thinking rarely features in the public sphere; that is, in popular media, and everyday discussions. The weight is tilted towards how individuals manage to thrive, rather than on how entire social arrangements, both in the past and present, have shaped life chances and peoples' capabilities to challenge them. Many look on, cheer, admire and become inspired by the portrayal of private lives shown on television. However, this reduction of disability and poverty to individual performance and personal characteristics does not reflect the complex reality. The thesis applies strong structuration theory and its concept of the duality and interplay of structure and agency in order to overcome reductionism when accounting for social events such as living with disability and poverty, to recognise the interaction between individuals, their action and social structural conditions.

The *Kon Kon Kon* documentary series is produced by TV Burabha Company. The weekly documentary programme broadcasted its first episode in April 2003 on

Channel 9 (or Modernnine TV). There are eighty-nine subjects of the films[2], twenty-two of which have disabilities. The name of the programme *Kon Kon Kon* literally means 'discovering humanity'. The programme features 'docudramas' or, according to Sutthpong Thammawut, the founder of TV Burabha and the main narrator of the programme, 'documentary about people's life narrated in a form of a fiction…sensational aspects of…life, aspects that tell story of flesh and blood, twisted fates, and poignant conflicts and resolutions' (quoted in Bancha Ondee, 2005, p. 62). The programme and the company have, at the same time, a commitment to quality knowledge production to strengthen Thailand as knowledge-based society. Sutthipong Thammawut says that the programme actually originated from his observation and concern that nowadays people are excessively self-absorbed and quibbling over trivial matters. Thus the programme is aimed to draw to attention the common good and to create a wiser and more compassionate society (Wimalin Kanchanapradit, 2007, p. 45). According to Sutthipong, *Kon Kon Kon* aims to distinguish itself from television programmes that involve only beautiful men and women and that encourage limitless consumption. These programme, although profitable, cannot help people develop wisdom (Bancha Ondee, 2005, p. 95):

> We think there must be some people who have courage to step out and to say that making money is not the only purpose of television programmes... People give tremendous weight on profit-making capacity of a programme, throwing enlightening value of television out of the window. But at the same time this does not necessarily mean we are going to stuff audience with information or we say television programmes have to be serious, entertainment is a must too. But the point is, what kind of entertainment should it be, the one that is not too easy (Sutthipong Thammawut quoted in Bancha Ondee, 2005, p. 90).

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[2] Each film spans over the period of one to several weeks. The number eighty-nine was up to October 2010, the time when the data collection for this thesis commenced.

As Thailand's pioneer in dramatised documentary, with own distinct combination of fact and fiction, of education and entertainment, and with an explicit aim to steer the society into a more informed, active and responsible one, it took Sutthipong Thammawut more than a year to finally get acceptance from a channel to broadcast his documentary. In 2002, Channel 9, the state-owned free-to-air channel was repositioning itself as 'Modernnine TV'. With a new motto 'sangkhom udom panya' (a society equipped with knowledge) , *Kon Kon Kon* was welcome and the first episode 'Thera, the Honest Man' was broadcasted in 2003 (Wimalin Kanchanapradit, 2007, p. 44). Moreover, *Kon Kon Kon* programme has enjoyed financial support from JSL and has become an affiliated company of JSL, which is a media corporate with commitment to the values of 'passion, quality, inspiration and society' (JSL, 2014). This allows *Kon Kon Kon* liberty in the technical and content aspects of the films while JSL, holding more than half of TV Burabha shares, assists in the distribution and marketing (Bancha Ondee, 2005, pp. 48-49; Wimalin Kanchanapradit, 2007, p. 44).

Kon Kon Kon programme, as part of wider social relations, has to negotiate institutional framework like other media producers (cf.Thompson, 1984, p. 135). In 2006, TV Burabha launched another TV documentary programme *Luhm Dum* (Blackhole) and broadcasted it on Modernnine. The programme presented social problems that have been hidden or ignored such as homeless children, credit card debts, motorcycle gangs, elderly sex workers. Nevertheless, the programme was not successful financially. TV Burabha thus in order to better accord with Modernnine

policy, had to change the style and name of the programme and relaunched it as *Jud Plean* (The Changing Point). *Jud Plean*, still presents various social issues but in a lighter tone, 'more fun and comprehensible' (Wimalin Kanchanapradit, 2007, p. 42) and arguably less controversial, addressing instead informative topics such as the source of tap water or the past and present of Tom Yum Kung (a Thai spicy soup). In terms of censorship *Kon Kon Kon* programme was requested by Modernnine TV to cancel the plan to broadcast an episode on transgender individuals (Jira Bunprasop, 2011). Nevertheless, the programme has been running since 2003, together with other programmes from the same company. All of them are the manifestations of TV Burabha's commitment to steer Thailand towards a more knowledgeable society, while negotiating the trend for light entertainment and fierce competition.

Kon Kon Kon programme has received wide recognition. In 2003, the first year of its broadcast, *Kon Kon Kon* was awarded, among many, the Golden Television Award for Best Educational Programme. In 2004, it was recognised by Amnesty Thailand for Outstanding Work on Human Rights before winning Mekkala Award for Best Documentary in the following year and the Best Advocate for Vulnerable Groups in 2009 from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (TV Burabha). A study conducted among 400 *Kon Kon Kon* viewers living in Bangkok found that the average age of viewers was twenty-seven. Most of them were university students and government employees and more than seventy per cent had or were pursuing bachelor degree or higher education (Chomchai Foochai, 2007, p. 2). Although the number of audience was lower than the popular variety show *At Ten* and the game

show *Ching 100 Ching 1,000,000* (Theerarat Duangkamol, 2011), the growing popularity of the programme can be judged by the fact that subjects of the *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries become heroes and are well respected following the broadcast. One of the subjects of Kon Kon Kon documentaries, Pu Yen, received a royal gift from Queen Sirikit as an appreciation of his virtuous life style. The degree of reliability and the popularity of the programme and its subjects have been substantial to the extent that they are representative of virtues. Due to its phenomenal popularity in Thai culture the programme deserves attention, not least because of its influence on the production of knowledge and the reproduction of ideologies that shape the way the public perceive and approach social life.

It can be suggested that a core aim of the programme is to encourage a more understanding and moral society; one with fewer prejudices in which awareness of the richness of human diversity is cultivated in order to foreground universal human values. This is perhaps similar to what Durkheim pointed to in his description of the sacredness of human beings or the cult of 'man' [sic] that emerged in post-traditional societies. This sacredness is inviolable, regardless of circumstances, and human life and dignity are held supreme. Nevertheless, by focusing on the individual agency of social actors, the films can be argued to lose their balance when it comes to portraying the other side of the story through an overemphasis on the essence, or fundamental and universal elements of the human being. The other side of the story concerning the factors that surround and are beyond individuals becomes redundant. This thesis recognises the need to supplement such compelling, empowering and

motivating life stories through discussing, first, the obstacles that such agentive capacities have to be exercised on in the first place in order to survive and 'live to tell'. Second, the thesis seeks to understand the contexts in which individualistic presentation and the limited contextualisation of disability and poverty are produced and received.

This thesis explores ten documentary films from the television series *Kon Kon Kon* about disabled individuals in Thailand. These films are analysed in a systematic fashion beginning, in chapter two, with an attempt to place the films and their treatment of disability within Thailand's social context. This is necessary if the meaning and potentiality of the films is to be genuinely understood. Subsequent chapters, as will be explained in more detail below, deal in turn with: the characteristics of the documentary texts themselves; the conditions of production and audience reception of the texts; and the ways in which social theory can provide resources that can enhance the capabilities of audiences to read the *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries in an informed and critical manner. The thesis asks difficult questions about the nature of the films' representation and contextualisation of disability and poverty and what this implies about the nature of individualism and community in Thai culture. It then supplements their rather one-sided and linear narratives with a perspective enriched by a greater awareness of the powerful social forces which co-configure the life conditions of individuals. The thesis advocates the adoption of this perspective by audiences and suggests a pedagogy directed towards these audiences in order to enable a more effective situating of their readings of individual life stories

within their social context. It is argued that such readings can enrich understanding and the potential for greater social justice.

The argument is underpinned by a combination of different textual, sociological, political-philosophical and social-theoretical approaches. Most original is the bringing together of the textual analysis of the documentary films and the contextualizing socio-political discussions with a third critical dimension. These are the abstract social-theoretical tools provided by critical realism, 'past modernism' (Stones, 1996) and a complex account of structure and agency in the form of the quadripartite cycle of strong structuration (Stones, 2005). I will introduce some aspects of these meta-theoretical tools in each chapter, but the main exposition will be left until the final substantive chapter when the pedagogy for audiences is explained, argued for, and advocated.

Chapter two is a review of the literature addressing the social context relevant to the production, textual form and content, and reception of the *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries. A relatively abstract series of general discussion of documentary film and representation, philosophies of individualism and communitarianism, and welfare ideologies in market societies, is followed by a more substantive, concrete presentation of welfare ideologies and individualism in Thailand. This juxtaposition of abstract discussion and the particularities of the Thai case allow one to perceive the legacy inherited by Thai society which provides the social and ideological context for the representation of *Kon Kon Kon*. The chapter concludes with a return to a more

general, theoretical discussion of issues of disability, with a view to focusing in detail in chapter three, on the ways in which the documentary films represent disability. The interpretations here will be informed by an awareness of the broader social frame provided in the first part of chapter two.

The textual analysis of chapter three extracts themes and versions of reality from ten *Kon Kon Kon* films. Thematic narrative analysis and the analysis of various narrative tools employed in the films are used. The chapter identifies recurrent themes within the film texts themselves, and also the simple, linear versions of reality offered by the film are continually placed in relief against the benchmark of the complex ontology of critical realism. The chapter argues and demonstrates in detail that the films are constructed around themes centring on individual qualities employed in the overcoming of hardships; such as themes tackling self-responsibility, autonomy to change one's life, perseverance, hard-work, self-reliance, resourcefulness, optimism and themes of informal care systems and mutual help within the family and among friends and community. The films about people with disabilities are constructed as moral stories to empower agency. However, the reality they imply is one taken from a simple fairy tale, where the well-being of an individual is not dependent upon structural intervention or reference to traditional and official authorities but rather upon personal determination.

Chapter four tacks back from textual analysis to specific social issues concerning the production and audience reception of these stories. The analysis is

based on two interviews with the Creative Executive and the Executive Producer of the programme. Analysis is also derived from published articles, journals and academic studies of the programme and its producers. The analysis of audience perception is based on thematic analysis of audience comments from thirty-one clips on YouTube about our focus films. The chapter locates factors that account for the popularity of linear representation and of human interest stories. Primarily, attention is given to the heightened form of individualism characteristic of late modernity. The chapter describes the conditions in which social or community-oriented meta identities have been weakened, leaving individuals with autonomy for self-assertion and freedom to try, consume and shop for lifestyles and identities. This occurs despite actual contexts which may inhibit the meaningful activation of assigned freedom: a gap between *de jure* autonomy and *de facto* autonomy. Media, filled with stories of private life, is nevertheless empty of public, collective issues. The second factor is the co-existence of features from both traditional and late modern societies which are reflected in a mixed, contradictory portrayal of people with disability. These are traditional meta-narratives centring on past karma, modern patterns of adjustment and rehabilitation and the late modern themes of rights, equality and individuality.

Chapter five adds social weight to the linear moral stories of *Kon Kon Kon*. The concept of position-practice relations (Cohen, 1989; Stones, 2005) is used to sketch social positions – and practices and relations attached to each of them – that an individual is anchored in. These positions and their attached practices and

relations, in the context of the disabled poor, are demonstrated as being co-configured by past and present forces which are: the social structures of economic liberalism; socio-cultural ideologies; and the structures and politics of welfare. In addition to identifying the institutionalised properties that an individual is thrown into, the concept incorporates the enactment of these institutionalised properties by individual agents. This is how the concept takes into account both structure and agency. The former identifies potentials of an individual and the activation of those potentials while types of impairment and other idiosyncrasies of agents result in indeterminate outcomes. This is a crucial benefit of position-practice relations in order to avoid either structuralist or voluntaristic accounts (the latter is what *Kon Kon Kon* inclines to) in explaining social phenomena. There are two arguments in this chapter. First, in order to improve the conditions of the disabled poor, we need to know more than just what happens at the level of individual enactment – the level of surface event captured by the camera. The ability to trace back to various relevant causal forces and how they are formed out of institutionalized regularities is very important in understanding an experience as disability. In order to transcend moral judgment on individuals, we can understand an event as constituted by the interaction of various entities. Second, having said that, the level of real enactment in the present moment is also crucial. This is because it highlights the role of agents in reproducing institutionalised context and conduct. This is to assign significance to humans, and not only to systems, in contributing to a social practice. This side of the story is, however, preferred by the *Kon Kon Kon* narrative. The narrative thus should

be complemented by the understanding that structures do place a weight on people's

lives.

Chapter 2: Documentary Film, Disability and Social Context: Background Discourses and Debates

2.1   Introduction

The focus of this thesis is the *Kon Kon Kon* television documentaries. These will be analysed as media texts that celebrate a narrative of deprived disabled individuals who overcome hardship in life purportedly all by themselves. This chapter provides background for the understanding of subsequent chapters. The first part discusses the quality of knowledge that documentaries should aspire to achieve as a way to cultivate public critical thinking and how documentaries should be assessed in this respect. We then move on to introduce welfare ideologies and provision in Thailand. These ideational, political and social environments form multiple layers of environments and provide significant resources for the decision and action of actors in adopting a self-reliant and self-sufficient life. Without understanding of these multiple factors and relations, it would be difficult for the audience to cast a net away from praising (or blaming) individuals for their decision and actions. The final section focuses on non-reductionist approaches and discusses disability as an interaction of different mechanisms at various levels. Again, the purpose is to highlight the significance of a comprehensive view of disability.

2.2   Documentary and knowledge claims

2.2.1 The role of media in public critical thinking and the challenge of the documentary genre

The sophistication of the knowledge claims of media texts, including documentary films, has a significant impact on the cultivation of public critical thinking. For a start, this means *an emotional engagement* with the distant others, be it sympathetic understanding, 'the sudden opening up to the Other, the unplanned explosion of non-indifference, the abrupt closing of distance' and 'cast(ting) her/him into the universe of under determination, question and openness' (Bauman, 1995 cited in Stones, 2002a, p. 218). However, this emotional engagement entails taking the standpoint of the Other and having *a critical comprehension of social relations* (Stones, 2002b, p. 357). First, this involves grasping the complex field of possibilities and constraints facing an individual at one particular moment. Particularly, it involves making an informed imagination of obligations and relationships in the past that attribute to the present possibilities and constraints. Second, as a consequence, it involves an awareness and sense of responsibility that an individual has about her/his action that will have effects on circumstances of the distant others (Stones, 1996, 2002a, 2002b). It is insufficient for a text to stop only at expanding public emotional engagement, as for one thing, the result can be only superficial and innocent, 'akin to the "being-aside" of a casual tourist' (Stones, 2002a, p. 222). For democratic deliberations, expanding emotional engagement needs to be guided by the obligation to remind the public of the labyrinthine systemic connections each individual has for

near and distant others, or of the fact that 'their life chances are not only their own responsibility' (p. 229).

The documentary genre is faced with a specific challenge with regards to the goal of enhancing public social awareness. This tension lies between the viewers' expectation for authentic truth and the filmmakers' artistic representation. From the perspective of viewers, documentary is expected to deliver true knowledge of things actually existing in this world, something worth knowing about. Viewers expect not to be tricked and lied to by the documentary; they expect to be told things about the real world, things that are true (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 3). The public expectation of documentary is such that:

> When documentarians deceive us, they are not just deceiving viewers but members of the public who might act upon knowledge gleaned from the film. Documentaries are part of the media that help us understand not only our world but our role in it, that shape us as public actors (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 5).

Despite this, authorial presence and manipulation is not to be underestimated. Documentary is an art form and as such it contains elements of construction from the director; it is the created and subjective articulation of the filmmaker, as is a fiction film (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 18). In fact, documentary is far different from raw footage because it contains arguments. This feature makes it unlikely for documentaries to have a single and unified representation of a subject (Nichols, 1991).

> More often than not, audiences are unaware of the various conventions documentary adopts in constructing their version of reality, of the

tension between being factual and fiction. In fact, documentary should be known more as a movie about real life. And that is precisely the problem; documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose (Aufderheide, 2007, pp. 2, emphasis in original).

Another tension is the incorporation of fiction with facts in time when media are faced with an increasing demand to attract and maintain viewers' attention. This is done through dramatising and entertaining elements and can be evidenced in the growth of reality TV (Holohan, 2012) and the pervasive hybridization of factual forms and fictional elements, even in news coverage (Bondebjerg, 1996; Macdonald, 1998).

2.2.2 Past modern assessment of knowledge claims in media texts

We have discussed the role of media and the challenge the documentary genre faces. The tension between public demand for coherent and objective truth, on the one hand, and the growing necessity to take into account diverse perspectives does not have to give way to rigid modern or defeatist post-modern narratives. The tension can be dealt with using a *past modern* approach. It can provide a guideline of what media texts should aspire to when portraying complex worlds. Likewise, the approach can be used to evaluate media texts for their knowledge claims.

Media texts, with their potential to shape the quality of public awareness, should be assessed in terms of their knowledge claims about 'how the world is'. The ontology of the past modern suggests to authors how to approach the world in a way

that surpasses the complacency of the grand narratives of modernity as well as the defeatism of postmodernism which rejects foundationalism and realism altogether, giving up all hopes to obtain accurate knowledge of the world (Stones, 1996, pp. 2-4). Past modern ontology guides us in avoiding becoming an authoritative expert who claims to know 'all there is to know' and thus underestimates the rich complexity and diversity of the social world. However, with such diversity and plurality of perspectives, we do not have to give up our ability to make comparative judgments and our critical capacity by claiming 'anything goes and in just any old way' (p. 2). Factual or fictional, particularly in the case of documentary films, beyond debates about boundaries between realness and creativity (see Corner, 1996; Kilborn & Izod, 1997), texts should be constructed with commitment to ontological rigour and epistemological caution (Stones, 1996, 2002a, 2002b). The former entails the author's attempt to draw the attention of readers to the complexity of social phenomena, processes or actions which always take place at the junction of individual biography and an array of socio-historical factors. Despite this informed ambition, the context in which an action can be adequately comprehended or 'the networks of relevant relationships' can be vast. Thus authors have to be cautious and acknowledge their limited knowledge and ability as well as the limitations due to the nature of the text form; it would rarely be feasible to focus on a whole range of relevant networks. This calls for authors to be self-reflexive and self-conscious of their inevitable limitations of perspective, and of the text's provisionality and incompleteness (ibid.).

The ontological complexity of the past modern is informed by critical realism and hermeneutics and in particular, the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar is inspired by the philosophical building blocks of *the intrinsic causal power of objects* and *the stratification of reality* (Stones, 1996, pp. 28-31). Each object has its own characteristics, capacities and intrinsic causal powers. The interaction of objects' differentiated intrinsic causal powers produces another object. Thus, no object exists in a vacuum without contact with other objects or other causal power mechanisms. As such the world is an open system where causal chains can be infinitely complex; the final consequence of an action depends on many contingently intervening factors (ibid.). In addition, critical realism is underpinned by the stratification of reality (Stones, 1996, pp. 29-31). The latter suggests three dimensions of ontology: the real mechanism or an object's inherent powers;[5] the actual event; and the empirical event. The latter is often mistakenly regarded by empiricists as the only dimension of reality as they base their study predominantly on regular conjunctions and the observable (ibid.). There is a reality beyond the observed, termed and theorized and a constant conjunction of events is neither necessary nor sufficient for a scientific explanation (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006, p. 283). To apply the building blocks of critical realism to a real life situation is to adopt a non-reductionist perspective, believing that an outcome in a specific context is the result of very complex interplay between mechanisms. A phenomenon is to be understood as taking its shape at different levels, with different mechanisms and contexts or different levels of reality taken into account (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004, p. 350). Disability, for example,

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[5] Or whatever exists, regardless of whether it is an empirical object for us and whether we understand or have concepts for it or not.

cannot be reduced to solely biological mechanisms – observable bodily malfunctions – or to socio-economic or cultural mechanisms. Rather, the interplay between them should be analysed so as to understand disability as a phenomenon (ibid.). The goal of the realist sociologist is to get as close as possible to recreate the particular ways, at particular times and places, that actions are constructed and to come as close as possible to being able to 'tell it like it was' (Stones, 1996, p. 32).

Using a non-reductionist approach to disability necessitates a discussion of hermeneutics or actors' (disabled and non-disabled) understanding and meaning brought to interactions. According to Giddens' structuration theory, the context in which a social action takes places is definable not only in terms of temporal and spatial dimensions but also in terms of people's understandings of what they are doing (Stones, 1996, p. 43). Giddens emphasises three analytical components of agency: *self-reflexivity*, or the ability to monitor and adjust their action to produce the desired effects; *knowledgeability*, or the quality of agents to be relatively knowledgeable about the context they encounter, or in other words, the social norms, meaning and structures that can constrain their actions; and *wants or desires* which will be filtered and negotiated (ibid.). These understandings, emotions and experiences are brought over from one sphere of life to another and thus agents never enter the social situation empty handed and life is 'processual' (p. 49). Agents draw on a wide range of resources, from past to present, in responding to a situation or in deciding to do or not to do something; or according to Stones (1996, p. 35):

> These understandings and emotions are knitted together in all sorts of weird and wonderful patterns, which may quite often include shades, shapes and

combinations that are unique. A reader … will know that there is an idiosyncratic story behind (a final consequent of action).

The implication of hermeneutics to a more sophisticated portrayal of life is to show the awareness of baggage agents carry forward to the present and of how it affects their understanding of a situation and thus their response to it. In other words, it suggests to us that media texts need 'to spread the net further than the event itself' (Stones, 1996, p. 49).

Moreover, texts should acknowledge the intimate relationship between context and hermeneutics; to be precise, the manner in which agents make decisions by drawing on their knowledge of context or structures and in turn the way consequences of their actions help to alter or maintain the context for the next round of actions (Stones, 1996, pp. 47-48), called the structuration of social life. At least, texts should aspire to allude to the way in which 'the world-out-there inhabits and influences the world-in-here' (op.cit., p. 58) or how the difficult world, with its imperfections, produces impossible personal circumstances that problematise an individual's path to goodness (Stones, 2002a, p. 229). There are seven elements that define contexts of relevance of a particular action and interaction (Stones, 1996, pp. 50-54). They can be useful in guiding authors to stretch beyond the present to absent meanings. These are: the worldview and experience of actor; the normative framework; the temporal location; the spatial location; the theme; goal; and plan of the action/interaction.

The assessment of the quality of knowledge claims of texts can be undertaken at two interrelated levels. First is a critical analysis of the *story* or events and characters as they actually happened in real time and space (cf. Stones, 2002b, p. 8). We can foreground story by looking at *plot*, or textual representation, or events visibly and audibly present before viewer (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 76). Foregrounding story is crucial in at least two aspects. First, by analysing it against the past modern ontological benchmark we can identify the extent of contextualisation a story of a media text provides to the relevant social relations and process it portrays (Stones, 1996, 2002a). Second, we can identify the text's substantiation of its own story, thesis and arguments.[6] A media text can use rhetorical, stylistic or formal techniques to conceal or show any insufficient substantiation, gaps or limitations of its knowledge (Stones, 2002b, pp. 361-362). It involves matters, such as the text's selectiveness; its configuration of the chronological order of its selected events within its own narrative order; the textual duration of its treatment of them; its presentation of spatial proximities and orderings; the manner in which it moves between points of view from which the account is given; and the way in which it exhibits and builds up impressions of subjectivity or character (Stones, 2002b, p. 361); the framing of their words; the insinuation of knowledge of where and when; and the painting of diversionary distraction (Stones, 1996, pp. 171-190). The analysis of these narrative diegesis should reveal the ways the author implies an authority for her/his story and controls the story as it is told. Although it is almost inevitable for any author to avoid

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[6] In a thesis, a text implies, what it believes to be, the social causes or processes that have produced events in focus. In an argument, a text makes a case for a certain interest. See chapter three for more detail.

using such tools as narratives can never be totally complete and thus selecting is almost its nature (Chatman, 1978, p. 30), the point is that the more accomplished the performance, the more readers will be distracted from questioning the gaps and limited knowledge of the author (Stones, 1996, pp. 172, 176, 185). *Kon Kon Kon* documentary films are no exception. We will see how the films sacrifice the complexity of social phenomenon such as social exclusion and lack of welfare rights to put forward specific moral theses and didactic arguments which underpin their stories and plots. Such didactic moral values, focusing on an individual's capacity to do well against all odds, have influences on her/his perception of rights and obligations. The next section discusses whether individuals' identities and aspirations have to be subsumed by the conventions of society, regardless of what asymmetrical and unjust social arrangements are, or whether there are alternatives. It addresses the relationship between individual and society and the autonomy that does not sacrifice the 'being-for' others.

2.3   *Individualism and communitarianism*

Individualism and communitarianism are often presented as antitheses. Radical individualism is associated with extreme liberal values such as autonomy, freedom from the yoke of tradition, and the pursuit of self-interest; while communitarian values cluster around conformism, commitment to common goals, the spirit of association and the woes of pluralism (Bellah, 1985; Cladis, 1992; Emirbayer, 2003, p. 274).

Through 'moral individualism', Durkheim demonstrated values associated with both liberalism and communitarianism without committing to radical autonomy or social determinism. He was critical of both ideas of 'a natural self' and 'an artificial social convention', arguing that there is no fundamental gap between the individual and society (Cladis, 1992, pp. 31-53). Human nature is therefore inherently social and individuals bear social sentiments which motivate them to live together and thus social participation is a natural inclination (op.cit., p. 42). Society and its institutions are part of an individual's identity; through the reproduction of cultural norms and beliefs that are instilled in individuals (op.cit., p. 32). In this line of argument, self is informed by common ideals and sentiments. An individual's identity is largely shaped by historical and social influences and impersonal motives of which individual is unaware (op.cit. , pp. 34,52; Emirbayer, 2003, p. 262). After all, it is hardly possible to live a social life filled only with individual consciousness and 'to ask the individual to elude social prejudice is to ask the individual to elude morality and ultimately the self' (Cladis, 1992, p. 41). Rules and proprieties of the group shape our conscious determination to pursue certain 'obligations' and to fulfil certain expectations of others. This significance of society, as the source of individual's 'social being', is demonstrated in Goffman (1967) when patients in mental wards are deprived of means to successfully communicate their deference and demeanour. According to Goffman, a social action has many ceremonial elements and thus meanings or functions. Two are distinct in Goffman's work. First is deference or the component of behaviour that shows appreciation, celebrations and confirmation of an actor's relationship to the recipient. These can be avoidance of violating the recipient's

personal sphere; presentation of regard such as salutations, compliments, or the offering of services (Goffman, 1967, pp. 56-76). The second is demeanour or an element in action which expresses how an actor is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities; in other words, whether or not s/he is socially well trained and sophisticated. It is particularly noticeable in the manner in which one talks, sits, eats, dresses in public (op.cit. , pp. 77-80). Goffman found in his work that mental ward patients were deprived of a good environment which enables them to show proper deference, to act with proper demeanour, and to develop their 'proper' self. With the coercion and constraint of the ward, they lack indulgences to offer to others and there is no freedom of bodily movement to make it possible for them to convey appropriate respect for others. In terms of demeanour, for instance, they are in need of a supply of appropriate clean clothing and eating utensils to practice proper table manners (op.cit. , pp. 92-93). They are placed in the opposite of the good environment necessary for playing a ritual game. One implication of Goffman's study is that, although each individual is responsible for the demeanour image of himself and the deference image of others, this is not a task undertaken in isolation. Rather the possession of self is a product of joint ceremonial labour (op.cit. , p. 85).

> … For a complete man to be expressed, individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left (Goffman, 1967, p. 85).

Returning to Durkheim, alongside the role of social action as a significant source of our being, that of social regulatory force and authority to counter injustice and the free reign of the egoistic pursuit of self interest in order to ensure equality

and harmony in society are emphasised (Cladis, 1992, pp. 45-55; Emirbayer, 2003, p. 261). Despite advocating the necessity of the contours of social life, Durkheim avoided suggesting that individuals disappear in the bosom of collective being. According to Cladis (1992, p. 37) Durkheim rejected communitarian accounts that neglect the freedom and moral value of individuals. He insisted that individuals are not only made *by* but are makers *of* society and, in Cladis's words 'even if we do not stir an entire population, we each in our own way jolt the spheres of our being, our family, community, corporation, and so on' (ibid.). Durkheim demonstrated in *The Division of Labour* (quoted in Emirbayer, 2003, pp. 259-260) that organic solidarity presupposes that each element has movements that are peculiar to itself in order for the whole to be more effective in moving in concert. Thus, in the context of modern industrial societies it is important that although conforming to some common practices, each individual has more room to develop their personality and specific function (ibid.). In *Moral Education* (quoted in Emirbayer, 2003, p. 268), Durkheim argued that morality is not external and in conflict with the autonomy of the actor. Conformity is different from passive resignation as the former requires assenting through an understanding (p. 270). Individual personality can be found in Durkheim's ideas on education. The ideal education in modern democratic pluralistic societies is thus to excite in students 'a desire to add a few lines of their own' and to make a unique contribution to the community (Cladis, 1992, p. 206).

Durkheim's conception of moral individualism can be argued to incorporate elements from both traditions, advocating a harmonious combination of individual

and collective consciousness. Cladis (1992, pp. 198-204) demonstrates how the following three concepts characterise Durkheim's moral individualism: discipline or the deference to authority and commitment to duty; attachment or desirability to collective good and goals; and autonomy or freedom to explore and reform social practices. The author then argues that the two elements that are central to moral individualism are: the existence and appreciation of objectively given reality; and a plurality of social and moral spheres that supports individual autonomy in the development of their uniqueness, critical thought, and potential to reform (op.cit. , pp. 43-57). This explains why education, in order to embrace moral individualism, should take place 'at the juncture of the familiar and the unfamiliar' and teach 'the way of tradition and of criticism' (Cladis, 1992, p. 208). The two are not opposite to each other and 'situated freedom' is used to describe the chief accomplishment of the early Durkheim. It incorporates both (being) 'at home in society' and (being) 'able to transform it' (op.cit. , p. 38). Contrary to modern notions of freedom from all influences, situated freedom means to understand how one has been influenced and to go on to influence others in novel and critical ways (op.cit. , p. 39).

We can apply the concept of moral individualism to the present study. The virtues of people with disabilities in the programme match, to a certain extent, with principle concepts of moral individualism. The subjects of *Kon Kon Kon* stories are honoured due to their commitment to collective goods, which is recognized by their being a good citizen, their honest living and continuous contribution to preserve values and practices of the spheres they belong to. Their great love and appreciation

for community life is represented by their cheerful and positive attitudes in everyday life and their success and skilfulness in demeanour and deference practices. However, their expression of autonomy and critical thought cannot be sufficiently established in the films. The accounts of subjects challenging and placing cultural beliefs and practices on trial are limited. In addition they are not shown to be influencing others in 'novel and critical ways' (cf. Cladis, 1992, p. 39), but rather in an emotional and uplifting way.

Another aspect of moral individualism is very relevant to the analysis of *Kon Kon Kon* films. Collective sentiment designated by moral individualism holds human beings as sacred, comparable to the sacredness of strong shared values, beliefs and religions which dominated traditional societies. This is the cult of (hu)man, which, according to Durkheim, is the only sentiment held and will continue to be held in post-traditional societies (Cladis, 1992; Emirbayer, 2003; Lukes, 1973). Killing oneself and others is a profane act as human beings have now acquired a kind of dignity which places them above themselves as well as above society (Durkheim, 1951 quoted in Emirbayer, 2003, p. 264). An individual, so long as her/his conduct has not caused her/him to forfeit the title of human being, shares 'in some degree in that quality sui generis ascribed by every religion to its gods which renders them inviolable by everything mortal' (ibid.). This cult of (hu)man is the only remaining bond, uniting individuals in one thought when societies become greater and individual differences multiply under organic solidarity. All individuals are members of this religion of humanity in which an individual's life, right and dignity are held sacred. It no longer

belongs to her/himself or the local group but to human being as a whole. This draws the human above all individual personalities, equalizing all human persons as sacrosanct (Durkheim, 1951 in Emirbayer, 2003, p. 266).

It can be argued that the religion of humanity underpins the *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries on people with disabilities. First of all, this is due to the focus on human interest stories. *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries can be classified as human interest stories because they focus on individual human beings, as opposed to the focus on transcendental collective interest, as if in a sphere superior to human interest (cf. Durkheim, 1902 in Lukes, 1973, p. 156). Second, subjects of the films are selected due to their exceptional service to the cult of (hu)man. The conduct of the subjects of the stories serves as a good example of the celebration of being human. Their resilience and unwavering determination to live through hardships without violating their own life and with respect for the life, right and dignity of others depicts the subjects of the film paying constant homage to the 'human as god'. Despite being deprived of opportunities due to their disability, the subjects are not shown to be angry or to display a potential for anti-social behaviour. Conversely, they are seen as cherishing their social life. This is probably the significant justification for their appearance on the *Kon Kon Kon* programme. Despite occasionally experiencing discriminating treatment from fellow humans, the subjects of the stories show their love for humans and their possession of positive, understanding and constructive views toward social life and their communities. For example, Royah is not angry with taxi drivers who usually refuse to accept an ill passenger like her. She seems to

understand their fears and the anxiety of having a passenger die in their vehicles. One frequent description of the subjects is 'in this impaired body resides an impeccable mind'. By reintroducing or reminding the audience of the cult of (hu)man, *Kon Kon Kon* equalizes all personalities, uniting all humans beyond any physical and ideational boundaries.

The title of the programme, literally meaning 'discovering humanity', matches well with its aim of 'celebrating humanity'. *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries try to recover and strengthen the fading 'religion of humanity' by worshipping individuals whose conducts uphold the moral worth and dignity of human personality. It is important to note that the focus on such abstract, universalized value leaves little room for nuances and local contexts. We will see that in *Kon Kon Kon*'s celebration of the sacredness of human life and dignity, the magnitude and capacity of social influences and local factors on an individual's conduct could be more substantially elaborated, if desired. However, the intention of *Kon Kon Kon* episodes on people with disabilities seems to be to worship a set of sacrosanct values that should and must thrive in any circumstance: the moral worth of human life and the dignity of human beings. Thus networks of relationship and social relations that shape the conditions of everyday living with disability and poverty are excluded from the films. The debates on ideologies and implementation regarding welfare provision and poverty intervention are addressed in the next section.

2.4 *Welfare ideologies*

2.4.1 Welfare ideologies: a general debate

Welfare involves three main areas (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 67): social service on health care, education, employment, housing, protection of rights and properties; social insurance which covers work-related benefits; and social assistance for the vulnerable such as the elderly, the homeless and those affected by disasters. This definition of welfare recognizes a wide scope of social rights from womb to tomb. It corresponds to Esping-Andersen's approach to a welfare state. A welfare state can be perceived narrowly as the provision of income transfers and social services, that is, a social amelioration. More comprehensive, however, it should be approached and analysed as state's larger role in managing and organizing the economy and therefore influencing areas such as employment and wages. More importantly, it is the role of the state in influencing the general social structure, precisely, the extent of commodification of individuals and the stratification (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 1-2). Thus the term[7] includes both the construction of the welfare state (or the country's social welfare policies and the nature of public-private mix in welfare provision) and the relationship this has with general social and economic structure (ibid.).

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[7] 'Welfare capitalism' can be used interchangeably (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 2).

Though in practice no governments, regardless of regime difference, can afford to adopt extreme measures concerning the redistribution of resources and thus welfare provision is a matter of political choice (cf.Taylor-Gooby, 2004, pp. 33-34), ideologically visions and understandings of poverty, equality and the role of welfare state can be polarized as: those associated with neo-liberalism and those inclined to social democracy. The former can be observed in most liberal and conservative governments, while the latter is most obvious in social democratic ones, although no direct relationship should be made between political ideologies and the practice of welfare provision. Neo-liberalism and social democracy are discussed here in terms of their different viewpoints on inequality, poverty, market, intervention, and welfare policies.

2.4.1.1 Inequality and poverty

While most neo-liberals regard inequality as natural, necessary and important for the existence of society, social democratic opponents set a major aim to lessen the social inequality and injustice.

Neo-liberalism

Neo-liberalism supports the equality of opportunity and the freedom of individuals to prosper and pursue their own interests. In other words, in its support of the 'class system', neo-liberalism encourages people of all backgrounds to pursue

individual improvement. However, the success in social mobility or in climbing up the ladder is decided mainly by the operation of the free market which does not guarantee the equality of outcome (Kavanagh, Richards, Smith, & Geddes, 2006, p. 556). In fact, as a strong believer in capitalism, inequality enhances incentives and a thriving entrepreneurial culture which will further sustain the capitalist system (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 70).

Inequality, likewise, underpins the belief among the conservatives that inequality is a natural phenomenon and stratification based on birth or ascription is reminiscent of the caste system (Sharma, 1999). Malthus' naturalistic utopianism in his essay on the *Principle of Population* (1803, 1992 in Somers & Block, 2005, pp. 269-270) is arguably an obvious example of such conservative thinking. According to Malthus, laws of nature make scarcity a permanent condition of life with scarcity creating the balance between resources and the number of people. The poor are doomed to suffer from scarcity and are thus naturally discouraged to reproduce (ibid.). According to this line of thinking, providing for the poor will have a perverse effect, not only by prolonging poverty through inducing the poor to propagate and multiply, but also by creating the culture of dependency which is harmful to the poor themselves in the long run (ibid.).

In addition to the natural fate of the poor, the conservative tradition maintains the idea of natural order or hierarchical relations. The paternalism or benevolent authority assumes that the minority with higher skills and better

judgments are legitimate protectors and rulers of the majority poor who need supervision (Taylor, 2007, p. 37). The concept of 'one nation' is emphasised by the conservatives to reinstate the importance of the great benevolence of the past generations who enable the current wealth of the nation. Thus citizens are to maintain the status quo, the patriarchal family structure (see Somers & Block, 2005, pp. 325-327), and the characteristics and tempo of the society through cooperating for the common good (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 36). The conservatives believe that people are to be supervised and disciplined, rather than liberated. This is one divergence of conservatism from neo-liberalism (op.cit: 34). Nevertheless, the two traditions can be argued to be sharing the same approach to counter poverty, which is that the poor need to work hard and commit themselves to the existing social arrangements rather than challenging them.

By putting emphasis on individual efforts to comply with capitalism and the legacy of the traditional past, neo-liberalism individualises poverty, claiming that poverty is due to personal failure or defective behaviour. Malthus took us back to the 'untainted beginning' where there was no political interference with the laws of nature before concluding that aid given to the poor is the real cause of poverty as it perpetuates the culture of dependence and of poverty. However, this historical claim about the pre-political state of nature lacks empirical foundations and Malthus could present no evidence that his harmonious past ever existed. It was a theory-driven logic (Somers & Block, 2005, p. 274). A similar remark can be made about conservative claims about the cause of poverty. They are mainly rather arbitrary

explanations with weak scientific evidence and focus on race, lack of biological restraints and a set of undebated moral judgments about good and bad behaviour while steering away from structural inequality (Goede, 1996). The poor are described by the conservatives as a homogeneous group associated with radically different norms and values from the rest of the society; such as teenage pregnancy, illegitimate births, unemployment, crime and family breakdown (ibid.).

Associating poverty with individual and private causes such as moral corruption, conservative and neo-liberal traditions allow the system of moral achievement to be established in classifying the poor. Some poor people are judged as 'respectable' and thus 'deserving' concession (Somers & Block, 2005, p. 276). The deserving or the worthy poor are the old, people with disabilities, the sick or those falling into poverty without moral corruption and thus deserve some charity or private alms. On the contrary, the undeserving or the feckless poor are those able to work but requiring aid and who thus reflect failures of personal responsibility, as much as laziness, incompetence, or lack of moral fibre (ibid. ; Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 75).

Social democracy

Social democratic traditions, on the other hand, promote equality in the society as the fundamental right of the citizen. If Malthus and his conservative followers have been using unobservable or 'theoretical entities' such as laws of

human nature and the perverse effect of state handouts, the opposite, 'institutional pragmatism' (Somers & Block, 2005, pp. 268-273), describes most social democratic regimes. Intervention based on problem-driven policies, laws and institutions and the use of rational solutions to urgent public crises are favoured. This is because of the belief that poverty is not due to personal failure, scarcity, natural disaster or even market gluts but rather to political failure to regulate their consequences (op.cit. , p. 269). It is not the shortages of food but the absence of entitlement to it that cause famine and suffering and thus redistribution is the rational solution (op.cit. , p. 269). It is also believed by most social democrats that capitalist states can be used to humanize capitalism and to create a more just society and greater equality (Taylor, 2007). Welfare provision and subsidised public services based on principles of universality and entitlement can influence the outcome of true freedom based on equality and egalitarianism. It gives an opposite outcome to the free market principles of allocation through ability to pay (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

Freedom, according to social democracy, derives from collective society, similar to the situated autonomy proposed by Durkheim. This is a contrast to the asocial individual freedom of classical liberalism which frees individuals from all restraints. Social democratic freedom means that individuals live and develop in communities and not as isolated beings (Taylor, 2007, p. 57) committed only to the maximization of self-interest. Some forms of restrictions are thus needed to guarantee solidarity, unity and equality as social democracy claims that 'freedom is something that can only be achieved … in a well-ordered and collectivist society'

(ibid.). As such, social democracy considers people and the idea of freedom in a broader social context (ibid.). Rather than blaming the unemployed as people who voluntarily choose to be so, social democracy recognises that the roots of unemployment are systemic and need to be tackled through state intervention (Taylor, 2007, p. 61). Kavanagh (2006, p. 557), notes how agency is limited according to social democratic tradition because of the belief in the power of environmental factors to shape behaviour. Social democratic support for collectivism and community can be recognized by the emphasis that society is held together through cooperation, contrary to the neo-liberal faith in competition (Taylor, 2007). The difference in state intervention in the competitive market between the two traditions is discussed in more detail in the next section.

2.4.1.2 Market, intervention and welfare policies

Neo-liberalism believes in the power of free unfettered competitive market to best serve the common good while social democracy finds capitalist system and its market principles unjust and calls for the interventionist welfare state.

Neo-liberalism

Market values, identified as inequality, incentives, competitiveness, indifference to social justice, and allocation through ability to pay (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, pp. 29-30), are becoming pervasive in all welfare states regardless of regime

(op.cit. , p. 33). Neo-liberal and conservative approaches in particular believe in the effectiveness and importance of self-regulating markets. These two political ideologies thus try to limit the scope of state intervention.

As a strong believer in capitalism, market liberals prefer uninterrupted markets which respond best to inequalities in resources (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 34) and regard any excessive attempt to intervene in market mechanisms as harmful in the long run (Kavanagh et al., 2006). To be precise, intervention is said to impede the freedom of the individual to prosper and grow. The pursuit of self-interest, particularly of the business class, is argued to be the key motivating force behind economic progress and the greater common good (Taylor, 2007, pp. 70-71). Following this line of thought, businesses, in particular, should be given a free reign, and competition rather than cooperation is encouraged as a key role. The neo-liberals' reliance on market mechanisms connotes the spirit of individualism and self-help and casts doubt on collective responsibility. Economic liberalism does not distribute risk across populations (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 34), but rather exhibits little consideration for social values that require the government to act in a positive way to redistribute resources and opportunities to those who fail in the free market system (Taylor, 2007, p. 73).

Perceiving poverty either as a result of the individual's failure to ride the wave of capitalism, or as intrinsic to those of lower strata, neo-liberalism and conservatism offer a rather circular and closed logic (Haylett, 2001, p. 49) behind

fellow citizens' harsh living conditions and this is reflected in their welfare policies. Malthus' perverse effects of welfare can be interpreted as suggesting that the poor should not be protected from the consequences of their folly; only the absence of poverty handouts will enable them to develop market-appropriate behaviour (Somers & Block, 2005, p. 275). Denham and Garnett (in Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 556) cite Sir Keith Joseph, a British neo-liberal, as promoting a similar outcome from state intervention: to strengthen family, thrift and self-reliance and to remove crutches from those who can walk. Thus it is less likely for neo-liberalism to support structural intervention in confronting poverty; private charity is subsequently the ideal intervention (p. 325) and believed to be a suitable approach as it will not affect the poor's behaviour in the long run and interferes less with the working of the free market (ibid.).

With the focus on self-help, interventions function mainly as a short-term safety net with conditions and time limit (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 557; Somers & Block, 2005, p. 280; Taylor, 2007, p. 21). Minimal intervention, for neo-liberals, aims to protect individual liberty and sustain a high level of market incentives (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 557); while for conservatives, it dampens the radical movement instigated by rising inequalities, ensuring greater social stability (Taylor, 2007, p. 51). Directions taken by the Thatcher government in the UK exemplified this point. The economic role of the state was reduced to an extent that it would not harm individual choice and enterprise (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 73) and employment was left to find its own level (Taylor, 2007, p. 70). Not surprisingly, egalitarianism was rejected as it

could hold back talent and discourage hard work (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 73). In addition, the British were told to take care of themselves, their family and neighbours rather than depend on state provision (Taylor, 2007, p. 75). Interventions based on personal achievement and failure were seen to stigmatise the poor and force them off benefits. This was believed to benefit the country in the long run, as Taylor summarises in relation to the policies of Thatcher and Regan (2007, p. 78):

> If deprived of a long-term safety net, the unemployed will be forced to make themselves fit for work and thereby fuel the state with the taxes they pay rather than feed off the state with the benefits they consume.

Social democracy

Social democracy is arguably more inclined towards the interventionist welfare state. It aims to actualize welfare state values of fairness, redistribution, greater equality, solidarity and social justice (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 30) through state provision of '… a general enrichment of the concrete substance of civilized life, a general reduction of risk and insecurity, an equalisation between the more and the less fortunate at all levels' (Marshall, 1949 quoted in Taylor, 2007, p. 57). The British welfare state was established by social democratic ideals and the ideas of collectivists such as T. H. Marshall (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 553). According to him, it is necessary for the state to intervene in welfare and social policies to free individuals from economic deprivation, curbing the impact of inequality which could affect an individual's attempt to live a meaningful life.

> The private market… narrows the choice for all men… it is the responsibility of the state, acting sometimes through the process that we call 'social policy'

> to reduce or eliminate or control the forces of market coercions which place
> men in situations in which they have less freedom… to make moral choices
> and to behave altruistically if they so will (Marshall, T. H., 1949 cited in
> Kavanagh et al., 2006).

Social democracy attempts to promote welfare provision as a right attached to the status of citizenship, not as a concession. The role of the state is as an enabler (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 557), ensuring that all people, the poor in particular, are not marginalized by the functions of the capitalist system (Taylor, 2007, p. 62) and that they are entitled to basic requirement in life on an equal basis. For them, access to services such as healthcare should be viewed as a social right. The insurance-based systems often exclude significant sections of society who cannot afford to contribute (op.cit. , p. 65). Thus, policies of interventionist states include gaining control over raw materials, basic industries and redistributive services in order to meet needs that markets do not supply (Taylor, 2007). Interventionist states are willing to use mechanisms to reduce inequalities and to cultivate a sense of cross-class solidarity and social unity. These they achieves through reducing income differentials and the influence of divisive market mechanisms (op.cit. , p. 58).

As noted earlier, almost all governments are expected to provide some forms of welfare services, and thus cannot afford to pursue a single ideology they endorse in an absolute manner. The scope and management of welfare provision differs among regimes. Taylor-Gooby (2004, pp. 33-34) notes how conservative and neo-liberal welfare states usually manage to respond to citizens' demands for welfare. Conservative welfare states typically adopt measures to include those unable to gain access to contractual insurance schemes and to distribute risks across

populations in a way very different from that achieved in open competitive markets. Even strictly economic liberal regimes contain at least some universalistic services. Many economic liberals are aware of the social context of poor health and support equal access to national health services as vital for securing individual liberty (ibid.).

While there is a rising demand for the state to provide welfare benefits, welfare states are required to consider the competitive advantage of the country at the same time. This concern can restrict the range of activities that states can provide. Factors or pressures that European welfare states have to confront in their political decisions about welfare include the cost pressures arising from the declining growth rate and ageing population; commitments that reach maturity; higher demands for pensions and health services; and the increasing number of women entering the labour force which results in increasing demands for jobs as well as care services to replace women's unpaid labour (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, pp. 30-31).

It can be argued then that modern welfare states have to mediate between public demands for better welfare benefits and the viability of the economy and the private free will. In Britain, Sir William Beveridge's report on Social Insurance and Allied Services in 1942 is regarded as the foundations of the modern welfare state. The report points out that in organizing a national minimum security the state should not stifle incentive opportunity and the responsibility of the individual. It should leave room and encouragement for voluntary action to provide more than the minimum for an individual and his/her family (Beveride, 1942 in Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 551).

Thus, social security is to be achieved by cooperation between the state and the individual (Kavanagh et al., 2006, p. 551), or arguably a combination of collective and individual approaches.

After discussing the general debates and themes about welfare, the next section focuses on welfare ideologies in Asia and Thailand.

2.4.2 Asian welfare regimes

The clustering of welfare states by Esping-Anderson into conservatism, liberalism and social democracy are based on analyses of welfare programmes and outcomes experienced by people. The two criteria to judge types of welfare states are: the extent of decommodification and stratification (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 21-77). Decommodification refers to the way in which welfare and services are provided as a matter of right and regardless of a person's work performance, history and contribution to the market (op.cit. , pp. 2-21) or 'the degree to which social rights permit people to make their living standards independent of pure market forces' (op.cit. , p. 3), without which citizens status would be diminished as commodities (op.cit. , p. 21). As commodities, people would be subject to powers beyond their control while their labour as commodity could be easily destroyed by contingencies such as illness, business cycle and the competition among workers (op.cit. , p. 37). Therefore de-commodification is a necessary precondition for an individual's welfare and security. It uplifts workers status from the captives of employers and market, and without it workers would be less capable of developing collective action, unity and

solidarity or simply political consciousness (op.cit. , p. 37). Attributes for decommodification include: eligibility and restrictions on entitlements; income replacement; and range of entitlements (op.cit. , p. 47). Firstly, entitlements guarantee rights irrespective of previous employment record, performance, needs-test and financial contribution. Secondly, benefit levels fall not too below normal earnings and living standard and benefits are provided long enough which would otherwise drive recipient back to work as soon as possible. Finally in a highly advanced case, social benefits are delivered regardless of cause while in all advanced capitalist countries, benefits usually include unemployment, disability, sickness and old age.

Stratification deals with equality and addresses specifically the extent to which welfare programmes enhance or diminish existing status and class differences (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 3) and whether they nurture individualism and self-reliance, the opposite of which is collective social solidarity (op.cit., p. 55). Attributes for the analysis on stratification include: the degree to which social insurance is differentiated and segmented into distinct occupation and status based programmes; the relative privileges given to civil servants; the salience of means-testing; the weight of private-funded welfare; and the extent of differentiation in benefit between the lowest and the highest benefits allowed to happen (op.cit., pp. 73-76). With this as a guiding principle, ideological path of Asian countries can be analysed as followed.

It is worth noting here that welfare programmes in Asia are far too diverse to form a homogenous group, with variations across time within one country itself. A study by Park and Jung (2008) applied a hierarchical cluster analysis to data of nine Asian countries and seventeen Western countries. The result revealed five groups[8] with both Asian and Western countries sharing each group, hence indicating similarities among Asian and Western welfare states. Apart from homogeneity with Western counterparts, the study's cluster analysis among the Asian countries revealed heterogeneity among themselves, falling into three distinct clusters[9]. Explanations for variations in welfare programmes of a country in Asia can be found not just in one dominant factor such as Confucianism or the level of industrialization or democracy (Ramesh & Asher, 2000, pp. 6-13). Design, performance and outcome of welfare state at a particular time can be explained by the interaction between political variables and the nation's historical legacy (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 52-54), in other words, both power relations between classes and the legacy (or history) of welfare institution co-evolve and interact in a significant way in determining welfare state[10].

8
The result reveals five groups among Asian and Western countries: group one composed of Australia and Hong Kong; group two composed of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore; group three made up of Austria, Belgium, Japan, Korea and Taiwan; group four made up of France, Germany and Spain; and group five are Denmark and Sweden (Park & Jung, 2008, pp. 10-11), with Thailand not sharing any similarities with any Western countries in the study.

9 The result shows three groups among nine Asian countries: group one is Hong Kong (on the basis of its mandatory occupational account programme in old age pension); group two includes Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (due to their provident fund systems); group three are Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand due to their strong trend of social insurance programme (Park & Jung, 2008, pp. 12-13).

10
An example of the significance of the two elements can be seen from the relatively de-commodifying and comprehensive welfare programmes of continental Europe which was due to its left

A number of commonalities are, however, noted. In terms of de-commodification, there is an strongly emphasized role of family in providing welfare in Asian countries (Wilding, 2000 in Yu, 2014, p. 84) which implies the necessity of nurturing pre-commodified, traditional care and social protection network of family, church or the lord, a feature of conservative regimes (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 35). Conservatism aims to uphold status and traditional hierarchical relations of social control while attacking the commodifying effects of capitalist market (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 39). Alternatively, the strong reliance on pre-commodified social protection can be related to a high level of commodification, a result of neo-liberal social and economic policy. Neo-liberal states are thus required, due to the innate failure of the market, to cater for the most vulnerable. The pre-commodified social protection serves as a social pacifier to prevent the state from collapsing (cf.Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 41)[11]. Moreover, de-commodification can be determined by the range of entitlement. Gough (2000, p. 9) and Park and Jung (2008, pp. 13-14) noted that investment in East Asian countries only scored high in education while there was a notable low attention in social safety net, such as social security, housing and health. Other studies likewise revealed that East Asian social policy is subordinated and integral part of economic policy and is thus geared to fuel growth, rather than to

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political mobilisation and a long tradition of conservative and Catholic reformism. On the other hand, Australia and New Zealand, although have had powerful labour movements, were set in historically dominant legacy of institutionalised liberalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 53-54).

[11] Schumpeter (1970 in Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 41) noted that the capitalist order worked because it was ruled and organized by the protective strata of an earlier era. The social policy of pre-commodification was one of the flying buttresses that prevented capitalism's collapse and is one of the cornerstones of the modern welfare state.

guarantee citizen rights (Gough, 2000, p. 8; Park & Jung, 2008, p. 11; Ramesh & Asher, 2000, p. 4; Gough, 2004 in Yu, 2014, p. 84). The pattern of policies and outcomes in East Asian can be termed as 'developmental state' (Gough, 2000, p. 13) or 'productivist welfare' (Park & Jung, 2008, p. 11), both referring to the state's association with enhancing economic interests, rather than taking into account welfare of the majority. Furthermore there is a minimal state interference in the market; the state reduced itself to mostly as a regulator, not a provider of welfare (Park & Jung, 2008, p. 11; Gough, 2004 in Yu, 2014, p. 84). Due to the limited range of social entitlements and the low level of income replacement, which hardly enable workers to engage in other activities outside work such as family, leisure or reeducation activities, it is fair to conclude on the salience of commodification in social policy, the prevalence of market-driven and self-responsible and contributive welfare provision favoured by neo-liberals states of East Asia (cf.Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 41-43). These are accompanied by its innate conservative styled pre-commodified welfare system made up of paternalistic employer-sponsored and loyalty inducing schemes, and of informal network of family and community care, as outlined above.

With regard to stratification, studies reveal a similar pattern among Asian countries. There is a trend of low public spending on welfare (Wilding, 2000 in Yu, 2014, p. 84), implying a higher percentage of privately-funded welfare (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 76). Similarly Gough (2000, p. 8) identifies common features among China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam as falling into the group of 'low spending, high HDI'. This suggests

restricted social policies and spending but good welfare outcomes among these countries (ibid.). Moreover, social stratification is likely to be sustained through a high degree of benefits given to government and military employees (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 76) which is notable in these countries (Gough, 2000, p. 9; Park & Jung, 2008, p. 11). Although access to welfare expands to other groups, the quality is significantly varied (Gough, 2000, p. 9). There is a rise in an entrepreneurial approach to health insurance as evidenced in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia (ibid.). This indicates a high degree of differentiation between low and high benefits allowed to exist and the subsequently low degree of universalism. A different approach, however, is adopted in Malaysia with its national health care system (ibid). Stratification is likely to increase with the high extent of private funding and spending on welfare which is the case noted among East Asian countries (Gough, 2000, p. 11; Park & Jung, 2008, p. 11). In the Philippines running alongside the low public spending on all groups (except the civil servants) is an extensive family provision and redistributive mechanisms funded by remittances from urban and international migration (Gough, 2000, pp. 10-12).

The next section focuses on welfare ideologies in Thailand and the social historical factors that shape its welfare provision. The political and social environments provide resources for actions by individuals, and particularly the subjects of the films. Therefore, the understanding of these contexts is crucial for audiences' critical reading of the films.

2.4.3 Welfare in Thailand

This part of the chapter explores literature on Thailand's welfare policies and how these are related to the country's political ideology and structures. This is a way to locate welfare in a wider context, rather than isolating it from other influences. Literature shows that, despite the country's increase in public spending on welfare in the past 25 years, poverty reduction and equality are not very well targeted (Ponlapat Buracom, 2011, p. 113) and the impacts of the social spending on poverty reduction and justice and equality are disproportionally small (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013; Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 201; Yongyuth Chalamwong & Jidapa Meepien, 2012). This implies a narrow view of what social welfare and the wellbeing of individuals should consist of, a rather slack attitude of the state in prioritizing social rights and equality, and thus weak commitment and contributions from all stakeholders. We are reminded of both conservative and liberal welfare regimes. The conservative explanation of poverty is based on the natural law of scarcity and on flawed personality of individuals. The state acts minimally in inducing the redistribution from the privileged minority to the mass and in delivering social rights in order to create less stratified society and to create humane condition for workers and the poor (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990). Moreover, substantial social protection starts with and remains limited to government employees, aiming to maximize loyalty. In terms of neo-liberal ideologies, what is prominent is market-oriented welfare based on contribution. The minimalist state is adopted and the government performs chiefly as a facilitator (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 221),

rather than the comprehensive main welfare provider. The concept of comprehensive welfare state was attacked right from the start of democratization in Thailand in 1932 as a western intrusive ideas (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 203) until now when the concept has been criticized by academics as unfashionable (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 222), unsustainable (Yongyuth Chalamwong & Jidapa Meepien, 2012, p. 242) and unnecessary in Thai society already enjoying family and community care (Decha Sungkawan, 2002). Such a lack of state contribution and commitment in comprehensive welfare provision is influenced by a dominant conservatism in the governance and cultural realms of Thailand. We will explore the country's social policy, economic policy and broad governance structure. Political ideology will be discussed towards the end.

2.4.3.1 Thailand welfare policy: broad governance structure and social and economic policy

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, having the King as Head of the State. The administration is divided into three levels: central, provincial and local administration. The central administration represents the exercising of the three powers of the King: the Legislative, the Executive, and the Judiciary powers, through the National Assembly or parliament, the Cabinet, and the Courts of Justice, respectively (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, p. 17). The Cabinet is the governmental body responsible for administrative or governmental functions, under the parliamentary system: the government requires a majority vote in the parliament and is therefore checked and balanced by it (ibid.). The central administrative system

consists of twenty ministries[12]. A number of independent public agencies have been

established for scrutinizing and counterbalancing such powers. These agencies

include the Office of the National Counter-Corruption Commission, the Office of the

Election Commission of Thailand, the Office of the National Human Rights

Commission and the Constitutional Court (ibid.). In addition, there are departmental

level state agencies, not being under the Office of the Prime Minister or any ministry,

such as, the Office of His Majesty's Principal Private Secretary, the Bureau of the

Royal Household, the Office of National Buddhism, the Office of the Royal

Development Projects Board, the Office of the National Research Council, the Royal

Institute, the Royal Thai Police, the Anti-Money Laundering Office, and the Office of

the Attorney-General (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, p. 18).

The provincial[13] administration means functions of the ministries and

agencies are assigned to officials at the provincial and regional levels, under the

supervision of the provincial governor (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, p. 18).

Nevertheless, the governor is appointed by the central administration in Bangkok.

Thus central level agencies still have the final decision-making authority. The local

administration gives autonomous administrative authority to the local people. A local

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[12] The ministries are: Office of the Prime Minister; Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Tourism and Sports; Ministry of Social Development and Human Security; Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives; Ministry of Transport; Ministry of National Resources and Environment; Ministry of Information and Communication Technology; Ministry of Energy; Ministry of Commerce; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Labour; Ministry of Culture; Ministry of Science and Technology; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Public Health; and Ministry of Industry (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, pp. 17-18).

[13] There are seventy-six provinces, each divided into several districts, each of which is in turn divided into sub-districts and then villages respectively.

administrative body has all or some members elected by the people and has its own revenue and budget. There are four types of local administrative organisations: Provincial Administration Organisations; Municipalities; Tambon (or Sub-district) Administration Organisations[14]; and Special Administration Organisations which are Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Pattaya City (ibid.).

Thailand experienced a shift from subsistence agrarian economy to industrial manufacturing following the Bowring Treaty with England and subsequent treaties with other Western countries in 1856 (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, p. 15). The economy entered an intensified development with the *First National Economic Plan* starting in 1961 (ibid.). Since then the country's social and economic development has been guided by National Economic Plans, each spanning over the period of 6 years. The plan serves as guiding principles, setting priorities and resource allocation and specifying the role of state and other stakeholders (Waranya Teokul, 1999, p. 360). Each of the plans has conceptually evolved over time: from expansion of basic facilities, integrating social policy in the national development, mobilizing people participation in social development, to human development (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 205; Waranya Teokul, 1999, p. 360). It is noticeable that economic and social developments were separated from the start. The first plan was aimed at the 'creation of the basic infrastructure facilities and a conducive framework for the future economic growth' (Office of the National Economic and Social Development

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  Nationwide, there are 76 Provincial Administration Organisations; 1,129 Municipalities; and 6,742 Tambon (or Sub-district) Administration Organisations (Suwit Wibulpolprasert, 2004, p. 19).

Board, 1967, p. 4), and thus was titled 'National Economic Development Plan 1961-1966'. Seven years later, its successor recognized the spillover effect of economic development on income disparity (op.cit. , p. 6) and the *Second National Economic and Social Development Plan* 1967-1971', with more social outlook, was launched (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 209). At the end of the first plan Thai economy established an impressive record of growth. The economic growth rate was 8.1 per cent, higher than the 5.5 per cent anticipated (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 205). Nevertheless, the income distribution was uneven. Incomes in the urban areas were generally about twice higher than those in the rural, and the average income in the metropolitan area of Bangkok was more than triple those in villages in the Northeast (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 1967, p. 6). Thus the second plan included the social development alongside economic development, particularly more emphasis on rural development (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 1967). Despite the effort, the end of the Third National Economic and Social Development Plan saw Thailand facing even more intense social problems of poverty, unemployment, low productivity in the agricultural sector, impaired access to education and health services among rural population and growing income disparities between urban and rural areas (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 205).

In fact, only until recently, social welfare was viewed as separated from economic policy and welfare as right was foreign to the country's development policy. After the change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in

1931, Thailand was under a series of military dictatorship and was beset with the Great Depression. The 1931 government turned down a plan proposedl by a statesman Pridi Banomyong to provide social welfare including full employment generated by and within the public sector and the establishment of social security schemes. Pridi's plan also proposed income guarantee for all. It was the first attempt to institutionalize Thailand's welfare state. The proposal was however rejected in the parliament due to the dominant 'feudalistic attitude' (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 203) and a lack of social consensus and across-class solidarity. Moreover, the idea of social welfare was seen as an encroachment of western thinking and was accused of being a socialist threat for the country (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, pp. 203-204). A more charitable approach in the provision of welfare was adopted. For example, the Department of Public Welfare was established in 1940, firstly charged with responsibilities of ensuring the provision of the four basics of food, shelter, clothes and employment. The operation was however, recognized as predominantly charitable in manner, stressing short-term rescue rather than empowering people through social services and insurance (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 212). Another example is the income supplement scheme for the poor in 1975 during the Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj's administration. It was a mean-tested programme, issuing cards to the people of low income for free health service (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 207).

It was not until the *Sixth National Economic and Social Development Plan* (1987-1991) that social welfare received concrete attention for the first time. The

blueprint for welfare provision, The *First National Social Welfare Development Plan* (1987-1991)**,** was launched, followed by the *Social Security Act 1990* (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 205). Under the act, the employees were entitled to protection under seven circumstances, namely: illness or accident; physical disability; non-work related death; child delivery; old age; child assistance; and unemployment (Social Security Office, 2015), with employer, employee and the government each contributing 1.5 per cent of the wage (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 205). The moves are however criticized as serving the manufacturing sectors, supplying entrepreneurs and industries with pacified workers (op.cit. , p. 209) or as part of political contestation (Reinecke, 1993, p. 87), instead of as a forethought of the welfare of the workers per se. More precisely welfare was designated for the poor mainly (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 208), hence not operating universally. It is arguable then that the Thai state has adopted a narrow view of welfare, disconnecting economic and social development, avoiding the creation of constructive relationships between public and economic policies for the generation of the wellbeing of the citizens (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990, pp. 150, 178, 185-188). Relying on private sector growth and private sector employment was the rule of the game in the hope that the prosperity within the sector would have trickle down effects which would in turn generate overall wealth (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 210). Nevertheless, the free market capitalism is less likely to produce such outcomes of fair distribution, without the constructive and committed intervention by the state (Ha-Joon Chang, 2011, pp. 1-10).

A major state intervention in poverty was evidenced during Thaksin Shinawatra premiership. Wars against poverty, corruption and drugs were implemented, as well as the universal health care for all with minimum or zero contribution, village fund schemes and other housing and micro finance schemes (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 217). The health care provision in particular is viewed as the first state attempt for universal welfare schemes (ibid.). In fact, it can be argued that two principal factors mitigated the negative effects of the economic downturn of 1997 in Thailand: Thaksin's administration and the royally initiated self-sufficiency economy. The former was successful in concretely connecting social and economic-finance policies together. There were initiatives on housing, health, and tax and finance which promoted employment, spending and the rural and overall economy. The latter served as the guiding principle for individuals (cf. Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 217). In 1999, the public administration reform increased decentralization, giving local administrative bodies autonomy in designing and delivering welfare services for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities, the HIV/AIDS patients. In 2003 the government announced three social acts: *The Social Welfare Promotion Act, The Child Protection Act and The Act on the Elderly. T*he Social Welfare Promotion Act, and its amendment in 2007, serves as a legal framework for the welfare provision. Among many elements, it promotes contributions from private sectors and civil societies by supplying resources and training to facilitate their welfare activities in order to supplement the central state welfare programmes (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 220).

During the 19 years, from 1987 to 2006, the four national social welfare development plans served as a guideline for the cooperation between the public and private sectors in 'uplifting living conditions of the people in all regions in order to enable them to be self-reliant, according to the national basic needs indicators (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 208). However, the objectives of the plans were not met and there were issues concerning the monitoring and evaluation of the welfare provision, conceptual obscurity about the definition of welfare and the low priority on welfare among all stakeholders. Hence the government established the National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, to draft and oversee the implementation of the *First Five Years Strategic Plan for Thai Social Welfare 2007-2011.* The then prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced welfare to be the national agenda and to gear Thailand towards 'Welfare For All by 2017' (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 202).

Characteristics of Thai welfare provision according to the strategic plan are as followed. Welfare provision will be provided under four pillars: social assistance; social insurance; social services and social support partnership promotion (National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, pp. 17-20; Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, pp. 225-231). Social assistance operates on means-tests and thus is designed as a relief for those affected by poverty and other disasters. Social insurance is contribution-based in which beneficiaries buy insurance schemes or contribute to funds for future benefits. Social services include basic services of education, health, etc. provided to all without or minimal contribution. Finally social partnership

enhances capacity of local administrative bodies, private and business sectors, households and individuals, all as welfare providers for the sustainability and efficiency of the three welfare pillars. The fourth pillar deserves more attention as it highlights the pluralistic nature of Thai welfare. The state is responsible mainly only for social services such as education[15] and health (see the discussion below) while other parties, as mentioned above, are expected to actively cooperate in providing social insurance and social assistance. The state has limited itself as a regulator and has been cautious about an 'over-investment' in welfare. This is reflected in literature. 'Welfare state' is mentioned as unrealistic and unsustainable due to growing commitments on the part of the state (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, pp. 222, 233), thus the government should encourage citizens to participate more in financial contribution (Yongyuth Chalamwong & Jidapa Meepien, 2012, p. 243) and Thailand should continue depending on the functions and responsibilities of the family, kinship and the community for the well-being of individuals (Decha Sungkawan, 2002, p. 215). Although recognizing the country's low public spending on welfare, 7.8 per cent of GDP in 2011, compared to 22 per cent in OECD countries (National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, pp. 16-17), the government aims to promote the increased contributions from other sectors 'which are still significantly insufficient'

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[15] Basic education in Thailand extends for 12 years, with the first nine years being free and compulsory. The basic education consists of six years of primary education, three years of lower secondary. The last three years are of upper secondary education which student can alternatively choose vocational tracts (sometimes also in lower secondary schools) (UNESCO, 2011). In terms of its performance, primary education is close to universal in Thailand, with enrolment ratio in lower secondary education over ninety percent. The percentage for upper secondary education is low, around 60, (UNESCO, 2011). Equality in terms of gender parity index is impressive, with almost 1:00 for every level of basic education (UNESCO, 2011).

(National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, p. 14) as 'the proportion of state investment on welfare is expected not to increase much in the future' (National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, p. 14). Hence the Thai state tries to promote partnership especially with the business and insurance sectors, as employment in formal sectors expands (p. 14). This brings us to the next characteristic which is a limited impact on poverty reduction and social inequality.

Another characteristic of Thai welfare is an ambition to expand the range of entitlements and the number of population covered, while the extent of income replacement or the impact on poverty, decommodification and stratification receives less attention. Percentages of coverage forms a significant indicator for success of Thai welfare provision, including the coverage of the once neglected group such as labourers in informal sectors (cf. National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, pp. 21-22). An attention on inclusiveness, in both the first and second five years strategic plans for Thai social welfare covering 2007 to 2016, veils the extent of income replacement and the actual duration of the transfers. This issue of decommodification is significant if welfare is to permit citizens to make their living standards independent of pure market forces (Esping-Andersen, 1990), and to create a less stratified society. Moreover, individual contribution still plays a significant role in Thailand welfare provision, posing the question regarding eligibility on entitlements; entitlements are tied to contribution performance. Farmers have now been entitled to voluntary contribution in saving and insurance funds (National Social Welfare Promotion Commission, 2012, p. 7). Nevertheless, the contribution-based

benefits can be small, insufficient to escape poverty during contingencies unless they are supplemented by other transfers. Hence the extent of differentiation of benefits between the lowest (given to workers in informal sectors) and the highest benefits (enjoyed by state employees) needs to be taken into account in welfare plans.

After looking at broad governance and social and economic policy, we next turn to the discussion of the underpinning issue, welfare ideologies.

2.4.3.2 Thai welfare ideologies

In order to approach the welfare ideologies in Thailand, we first briefly look at the country's healthcare provision. Here it is discussed that government revenues have been seen to be disproportionately paid to support the contribution-based social security programmes for employees in the formal sector (cf.Reinecke, 1993). This leaves the majority of Thai people, due to their informal employment, facing inadequate welfare benefits although the situation has begun to improve through the Universal Health Care Coverage Policy (2002). From this overview of welfare provision and ideologies, the chapter continues by discussing some issues of structural inequality rooted in Thai society which can highlight Thailand's conservative and neoliberal welfare ideologies. We look at two key issues: 1) the consolidating of power by the elite and welfare provision as part of a power contest between different elite groups; and 2) an uneven development since the 1960s relating to the long lasting effects of the pressures of rural life and social exclusion. The discussion on the

context of welfare provision and state commitment is crucial when we try to understand the basis on which subjects of the film behave.

A brief overview of Thailand's provision of health

Thailand has health schemes that cover all population groups. Employees in private and state enterprises are protected by the *Social Security Scheme* which was established in 1990 (Reinecke, 1993) and the *Provident Fund*. The former is funded by contributions from employer, employee and the government. The scheme includes benefits for work and non-work related sickness, disability and death, retirement, maternity, children allowance, and unemployment (Social Security Office). The Provident Fund, established in 1983, is a compulsory option, additional for employees in firms of particular categories such as those listed on the stock exchange and in financial institutions supervised by the country's central bank. Employees and employers contribute to a member's account which can be withdrawn at the time of retirement or termination of employment (Ramesh & Asher, 2000, p. 63).

Civil servants and state enterprise employees benefit from the *Civil Servants Medical Benefits Scheme (CSMBS)* (Ramesh & Asher, 2000, p. 103), the *Pension Scheme*, the *Provident Fund* and are entitled to child benefits (op.cit. , p. 64). CSMBS provides free, or almost free, medical care for active and retired military personnel, policemen, civil servants and employees of state enterprises, and up to three of their dependants. It is paid for from the government general revenues (op.cit. , pp. 103,

107). The Pension Scheme is another non-contributory scheme funded entirely from government budget (pp. 64, 107). The Provident Fund for civil servants is a mandatory programme for all workers on the payroll of the government. The contribution made by both employees and employer (the government) aims to increase the country's saving rate and to restrain expenditure on public sector pension (p. 64).

The majority of Thai people, who are not included in any of the above schemes, are protected by the *Universal Health Care Coverage scheme (UC)*. Introduced in 2002, the scheme is funded by government budget and less or none from beneficiaries.[16] The scheme can be viewed as a new approach to guaranteeing equal rights to health services for all Thai citizens. It aims to tackle the unethical conduct in denying services based on a person's ability to pay (op.cit. , p. 33). All Thai people, except those in the formal sectors, and thus insured by the CSMBS, Social Security Scheme, or other contribution-based insurance schemes, are provided with a basic right to free healthcare and medical services[17] (National Health Security Office). The coverage of health schemes in Thailand improved significantly with this scheme[18] and the Universal Coverage indicates the country's direction towards the extension of

[16] It is not clearly specified in the National Health Security Act B.E. 2545 (AD 2002) or on the website of the National Health Security Office about amount of cost sharing or co-payment paid by beneficiaries of a health service (National Health Security Office, 2014). The issue has been under discussion under the new military government (Thairath Online, 2014).

[17] A capitation payment of 2,895 baht (in 2014) per registered capita per year was prepaid from the government revenue to the healthcare facility to cover the benefit package (Thairath Online, 2014).

[18] In 2011, while 15.9 and 7.8 per cent of the population were covered by the Social Security Scheme and the CSMBS respectively, the rest of the population was insured by the UC (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 22)

subsidized and statutory schemes.[19] The introduction of universal health coverage can be seen as marking a new chapter in the history of the Thai welfare state, and one that complements stories of Thai conservative political ideology (cf. Ramesh & Asher, 2000; Reinecke, 1993; Schmidt, 2002; Yupa Wongchai, 1985).

It is worth noting here that the trend towards more equality can additionally be seen from the restructuring of government organizations in 2002, another effect of Thaksin Shinawatra's premiership. The restructuring saw the establishment of new government agencies including the *Ministry of Social Development and Human Security*, with the responsibility 'to promote social development and create public equity and social justice' (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security). Under the ministry, the *Department of Social Development and Welfare (DSDW)* has a specific function in providing remedial and rehabilitative services for vulnerable people which include children and youth, the elderly, people with disabilities,[20] the homeless, women, the disaster-effected, ethnic minorities, nationality-less persons and people with other social problems (Department of Social Development and Welfare). Another office is the *Office of Welfare Promotion, Protection and Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups (OPP)*. The OPP is in charge of formulating policy,

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[19] In 1990, private funds were the most significant source of healthcare finance, with up to 78.7 per cent of private fund contribution and user charges to the total health expenditure (Ramesh & Asher, 2000, p. 109). In 2003, with the implementation of the universal coverage, however, the figure reduced sharply to 38.4 (Bureau of Policy and Strategy Ministry of Public Health, 2006, pp. 22-23) and thus as high as 61.6 per cent of total health expenditure was covered by government revenue.

[20] For example, by law, people with disabilities are entitled to services including the provision of care homes, career training centres, job provision schemes and the provision of mobility and life support equipment (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security). Please see chapter five.

measures and mechanisms for developing security and quality of life of the vulnerable group and provides the target groups access to welfare benefits apart from the provision by DSDW. These include healthcare services, education, careers, loans, allowances, housing, and other life opportunities and security (Office of Welfare Promotion Protection and Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups). These welfare services for people with disabilities are carried out specifically by another agency within the ministry, the *National Office for Empowerment of Persons with Disability (NEP)*. It has the same function as the OPP but with a focus only on people with disabilities (National Office for Empowerment of Persons with Disability). It is worth mentioning here that in 2012 there were about 1.5 million people with disabilities in Thailand, accounting for 2.2 per cent of the population. This included three groups of people[21]: individuals with prolonged illness of more than 6 months and with reduced activity (1.4 million people or 2.1 per cent of the population); individuals with difficulties in looking after themselves (0.3 million or 0.5 per cent of total population); and those having physical, mental or intellectual disabilities (1.1 million or 1.6 per cent of the population) (National Statistical Office, 2014, p. 4). Population aged over 70 formed the largest proportion of people with disabilities, 16 per cent. Almost all disabled people, 98.4 per cent, received health care cash transfers. However 15.8 per cent failed to receive disability aids they needed and 4 out of 5 of people with disabilities demanded more assistance from the government in terms of cash transfers, support to work from home, and personal carers. Moreover, 22.4 per cent of disabled people aged 5 and over did not have education

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[21] An individual can belong to more than one group (National Statistical Office, 2014, p. 5)

and as high as 40 per cent of working age disabled people (aged 15-60) were unemployed (ibid.). Those in work were employed in agriculture, forestry and fishery (together accounting for 15.4 per cent of all working disabled people) while the rest were casual labourers, retailers, and skilled employees. Only a small proportion of people with disabilities had access to computer and internet, 2 and 1.8 per cent respectively. Although the number of people with disabilities decreased from 2007 (ibid.), there was still a wide gap between what is available and what people with disability need in order to live meaningfully in the society.

Although the recent development of the universal health coverage and the restructuring of government agencies aimed to work more constructively with underprivileged groups, representing a promising future for a more equal society, the country's long history of structural inequality, elitism, administrative inefficiency and lack of commitment to the majority poor should not be simply overlooked and underestimated. It forms a profound basis in Thai normative elements. The following section discusses the deeply rooted conservative and neo-liberal values in the thinking on welfare in Thai society.

Welfare ideologies in Thailand

As pointed out earlier, welfare states usually face a dilemma in responding to public demand for better welfare benefits and in strengthening the economic viability of the country. Thailand is no exception. The massive domestic labour force and the

evolution of cheap labour means the Thai state is faced with the internal demands for democracy and welfare, while the competitiveness of the economy is of no less significance (Schmidt, 2002, p. 94). Nevertheless, the pursuit of economic growth and the maintenance of the status quo have been prioritized in the case of Thailand. Welfare issues have been mainly left to the responsibility and duty of individuals and their families and as such welfare benefits are not perceived as a right. Welfare as rights in the United States was commented on by King Bhumipol as creating disincentives to work and thus disincentives to become 'useful' in the society. Moreover, welfare as a right would be squandering the national budget, giving charity from money earned by hard-working people to 'those who make it a point not to work'[22] (King Bhumibol Adulyadej 1992 cited in Hewison, 1997, p. 67).

A few observations can be drawn from the above comments by the King. First of all, they respond to conservative and neoliberal charity-based approaches to welfare provision, which Thailand had adopted (Reinecke, 1993; Schmidt, 2002; Yupa Wongchai, 1985). This approach is different from a socialist one in which welfare is provided by the state as a right to create more justice; or as 'ideas of democratization from below' (Schmidt, 2002, p. 103). A similar stance was adopted by the former Singaporean Prime Minister Goh who encouraged individuals to take care of themselves and their family. Generous fiscal incentives are offered for those who work after retirement or despite disability, or for those who take care of disabled family members and the elderly. The popularity of the idea of welfare as charity and

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[22] See full quotes in chapter five.

the prevalence of the role of private charity in providing social security was due partly to the fact that this direction contains 'built-in limits'(Ramesh & Asher, 2000, pp. 67-68). This means help can be provided without creating a prolonged situation of dependency on the state, which is beloved by the conservatives (Goede, 1996, p. 325). In addition, the voluntary provision interferes little with the working of the existing free market (ibid.). The Singaporean government encouraged, if not compelled, individuals to meet contingencies on their own as much as possible; only the deserving poor should receive state support (Ramesh & Asher, 2000, pp. 67-68).

The emphasis on individualism and self-help leads us to the second point that can be drawn from the comment by King Bhumipol: the neo-liberal excessive moral value given to work. People who work are preferred over those, according to the conservative stereotype, with a corrupted mind and who are ignorant of work thus making no contribution to society (Goede, 1996; Haylett, 2001). This is a kind of 'equality' in neo-liberal, late modern societies in that it is equivalence in terms of responsibility to pursue one's goal and to ride the wave of the free market (Bauman, 2000, pp. 70-89). This version of equality is normalised regardless of the actual unequal terrain and conditions of competition, a late modern gap between *de jure* autonomy and *de facto* autonomy (ibid.).

It is possible that the individualistic solution may lie behind the principles of self-sufficiency that has been promoted in Thailand over the past two decades. The focus here falls on Thai cultural roots in the form of villagers 'who had been self-

reliant, mutually supportive in a pre-monetary order', and on the reduction of engagement with the global economy while making do with a modest standard of living (McCargo, 2002, p. 6). This perspective sits alongside the scaling down of economic desires and demands. All of these have been criticized as stemming from a rather Buddhistic solution which places the responsibility for adaptation upon individual citizens (ibid.). In the same way, the recent emphasis on civil society can be viewed as hijacking the focus away from issues of immediate importance – inequality , social crisis and poverty (Schmidt, 2002, p. 102). The neo-liberal ideology of 'identifying needs, solving problems and creating opportunities at the individual level' (op.cit., p. 103) may lead to welfare recipients being stigmatized on the grounds that poverty is associated with moral weaknesses. This line of thought deflects responsibility away from states and from the interacting consequences of economic and social change for families, employment, taxation, housing, social security and public services (op.cit., p. 103). In other words, due to the principles of self-sufficiency and the emphasis on civil society, the debate on welfare shifts its focus and turns to centre on issues of personal weakness, individuals' corrupted minds, and away from structural conditions which create injustice and inequality.

Structural inequality in Thai society

From the brief overview of welfare provision and welfare ideologies, the chapter continues by examining the manifestation of structural inequality in Thai society which both form and support the predominance of conservative and

neoliberal welfare ideologies and on the long standing poverty and social exclusion. Structural inequality is examined here through 1) the consolidation of the power of the elite which makes welfare provision merely a part of a power contest between different elite groups as in the case of the Social Security Scheme; and 2) the rapid economic development from the 1960s onwards.

The consolidation of the power of the elite and welfare provision as part of a power contest between different elite groups

Ramesh and Asher (2000, pp. 10-13) point out that welfare policies in Southeast Asia are highly dependent upon political capacity and will of the state rather than upon ideology which can be changed for convenience. They identify three considerations underlying welfare policies in Southeast Asia: industrial survival, political survival and international economic constraints. The states will typically shape welfare policies according to industrial strategies; if the emphasis is on growth, education will be prioritized at the expense of health, housing and social security. At the same time, the states may depart from the primacy when their survival is at stake and establish programmes to build support from the public. Lastly, economic competitiveness can play a significant role as it tends to limit the chance of raising taxes which can be used to fund social programmes (ibid.).

The establishment and enforcement of Thailand's Social Security Act can be used as an example and can be explained in terms of a power contest similar to

above, but with an additional emphasis on struggle between different groups within the state, or close to the state. According to Reinecke (1993),the welfare act was marked by a lack of strong commitments at the first phase of legislative process between 1952 and 1988 (op.cit. , p. 83). At a later phase, it was criticised as driven by the conflict between two major strategic groups in Thai society: the bureaucratic elite (the military and its representatives in the senate) and the economic elite (The Chatchai government which was dominated by the economic elite). In increased conflict with the military over many issues, the government sought support from unions and proposed a draft with plans for increased benefits. However, the senate, backed by the military, voted against the draft which can be interpreted as a politically motivated move to embarrass Chatchai. Finally, the government draft was voted for and the Social Security Act came into force in September 1990 (op.cit. , p. 87). Reinecke observes that welfare policies are not as much a democratic move as a means to consolidate political power and strengthen benefits of the elite groups.

> The Social Security Act in itself had no high political priority for the two most important strategic groups. However, the political decision on the Act and the political tension between government and military coincided; the law became a symbolic issue in this power context and its political importance increased (Reinecke, 1993, p. 89).

Weak unionism and a reduced chance for the voice of the poor to be heard can be explained by interacting elements of Thai politics such as the consolidation of the power of the elite (McCargo, 2002, p. 16), electoral fraud (op.cit. , pp. 6-8), thriving mediocre leaders (op.cit. , p. 6), cronyism (Suntaree Komin, 1995, p. 253) and poor commitment and accountability to voters and the public (Schmidt, 2002, p. 96;

Suntaree Komin, 1995, p. 254). As things stand, labourers and marginalized groups have never had an institutionalised voice in the political arena and their efforts face continued constraints including government suppression and assassination (Schmidt, 2002, p. 96; Turton, 1978). As a consequence, consolidation and contests of power among the elites, along with cronyism, perpetuate structural inequality in Thailand. Another manifestation of such inequality is Thailand's development path that prioritized urban and industrial sectors, at the expense of rural resources and development.

The rapid economic and industrial development since the 1960s

Thailand's intensified economic and industrial development since the 1960s has resulted in many long term consequences for the social structure. The start of the First National Economic Development Plan in 1961 brought change to the country when resources and policies were directed towards the growth of the export-oriented economy and industrial sector, particularly manufacturing (Falkus, 1995; Medhi Krongkaew, 1995). Conservative macroeconomic management with the priority on private sector was aimed at raising the country's income (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007) and policies were biased towards manufacturing and export sectors at the expense of negative effects suffered by the agricultural sector. For example, highest tariff protection was given to luxury consumer durable industries in order to protect domestic manufacturers, while imported agricultural goods were allowed free entry during the 1960s (Caldwell, 1976 cited in Turton, 1978, p. 107). Another example of biased policies was the rice

premium which aimed to limit rice exportation in order to keep the domestic price of rice low and to further maintain the low and investor-friendly urban wage. However, the depressed price of rice put strain on farmers (Falkus, 1995, p. 31).

Moreover, competition over natural resources emerged between urban and rural sectors. Due to the low level of domestic technology and research development and low skill levels among labourers (see the discussion below on quality of education provision), Thailand has been using resource-and-labour intensive approaches in developing the economy (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, pp. vii-viii). There was a rapid and massive clearing of forest for intensification of cash crop plantation such as rice, maize, cassava and eucalyptus since the 1960s. This intensive use of land relied heavily on chemical farm inputs which further placed a strain on ecological systems and caused the deterioration of natural resources which rural people relied upon for their livelihood. In addition, the fierce competition over water and land resources was due to the increased clearing of land for tourism and the construction of dams and power stations (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 213). Furthermore, there was a decline in the share of public expenditure in rural investment (Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyarangsan, & Nualnoi Treerat, 1995, p. 149). In mid-1984, fifty-five per cent of rural households did not have toilets and in 1989, one-fifth of rural households had no access to safe drinking water (op.cit. , p. 147). In 1988, eighty per cent of the poor had only elementary education and sixteen per cent had no formal education whatsoever. The

poorly educated people were forced to work in low paid job because of their limited skills (op.cit. , p. 149).

In conclusion, the clustering of financial, industrial and commercial centres and infrastructure in Bangkok and its vicinities and the inadequacy of basic facilities in the rural areas have created and widened the gap in income and opportunities between the rural and the urban, and between rich and poor rural households.

The pressure on rural income and rural life, coupled with increased population and pressure on agricultural land, led to huge rural-urban migration. An influx of rural migrants to find income opportunities in Bangkok and large cities followed as a common coping strategy for rural people due to the income gap between the agricultural and industrial sectors and between rural and urban areas (Falkus, 1995; Medhi Krongkaew, 1995). In terms of an income gap between the two sectors, the share of agriculture in GDP started to decline from the beginning of the period of the First Plan, from 39.8 per cent in 1960 to 25.4 per cent in 1980 and further down to 12.4 per cent in 1990 while the share of manufacturing increased from 12.5 to 19.6 and to 26.1 per cent in the corresponding period (Medhi Krongkaew, 1995, p. 35). In mid-1980, the majority of export items from Thailand consisted of manufactured products rather than agricultural products. In terms of an income disparity between the urban and the rural, in 1988 the proportion of population living in Bangkok and its vicinities was 14.6 per cent but its income share was about thirty-two per cent, while the North-east which had the highest population

share, at 34.3 per cent, had only 20.4 per cent of total income (Pranee Tinakorn, 1995, pp. 222-223). Between 1981-1988, growth rate of total household income was three per cent for urban households but -0.7 per cent for rural households (Medhi Krongkaew, 1995, p. 52). This demonstrates how the majority on the lowest income was in rural areas, sharing the poor and labour–intensive agricultural sector. Tinakorn (1995, p. 228) stresses that the agricultural sector which produced about one seventh of real GDP in 1990 had to absorb about two thirds of the labour force. It is also worth noting that though migration seemed to be a promising option, rural migrants were faced with a harsh reality. Wages were low and were to be kept as such according to the minimum wage law which favoured large-scale, capital-intensive firms (Falkus, 1995, p. 27). Other conditions that rural migrants encountered included weak unionism and bargaining power, casualisation of labour, sweat shops, insecurity of employment, lack of rights to settle redundancy payments and lack of access to skill training. All of these furthered and exacerbated social exclusion (Pasuk Phongpaichit et al., 1995, p. 149). In addition, these migrants usually lived in slums with poor public provision, including inadequate care and little or no education for their children who were thus subject to further exclusion from good jobs in the future (op.cit. , p. 148).

Although absolute poverty declined[23] following rapid economic development, relative poverty or income inequality increased (Medhi Krongkaew,

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[23] The incidence of poverty reduced from fifty-seven per cent in 1962-1963 to thirty per cent in 1975-1976, to twenty-three per cent in 1981 and to twenty-one per cent in 1988 (Medhi Krongkaew, 1995, p. 53).

1995, p. 53). Between 1975-1976, the richest twenty per cent of the total population received forty-nine per cent of the country's total income while the poorest twenty per cent received only six per cent. In the 1987-1988 period, the richest increased their share of the national income to 54.9 per cent while the share of the poorest fell to 4.5 per cent (Pasuk Phongpaichit et al., 1995, p. 147). The economic development meant that, although farm income dropped, agricultural households were able to supplement their income through non-farm sources and were able to invest in better agricultural techniques and production. However, it was doubtful if these positive effects were experienced by everyone alike. Only large-scale farmers who were not severely indebted and thus did not face huge deficits were likely to be in the only group that gained profit (see Turton, 1978).

Conservative and neo-liberal approaches to welfare provision and poverty intervention, along with the deep-seated social exclusion of the rural majority form the network of relevant relationships for living with poverty and disability in rural Thailand. This social context is mostly muted in *Kon Kon Kon* films. The films focus on personal qualities of the subjects and their uplifting and heroic attempts to escape poverty and disability discrimination. This type of narrative will be discussed (in chapters three and five) as being based on an over-individualistic view. The next section explores the shortcomings of this way of looking at disability before discussing alternatives.

2.5   Studying disability: A non-reductionist approach to studying disability

This section opens by analysing two extreme directions in studying disability: the social model and medical model approaches in order to characterize the distinctiveness and the shortcomings of the two approaches. Following this, non-reductionist approaches are discussed in which disability experience is understood as an interaction of different mechanisms at different levels.

The social model

The social model describes disability as predominantly socially and politically caused through oppression and discrimination. According to social model scholars, impairments – bodily and intellectual dysfunctions – are turned into disability due to the current disabling physical and cultural environments.

> In our view, it is society which disabled physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society...To understand this it is necessary to grasp the distinction between *the physical impairment* and *the social situation, called 'disability'*, of people with such impairment. Thus we define impairment as lacking part of or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976 quoted in Oliver, 1996, p. 25) (my emphasis).

According to this line of thought, responses to and consequences of bodily impairment are not inevitable, universalistic, or 'natural'; perceptions of impairments vary across time and space. Based on materialist and Marxist perspectives, the social model of disability argues that the negative responses to impairment are caused by the contemporary social context defined by capitalism (Barnes, 1996; Oliver, 1996; Thomas, 2007). Social barriers or structural disadvantages to be eradicated are thus mainly material barriers such as un(der)employment, lower wages, inaccessible education systems, inadequate disability benefits, inaccessible transport, houses and public buildings and amenities. Associated cultural and attitudinal barriers, such as social attitudes, social roles, the devaluing of people with disabilities through negative images in the media (Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 44-49), are increasingly addressed by many social model scholars, although the discussions are subordinate to the main focus on the more powerful and foundational economic infrastructure (Thomas, 2007, pp. 63, 81). Moreover, subjective experience of disabled people may be studied, but as long as it serves as a vehicle for exposing the functioning of disablist practices in social domains (Thomas, 2007, pp. 156-157). According to the social model of disability, disability can be abolished by measures such as a totally inclusive social arrangement and the 'barrier-free world'.

Although locating the root cause and solutions in society – its physical and attitudinal barriers – is found to be crucial among many disability activists for political mobilization, the social model approach is criticized for its negligence of effects of impairment (Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 2007). Disability is defined and discussed as

irrelevant to impairment; disability and impairment are antithetical and presented as a robust dualistic pair in the social model (Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas, 2002, 2007). Causes and solutions are made universal and for the purportedly homogeneous group of disabled people, that is, regardless of types of impairment. All types of impairment are deemed as mere differences, comparable to race, sexuality and age (cf. Oliver, 1996). Thus, the discussion on topics such as subjective experience of impairment, pain, and suffering; the changes and construction of self, personality and attitudes are pushed to the margins as they divert attention away from unjust social contexts and belong to the 'personal' domain as justified by traditional social modelists (Thomas, 2007, p. 122).

The medical model

Contrary to the social causation model of disability, medical values and interpretations award priority to impairments as being the cause of disability (Barton, 1996, p. 9). In medical and psychological terms, the starting point of studying impairment is as a tragic happening and a form of deviancy. The emphasis given to individuals brings the medical model close to an 'individual/personal tragedy theory' which regards disability as inhering in the individual and as stemming from functional limitations or psychological losses (Oliver, 1996 cited in Shakespeare, 2006, p. 15). One example of work using an individualist approach is by Eda Topliss (1982) (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 15). The study, though an emphatic account of disadvantages faced by disabled people, does not attend to the contribution of environments,

policies or provision in creating the disability problem. Rather, it focuses on disadvantages as an inevitable consequence of impairment. The approach was also present in the view about disability during the post war period when steps and curbs were not considered problems; instead, the wheelchair was itself the obstacle and wheelchair users needed to adapt to existing environments (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 15). In addition, the model addresses a significant role of medicine in treating, alleviating, rehabilitating, controlling, and eradicating impairments.

Shakespeare (2006), in arguing for a comprehensive approach to the study of disability, attempts to reject the demonization of medical/individual model approaches. He demonstrates how the inclusion of the intrinsic but overshadowed aspect of impairment is extremely crucial. This encompasses restriction and pain, physical or mental, and can be expanded to include psycho-emotional dimensions such as personal experiences of impairment and attitudes to it, personal qualities and abilities, personality and fear of dying (p. 56). Thus the individual model approaches are not to be completely discarded and are argued to be useful in understanding disability.

The medical/individual model approaches have been criticized especially by social modelists and UK disability advocates as causing the categorization of 'disability' through its emphasis on the decisive role of medicalisation and rehabilitation. In addition, some traditional sociological accounts of disability, such as those from Parsons and Durkheim, which imply disability as deviant or pathological

and far from the sociological assumption of individuals as 'rational actors', have been criticized as aligning with the medical/individual tradition (Thomas, 2007, p. 16). The more recent medical sociological studies, however, seek to include experiences of impairment from the point of view of individuals, with a focus on the impact of impairment and suffering on self and identity and the variable ways in which the body lives and articulates sense of self (op.cit. , pp. 156-159). Nevertheless, studies following the medical model often limit themselves to 'being', rather than expanding to 'doing and accessing', and although implicit or explicit reference may be made to social structures and mechanisms, they have little or no explanatory function (op.cit. , p. 167). The *Kon Kon Kon* narrative which emphasizes personal stamina and qualities such as perseverance, with only very subtle allusion or hint to conditions of poverty, can be classified as relying on this type of medical model.

Towards a more comprehensive view of disability

Shakespeare (2006, p. 55), proposes an interactional approach to studying disability. According to this approach disability is an interaction between structural and individual factors. Extrinsic or contextual factors refer to factors arising from the wider context in which s/he finds her/himself, including attitudes and reactions of others, physical environments, wider cultural, social and economic issues. Factors intrinsic to the individual include the nature and severity of her/his impairment, attitudes, personal qualities, abilities and personality. Shakespeare argues for the inclusion of the materiality of body and impairment in the analysis of disability,

stressing that people are disabled by both society *and* their bodies and that 'contextual essentialism', which simply defines disability as the external disabling barriers or oppression, is inadequate (op.cit. , p. 56). A barrier-free world for people with disabilities, if at all possible, will not offer the end to disability as bodily pain and restrictions are real and exert forces in life regardless of their social context (Shakespeare, 2006). Similar to the importance of bodily conditions, is the recognition of personal attitudes and motivations. The same people with the same extent of barriers and oppression can have different experiences, attitudes and reactions to their situation because of difference in self-esteem and self-confidence (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 61). Bury (Thomas, 2007, p. 158), emphasises the importance of studying, along with the structural problems people with disability face, the active steps they take to overcome them. This input from the experiential reveals in more depth the issues that people find most difficult in adapting to impairment and the availability or the lack of resources needed to tackle the problem (Thomas, 2007, p. 158). However, in *Kon Kon Kon* films, as will be seen below, the focus falls disproportionately on this aspect of intrinsic factors; that is, on personality and attitudes, while attention to structural issues such as welfare and social exclusion are left out. Thus, uplifting stories of experiences of overcoming obstacles may be best narrated alongside these issues as connected to conditions in societies that cause such obstacles in the first place. If not, moral narrative risks reducing disability experience to individual moral success (or tragic) stories.

The interactional approach proposes 'impairment continuum' to attack the one-size-fits-all solution and the impairment/disability dualism. The continuum recognises impairment differences encompassing severe and less severe impairments (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 61). It follows that initiatives such as independent living and civil rights will mean different things to different individuals on the continuum; advocating independent living will mean less to an individual with profound intellectual impairment (ibid.). According to this continuum, impairment and disability are no longer dichotomous. Thomas' (2007, pp. 135-136) 'bio-social phenomena' is similar in this respect and argues that impairments and their effects are at one and the same time of the body and socially contingent. An absent hand has an embodied effect while, at the same time, an individual with one hand becomes incompatible with standard appliances that people are expected to live with and able to use. By this Thomas intends to tackle the bio/social dualism (ibid.) and to overcome the limits of pursuing single lines of thought in approaching disability. This is best captured in the following quote.

> It is difficult to determine where impairment ends and disability starts, but such vagueness need not be debilitating. Disability is a complex dialectic of biological, psychological, cultural and social-political factors, which cannot be extricated except with imprecision (Thomas, 2007, p. 128).

Critical realism has been discussed earlier in the chapter as enabling a more rich and comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Stones, 1996). It is a philosophical understanding that acknowledges the multiple dimensions of reality whose existence are independent of whether or not we have conscious knowledge of them. In other words, there exist mind-independent generative structures and non-

observable causal mechanisms, exerting force whether they are detected by human minds or not (Bhaskar 1989 cited in Thomas, 2007, p. 34). Danermark and Gellerstedt (2004, p. 350) apply this to the study of disability. According to the critical realist perspective, the world is stratified with mechanisms working at various levels, generating a range of outcomes in different contexts. In the analysis of disability, these various levels encompass culture, socio-economic, psychosocial, psychological and biological realms (ibid.). As such disability experience should not be reduced either to experience of disablism, as single-mindedly pursued by many traditional social modellists, or to an excessive focus on impairment as an individual tragedy upheld by many scholars in medical sociology. Disability studies should take into account forces at multiple levels, as captured in the following quote.

> In concrete research, it is not possible to grasp all levels...However, focusing on one level still means permanent awareness of the existence and importance of other levels, as there are mechanisms active at other levels influencing the phenomenon under investigation (Danermark & Gellerstedt, 2004, p. 351).

The non-reductionist approaches to disability experience can be applied to different aspects of living with disability. First is the recognition of reality of bodily pain and restriction. The social model, by associating disablism with sexism, racism and homophobia, downplays the importance of physical impairment and deems it irrelevant. According to the social model, if all barriers are removed, disability will be eradicated and people with impairment will be equal to those not having impairment. However, physical impairment represents real and long-term, if not permanent, physical and/or mental difficulties or inabilities which inhibit individuals in a way gender, race, and sexuality normally do not (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 67). Impairment,

even with the presence of totally inclusive arrangements, will pose difficulties once individuals travel out of the city into nature where there is no 'inclusive universal design' (ibid.). Thus, impairment and chronic illness will always present real pain and obstacles in life and consequently there is a need to acknowledge different levels of severity and natures of impairment (Abberley, 1996, p. 63). Having highlighted the reality of impairment, it does not mean disability experience has no social dimension. In fact, impairment can no longer be regarded as a purely natural phenomenon, but should be located in social cultural context as well (ibid.); the phenomenon always and only occurs in a particular social and historical context which determines its nature, prevention, eradication and effects. Thus impairment takes on a social aspect (ibid.).

> (T)he experience of simple cataracts, or erosion of the hip joint, whilst once perhaps reasonably viewed as a product of nature, cannot today be seen in this country separately from the social phenomena of damaging social practices, NHS waiting lists, fund-holding queue jumping, age- and impairment-based discrimination and so on (Abberley, 1996, p. 63).

Likewise, in the area of employment for people with disabilities non-reductionist approaches help us cast the net further away from a one-sided perspective. Social model approaches provide accounts of how capitalism and the consequent changes in the nature of work and economic arrangements are discriminating factors, making disabled people suffer exclusion from the workforce (Barnes, 1996; Barton, 1996). The focus is on, for example wage labour in factories, the speed of factory work, the enforced discipline, the timekeeping and production norms, competition between individual workers, the maximisation of profit (Oliver,

1996, pp. 28-35).[24] This traditional materialist view of disability in the social model, almost an economic reductionist perspective,[25] is best supplemented by analysis of other levels such as cultural and ideological forces and again the material reality of impairment. Earlier the impact of neoliberal ideologies of the moral value of work and self-help which form the basis of the thinking about poverty as caused by defected personality and laziness was discussed. A similar value attached to work can be found in Marxist Utopian thought in the sense that labour, in communist society, is no longer just a means of staying alive but has itself become a vital need (Marx, 1974 cited in Abberley, 1996, p. 68). This implies work as a key element of humanity and a key need of human beings in all eras (Abberley, 1996). Such requirements in order to gain the title 'human' is problematic especially for people with disabilities as it is the only need that most disabled people find difficult to meet (op.cit. , p. 69). Even in the most inclusive work schemes, some disabled people, due to the nature of their impairment, will still be excluded from employability, participation in the economy, and thus independence, which have all been made legitimate requirements for being a social member. Thus, the cultural legacy of equating occupational participation with a full societal membership and the equal status in the society needs to be addressed, not only the physical barriers to integration into work. We need to include critical analysis of norms and values including instrumental rationality; the Enlightenment

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[24] It was claimed that the only exemption was the work environment during the war which was organized instead around the principles of cooperation and collaboration and thus society saw the number of disabled people excluded from the workforce dropping substantially (Humphreys and Gordon, 1992 cited in Oliver, 1996, p. 33).

[25] The traditional materialist view of disability, by arguing that social and economic arrangements of capitalism are to be blamed for disability discrimination, faces criticisms because it deems culture as less significant, as secondary to and as only consequent of the capitalist economy (Thomas, 2002, p. 49).

values of reason, freedom, method, universalism and progress; and the traditional production-based sociological explanations (op.cit. , pp. 70-77).

Similarly, the interaction approaches discussed by Shakespeare (2006), acknowledging the interplay of factors and especially the real obstacles of impairment and physical pain and limitation, argue for compensation and redistribution, not merely equality. Human beings are not all the same and do not have the same capacities and limitations. Disability includes intrinsic limitations and disadvantages and therefore disabled people are among those who require more from their society. Justice by creating a level playing field is not enough: redistribution is required to promote true social inclusion (op.cit. , pp. 65-67). In addition, with the recognition of the heterogeneity of people with disabilities and their nature of impairment, the sharp distinction between rights movement and charity becomes less significant nowadays. Charity as a stigma of dependency and degraded identity, as segregating people with disabilities and as always organized solely by non-disabled people are simply outdated criticisms made by the rights movement. Nowadays, the two camps are not incompatible. Though the rights movement has gained in significance, voluntary organizations and charitable relations will continue to be necessary for disabled people and their families whose complex needs cannot be fully met by themselves, the market and the state. Thus, voluntary organizations will continue to be needed. After all, the fundamental ethic of charity can only be positive and thus not incompatible with that of the rights movement.

Struggling against social inequality and injustice is not incompatible with emotional connection and moral

commitment: after all, it was Che Guevara who wrote, 'The true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love'. Perhaps 'rights *and* charity' might be a better slogan or in the words of the Old Testament prophet Micah, 'justice *and* mercy' (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 466) (my emphasis).

2.6   Cultural representation of disability

Despite paradigm shifts in studying disability, from medical towards sociopolitical, and the steady improvement of legal status of people with disabilities, media on disability did not follow the pattern. Both the demonized and its opposite of pitiful and awe-inspiring images of disabled people has been dominating the cultural representation of disability (Riley, 2005, p. 13). It is non-disabled people who erect the norms for physical body and intelligence and who continue to dominate the production of narratives about disability in the media industry (Norden, 1994, p. 4). Hence there has been a disparity between the cultural representation of disability (by the non-disabled people) and the perception and real experience of people living with disabilities (Norden, 1994, p. 1; Thomson, 1997, p. 10).

In order to understand the public perception and media representation of disability, it is crucial to trace back to the construction of the concept of normalcy and the idea of otherness and deviancy imposed on people with disabilities (Davis, 2010, p. 3). The hegemony of normalcy is argued to be only a recent phenomenon, emerging in the nineteenth century. After all, the word 'normal' - as constituting, conforming to, not deviating from the common type or standard, regular, usual - only enters the English language around 1840 (op.cit. , p. 4). The concept of normalcy is a

product of statistics. In order to achieve sound state policy, numbers and information about the population are compiled. These then serve to construe the type of average man needed so as to construct a strong and prosperous nation (op.cit. , p. 5). The average man represents the average of all human attributes in a given country and hence commands conformity from all citizens. The concept of a norm implies that the majority of the population must or should be part of the norm, unlike the concept of the ideal in classical Greek myths which connoted the divine beauty and body possessed only by the immortal and hence was beyond the attainment of common men and women (op.cit. , pp. 3-4). The creation of the average man in 1835, by the French statistician Adolphe Quetelet, was further supported by the justification for moderation and the middle way during the expansion of the middle class in France in the nineteenth century (op.cit. , p. 5). The mean position became a norm and the ideal to be wished for and possessed. The population that falls under the norm is deviants; the norm divides population into standard and non-standard (op.cit. , p. 7). The bell curve is further developed into quartiles, ranking intelligence and human physiology (op.cit. , p. 9). This statistical ideal, further supported by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, is relevant to the development and widespread of eugenics (op.cit. , p. 7). Eugenics cherishes the idea of improving humans by diminishing deviations and the unfit according to the judgement by the norm. This involves either transforming the defectives[26], which includes the deaf, the blind, the

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[26] The middle way applies to both body and morality and thus the defectives according to the concept of normalcy includes the morally deviant or the 'unfit' according to the middle class norm such as the criminal, the professional tramp, the alcoholic, the pauper (since low income was equated with inefficiency), (Davis, 2010, pp. 6, 10).

physically defective, the insane, into a norm or eliminating them (op.cit. , p. 6). Eugenics combines with an industrial mentality to create uniformed and interchangeable workers for the production of uniform product (op.cit. , p. 10). Hence the two creations during the last two centuries, statistics and eugenics, consolidate the concept of disabled body and associate it with criminality and incompetence.

Much of literal reference about characters with disabilities is based on and hence legitimizes the concept of normalcy. It reinforces the cultural identities and categories of 'disabled bodies and mentality' as the abnormal. The cultural intolerance of anomaly is one of the most popular themes in Western thoughts (Thomson, 1997, p. 33). This is reflected in Aristotle's Poetics in which it is required that for the plot to be unified, anomalies must be excluded. For Kant pure colours are beautiful, while composite colours are not (ibid.). In Flaubert's Madame Bovary, although the role of medicalization and medicine is challenged, the plot and character development still pushes forward the normative, middle way of living of the main character Emma (Davis, 2010, p. 12). There are numerous instances of metaphors of disability in Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent in order to demonstrate limitations on normal morals, such as 'a blind belief in the righteousness of his will against all mankind', 'unmoved like a deaf man', 'a dance of lame, blind, mute thoughts', 'a whirl of awful cripples' (Conrad, 1986 cited in Davis, 2010, p. 15). One character with deafness from Joseph Conrad's Under Wester Eyes, Razumov, faces an ultimate punishment of being invisible, useless. Razumov's fate ends with he being run over by a car, implying the impossibility to survive with disabilities (Davis, 2010, p. 17). Moreover, characters' physiology and morality are made inherited from parents and

remain unaffected by circumstances in life, such as Oliver Twist's bourgeois morality

and linguistic normativity. This emphasizes the idea of inherited traits and biological

determinism and fatalism (op.cit. , p. 14). Characters are described according to the

ableist standard of normal head, face and body features, which are linked to family

traits. It is worth quoting in full here Ossipon's gaze at Stevie and the connection he

draws to Stevie's sister in Conrad's The Secret Agent:

> he gazed scientifically at that woman, the sister of a degenerate, a
> degenerate herself- of a murdering type. He gazed at her and invoked
> Lombroso…He gazed scientifically. He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose,
> at her eyes, at her ears…Bad!...Fatal! (Conrad, 1968 quoted in Davis,
> 2010, p. 16)

Characters with disability are usually loaded with negative mental state of

mind or qualities. This represents the deep fear of the non-disabled and the unknown

territories of illness and death. These are perceived as threats to society's normalcy

(Davis, 2010, p. 17; Norden, 1994, p. 5). Non-disabled characters usually gain insights

into life from the threatening fate of disabled characters. The tragic end of the

character Razumov, mentioned above, is gazed upon by Miss Haldin whose 'eyes are

open at last' and whose 'hands are free now' (Davis, 2010, p. 17). Here a glance at

differences, at 'the maw of disability', reminds the non-disabled of death,

abnormality, the loss of control, autonomy and self-determination (Thomson, 1997,

p. 41). The misrecognition ultimately protects and sustains its opposite which is the

notion of normalcy and a standardized individual (Davis, 2010, p. 17). The non-

disabled posit people with disabilities as Others, gazing at them and being fascinated

by their so-called 'disorders'. This reflects the former's dreams and fears (Norden,

1994, p. 5). Thus the difference in physiology are made manifest in different traits of

character and hence life paths. This consolidates the purported differences between people with disabilities and non-disabled people.

The representations of people with disabilities are ambivalent. There are both images sinned with freakiness, self-pity, anger or despairs on one hand, and images shed with awe-inspiring virtues (Norden, 1994, 2001; Riley, 2005; Thomson, 1997) on the other. There are emerging types of representation of disabled people as rights campaigners and as consumers. The former tries to question and undermine the disabling and discriminating society and to demand equal rights, all corresponding to the social model of disability as discussed earlier. The latter – people with disabilities as consumers – represents living with and not fighting against disability and the world, similar to the postmodernist embracing and celebrating of differences (Riley, 2005, pp. 3-4) and to the perception of disability as difference rather than a deviation from norm in need of correction (Thomson, 1997, p. 22). However, images of sinful freaks and the redemptive heroes are more pervasive (Riley, 2005, pp. 3-4) and we will discuss them in details.

The exhibition of freak bodies are shown as astonishing, remarkable, ugly, hybrid, or danger. It aims to establish the contrast with and supremacy of the normal and standardized, civilized bodies (Thomson, 1997, pp. 52-66). This include images of 'abnormality' such as violent beasts asking to be destroyed and comic characters who cause troubles for themselves and others (Norden, 1994, pp. 3-4). The courageous, overcoming, heart-warming triumphant stories of extraordinary disabled people often operate through the contrast between the physiological lack and the

compensated gift of insights (op.cit. , p. 4). Both types of dominant representations reflect the medicalized, individualized perception of disability which regards disability as personal problem (Riley, 2005, p. 13). Hence individuals have a choice to either overcome the obstacle or to remain succumbed by it. Both types of representation are imbued with ideologies. The deviant freaks personify evil, embodying otherwise formless dangers. A sense of deviance bestowed upon people with disabilities helps maintain and reinforce social hierarchy and status quo and ultimately the stability of the society. The narratives of triumphant disabled people or the 'supercrips' carry forward values of self-reliance, self-determination, autonomy which are part of the standard of liberal individualism in neoliberal capitalism (Thomson, 1997, pp. 41-45).

The two dominant types of representation, the sinful and the redemptive disabled people, can be argued to reduce the reality of living with disability to suit certain ideas or purposes of the non-disabled. Representation is a common process of constructing and consolidating cultural identities and categories, or what Alfred Schutz calls recipes, in order for people to organize raw experience and to routinise the world, especially situations people have little direct knowledge (Thomson, 1997, p. 10). The interpretation and representation of the material world tends to imbue any difference with significance (Thomson, 1997, p. 11) or social stereotypes (ibid.), the same way as the media refracts disabilities to articulate specific messages, whether this be fame, shock, revenge or entertainment (Riley, 2005, p. 2). This is however not to say that the able-bodied are unable to have insights into the experience of people with disabilities. More often than not, they twist the image to fit preconceived notions (Norden, 1994, p. 4). This process obscures the complexity of

the bearers of those differences (Thomson, 1997, p. 11), arguably tidying multiple configuring narratives and reducing them into a simple and linear one. The results are overdetermined, rigid labels or categories (cf. Thomson, 1997, pp. 10-11) and dualistic pairs of virtues and vices for quick and uncomplicated references to the unknown world of living with disability and illness. The dynamic social relations of real living with disabilities amid ableist worldviews and practices are simplified into static and minimal descriptions of a character. Moreover the simplistic representation objectifies, and hence denies people with disabilities any opportunities for subjectivity or agency (Thomson, 1997, p. 11). Any idiosyncrasies of individuals with disability seem unfit and uncomfortable and thus inconvenient to be included in disability narratives. Such narratives would challenge the limitations of the stereotypes available[27] and disturb the image of otherness that the normate[28] impose on disabled figures. This so far rather careless and quick recipe to account for the experience of disability shapes perceptions of both non-disabled and people with disability alike. For the former, the representation serves as a gaze upon the yet unfamiliar realms of illness and abnormality. For the latter, the representation offers resources to reflect on selves and a challenge to construct an alternative new perspective. Disability is more complex and dynamic than representation usually

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[27] The stereotypes arguably centre on the constancy and the pervasiveness. The constancy refers to people with disability being assigned a single and constant attribute, be it virtues or vices. The pervasiveness refers to the perception that disability affects both physical and personality or 'disabled inside out'. See multiple examples of these two themes in Thompson (1997, p. 11).

[28] Thompson refers to 'normate' as the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. It is then the 'constructed' identity of those who can step into a position of authority and can wield the power it grants them (Thomson, 1997, p. 8).

suggests, as discussed earlier in the non-reductionist approach to studying disability and as captured in the following quote:

> Disability, then, can be painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, endearing, challenging, infuriating or ordinary. Embedded in the complexity of actual human relations, it is always more than the disabled figure can signify (Thomson, 1997, p. 14).

2.7   *Conclusion*

This chapter provides a background discussion for the analysis of *Kon Kon Kon* films. First, it suggests critical realism and hermeneutics as frameworks to guide media texts in how to effectively portray a complex social world, as a way to enhance public critical awareness and social responsibility. It is rather unrealistic for a film to cover all aspects of one social phenomenon. However, it should aspire to allude to the way in which decisions and actions of people are influenced by their multi-layered past and present, made up of social, political and ideational factors. This way, actions are grounded in historical contexts and not left floating freely or stemming from freewill alone.   The discussion on Durkheim's moral individualism and situated freedom addresses the constructive relationship between self and society in which self-identity and autonomy is formed within the context of, and is exercised for, the benefits of the community. This is contrary to both an egoistic freedom and passive resignation. The discussion on welfare ideologies focuses on conservative and neo-liberal approaches which tend to individualise poverty and are less likely to intervene

in the market to create equal living conditions. This forms the basis of Thailand's welfare provision and thus individuals are left to overcome poverty and disability by themselves, with less or no recognition of injustice and highly hierarchical social arrangements that underlie their predicament. The discussion on disability studies follows a similar direction in that that disability should be viewed as a complex phenomenon, an interplay of factors on different levels: culture, socio-economic and biological realms. This prepares us for subsequent chapters where the films and their rather linear simplistic moral narrative are analysed.

Chapter 3: Key themes from *Kon Kon Kon* documentaries on disabled people

3.1 Introduction

This chapter extracts themes and plot from ten *Kon Kon Kon* documentary films about disabled people. These two elements suggest the extent of contextualization that the films provide for events or social lives. This contextualization will be positioned against benchmarks of ontological complexity. The chapter argues that themes and theses implied in the films are values at the individual level such as self-reliance, perseverance, resourcefulness and resilience; as well as kindness and helpfulness towards others. Issues beyond the level of individual qualities are incorporated to the films in varying degrees of explicitness but in most cases do not serve as a main theme or thesis. These are, for example, the poor quality of education and job opportunities for disabled people, inadequate maternal and infant care, as well as transportation and road safety issues. The *fabula,* or reality claim of the films, is that one should improve one's own life singlehandedly and that it is not helpful to locate an external cause and solution without first trying to solve the problem by oneself. Thus, unless one works hard initially and then encounters difficulties, external intervention is not to be demanded or is unimportant or even harmful. With such *fabula*, the level of contextualization of the films is rather limited. The choices, desires, aspiration, and character traits of subjects of the films are portrayed as having no depth; that is, as not being influenced by other events in different times and spaces. By giving voice to ordinary people such as people with

disabilities and villagers, the films convey the message that it is they and not the authorities that have control over their lives. By presenting people with disabilities in a new, positive light, the films support the worldview that success and happiness is not dependent upon status at birth but on individual performance. Although this aims to empower individuals, the simple moral tales do not capture the dynamic of poverty. In other words, while addressing the issue of personalities, virtues and vice, the films ignore almost all other explanations of poverty, inequality and social exclusion at other levels.

The chapter opens with a discussion of methodological approaches: thematic narrative analysis and *sjuzet - fabula*. This is followed by themes extracted from each of the ten films. The third section of the chapter analyses these themes and the level of the films' contextualization.

3.2   Methodological approaches

3.2.1 Thematic narrative analysis

Thematic narrative analysis is applied in this chapter to find an underlying assumption or theme in each film. The approach allows researchers to identify propositions that reappear in the form of thematic assumptions taken for granted by the writer (cf. Riessman, 2008, p. 68). Data, or in this study films, are interpreted in light of a thematic developed by the investigator and influenced by prior and

emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data itself, political commitments, and other factors (Riessman, 2008, p. 54). Thematic narrative analysis treats a text as whole to preserve the wealth of detail contained in long sequences; that is, the internal logic, flow and connection between elements in long sequences (op.cit. , p. 74). This allows a case-centred study, or for each text or film to be studied for its own particularity. This differs from other content analysis, in which for instance thematic categories are identified and common elements or codes highlighted across cases or texts by fracturing each case into segments, lifting those segments off from their original context for an analysis (ibid.). However, by keeping sequences intact and preserving the original logic of flow and context in which those elements originally arise, the analysis can incorporate broader elements of a text and consider how they are deployed to deliver certain outcomes on the readers/viewers.

Thematic narrative analysis is used to identify filmmakers' propositions implied in the flow and context of elements within the film. Thematic narrative analysis for documentary involves investigating the flow and context of elements of *narrative* and *narration (stylistic)*. These two groups of elements are discussed in turn below.

Narrative[29] elements include, first and foremost *causal motivation* and *time and space* (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 75). They also include *opening and ending*

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[29]Narrative can be used to refer to 'a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space' (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 75). Thus, it is not merely a collection of events. 'An old woman is sitting in front of a hut'; 'A young girl sells pomeloes'; 'A pot of rice is boiling on a stove' are three separate events. However, a narrative could be: 'An old woman is ill and cannot work. There is

(Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 93) and *a pattern of development* (op.cit. , p. 87). A pattern of development directs the way the events and actions in the narrative progress and thus this pattern is highly involved with the cause and effect assumption of the film. The most common general pattern is 'a change in knowledge' in which a character learns something in the course of the action, with the most crucial knowledge coming at the final turning point (op.cit. , p. 86). In investigative films, the goal-oriented pattern of development is usually employed in which a character takes steps to achieve a desired objective or state of affairs (op.cit. , p. 86). In another usual pattern, found in classical Hollywood narrative, actions will spring primarily from the individual character, identified as personal psychological causes such as decisions, choices, character traits (op.cit. , p. 94).

Another element of a narrative of documentary is *argument*. With argument, raw footages are turned from isolated facts into pieces of evidence demonstrating a system of signification, or a web of meaning (Nichols, 1991, p. 117), or a context for a particular view (op.cit. , p. 126). Consequently, argument represents an authorial presence (op.cit. , p. 126).[30] Such authorial presence can be recognized at two levels:

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no money left in the house. A young daughter has to go out to sell pomeloes. That evening she comes back with some money to buy rice and cook it for herself and her mother'. The three events are now part of a series of cause and effect. The sickness of the mother causes the young girl to work. The work gives them some money to have food on the table. We can also connect the events spatially. The old woman is in the hut. The young daughter walks around the village. The pot of rice is in their kitchen. Time can also be identified. The sickness of the mother occurs before the daughter goes out to work which occurs before the cooking of rice. All of the action can be running possibly from a morning to the evening. This example (cf. Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 75) can also illustrate how raw footage is different from a documentary as the latter incorporates proposition about cause and effect and time and space. (cf. Nichols, 1991, pp. 113-117).

[30] It follows that there is never a pure one-to-one correspondence between fact and argument as for every fact, more than one argument can be fashioned (Nichols, 1991, p. 117).

perspective and commentary (Nichols, 1991, pp. 118,126; Stones, 2002b, pp. 365-369). *Argument in perspective* is the way in which a documentary text offers a particular point of view tacitly through its choice and organization of evidence (Nichols, 1991, p. 118). Examples are the way some films are built heavily around interviews which implicitly present the filmmaker's argumentative perspective; although without help from descriptions and accounts supplied by interviewees or commentary it is already clear where the filmmaker stands on the central issue (op.cit. , p. 126). It is a continuous and implicit form of argumentation (op.cit. , p. 118) and resembles 'style' in fiction (op.cit. , p. 126). Perspective is implied by the selection, depiction and internal organization of the visual events and sequences of the film (Stones, 2002b, p. 366). An example is a film's choice to concentrate on visual tropes of particular themes as having an explanatory force to the event. Perspective can also refer to individuals recruited to speak in the film, but not for the film (Nichols, 1991, p. 128). Such boldness is *argument in commentary*. Commentary is a more intermittent and explicit form of argumentation. Although it does not limit itself only to the verbal form and can be visual and aural[31] and is more recognizable in the form of commentary of a voice-over narrator (op.cit. , pp. 118-119), anchorpeople and presenters (op.cit. , p. 129), or the view stated by the filmmaker or social actors recruited to the film (op.cit. , p. 126) which all provide the steering or agenda-setting process (op.cit. , p. 129). Commentary speaks to the audience directly, especially the commentary of the voice-over which diverts our attention from the world

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[31] The visual and aural forms of commentary arguments are, for example, the particular way interviews and commentary are contextualized, a disruption and a cross-cutting by a certain sequence, or anything operates outside the normal editing pattern or stylistic expectations (Nichols, 1991, p. 118).

represented (perspective) to the discourse or the logic of the text and gives didactic orientation (op.cit. , p. 129).

A *thesis* pointing to the **'**the social causes or processes that have produced events' as a means of argument (Stones, 2002b, p. 360) usually exist in narratives. Thus, arguments and thesis imply a network of relationships that, according to the filmmaker, are relevant to the events portrayed. An example of this is the thesis of deeply rooted ethnic hatred that is found to be running in the argumentation, perspective and commentary, of the documentary 'The Root of War' which purports to identify the causes of the destruction of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (see Stones, 2002b).

The second textual element of a film is narration or stylistic elements. *Narration* refers to the way of distributing information in order to achieve specific effects (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 88). Narration determines the process by which cues are arranged in ways that withhold information, to achieve curiosity or surprise, or supply information for the sake of creating expectations or increasing suspense (ibid.) Narrational patterns include *the choice of narrator, the range of story information* and *the depth of story information*.[32] These will be discussed later in

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[32] *The choice of narrator* is between either a character in the story or a non-character narrator, as commonly recognized as the anonymous voice of God (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 92). *The range of story information* is determined by the adoption of either an omniscient, unrestricted narration which tells us what no character knows, or a restricted narration which limits audience knowledge to what certain characters know (op.cit. , p. 89). *The depth of story information* is the depth into a character or social actor's psychological states. The narrative is objective when it confines us wholly to information about what characters say and do or their external behaviour and it is subjective when it

relation to their featuring in the studied films. Other narrational devices involve *the manipulation of photographic image*.[33] These narrational patterns determine what Nichols (1991, pp. 119-125) identifies as possible stances a documentary can take in relation to its own argument. In other words, narrational elements are ways in which a documentary lets its knowledge be known through the degree of knowledge, the degree of subjectivity, the degree of consciousness, and the degree of communicativeness. Narration or stylistic elements therefore serve narrative elements such as perspective and commentary arguments. It is thus crucial for critical readers of films to understand the function of these rhetorical, stylistic techniques as they convey the text's selectiveness and hence conceal or show any gaps or limitations of knowledge of the film.

3.2.2 Plot and story

After extracting themes (or thesis) through exploring narrative and narration elements, this study assesses claims about social life against ontological complexity. In order to this, another methodological approach is used. This is the identification of *sjuzet* and then *fabula*. *Fabula* is then assessed according to its complexity.

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gives us access to what characters see, hear (perceptual subjectivity through the point-of-view shot and sound perspective), and think (mental subjectivity) (op.cit. , p. 91).

[33] Through, for example, over-exposure; fast/slow motion effect; different distance of camera position to the object; camera movement; as well as editing that can convey graphic, rhythmic, spatial and temporal relations between shots.

In a film**,** *sjuzet* or plot contains events visibly and audibly present before viewer (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 76). Possible ways these events can be arranged are through a normal plot (abc), a flashback (acb) or a beginning *in medias res* (bc) (Chatman, 1978, p. 20). From the plot, or what is narrated, the viewer can infer and construct the whole narrative or *fabula* or story. Thus *fabula* or story refers to all events in a narrative, both those presented in a plot and those which can be inferred from the plot (op.cit. , p. 20). In the context of analysing knowledge claims about social reality, *fabula* carries a specific meaning, and refers to the story of characters and events as it actually happened in real time and space (Stones, 2002b, p. 361).

What happens at the level of the *sjuzet* is guided by *fabula* and here lies the thrust of a sociological analysis of a film's representation of reality: the examination of the quality of the logic that governs the film's *fabula*. 'In real time and space' in this sense should be constructively interrogated as it indicates the wealth of sociological imagination by the filmmaker. 'In real time and space' could either be based on understanding and/or respect for social complexity, which would likely result in the events and processes in the *sjuzet* text being well located in a sufficient network of relevant relationships, or on the lack of it, which would produce accounts of 'uprooted' events (Stones, 2002a, 2002b). That the *fabula* is 'a series of events according to the logic of events which is the same rule governing the society and human behaviour' (Bal, 1997, p. 5) is not to be taken unproblematically when attempting to engage social theory with media analysis as it can be 'the same rule'

inherited among media of light entertainment (see Stones, 2002a, 2002b). By analysing the presented scope of and nature of relations among events at the level of *sjuzet* or text, the film's implied *fabula* or its argumentation about social reality can be uncovered and assessed against the benchmark of ontological complexity.

In the present study, thematic narrative analysis focusing on the flow, sequence and context of narrative and narration elements is combined with the retrieval of *fabula* or reality claim. This will allow us to assess the social complexity of the claim. The next section applies these approaches to *Kon Kon Kon* films.

3.3   Themes in Kon Kon Kon films

It is perhaps useful to begin this section with an introduction to common features of *Kon Kon Kon* films. First, each *Kon Kon Kon* film, which is forty-five minutes long on average, usually has the following organizational pattern: 1) credits and the theme score; 2) an introduction by an anchorperson; 3) an account or report from a presenter which is composed of sequences from the subject's daily life or focal activities, exchanges and an interview with the subject and other social actors, and on/off-screen narration; 4) the anchorperson summarizing points to be picked up from the film; and 5) end credits.

The *Kon Kon Kon* documentary has an expository mode and addresses the viewer directly in order to advance an argument with narration and narrative

elements moving in service of this persuasion (cf. Nichols, 1991, pp. 34-35). There is a high degree of authorial presence in order to establish and maintain rhetorical continuity or to support the film's propositional element or its logic (op.cit. , p. 37). In this mode it is typical that witnesses give their testimony within a frame they cannot control and may not understand and their task is, merely, to contribute evidence to the filmmaker's argument (op.cit. , p. 37). This is one difference from the observational mode in which the impression of 'lived' and exhaustive spatial and temporal continuity are the main concern and whose purest form eschews the constructing of a rhythm, and even interviews (op.cit. , pp. 38-39). Thus in *Kon Kon Kon*, with its expository mode, the commentator's argument moves the text forward (op.cit. , p. 34) and the commentary provides coherence and governs the arrangement of textual elements.

The anchorperson is almost always Suthipong Thammawut, a moustached man in a casual outfit and cap. He is the programme's founder and a man who is 'often seen as eccentric and obstinate' (Krungthep Thurakij, 22 March 2003). Suthipong described himself as someone who is 'not inconsiderate, docile, or a loser' but 'lives the life according to what he honestly believes' (Siam Thurakij, 23 March 2003).It is therefore fair to say that, after years as a professional in media and entertainment and as an earnest author, he has earned recognition by combining idealism and pragmatism, as well as both trust and respect from the public. His remarks in the introduction and the epilogue lend a strong support to the thrust of the film. Each of the films will be discussed below, highlighting their key themes.

3.3.1 The happiness of Mankong [34]

Mankong (forty years old) has impaired mobility and speech muscles. He lives with his parents in Nakonpathom, Central Thailand. Mankong grows vegetables which he then sells, together with those he travels to buy from a wholesale market. The film can be argued as underlining the themes of *'a happy life deriving values of perseverance, hard-working, self-reliance and mutual support'*. That *'these values can change life'* is another thesis implied in the film. However, there are other elements from interviewees' accounts (commentary argument) and plot elements which are not emphasized in the film. Their function is limited to providing context for the two main themes, while in fact these elements can have direct relationship to the purported 'self-made happiness' of Mankong.

Two main themes can be implied from the plot. The opening studio address guides how the whole film should be perceived: how to achieve happiness despite difficult economic and political situations. The first set of sequences involves the presenter accompanying Mankong to see how he buys and transports vegetables from a wholesale market back to home and then to prepare and sell them in a nearby market, using his trolley. A great amount of physical and mental effort is demonstrated. The second set of sequences concentrates on how he works patiently on his vegetable plot with his twisted arms and legs using simple farm tools, all without complaining or resentment but with a sense of satisfaction. The plot ends

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[34] The film was broadcasted in two parts on 3 and 10 March 2009.

with Mankong arriving home in the evening exhausted but happily and being welcomed by his mother. She admits that in the early stage of her son's life she was worried and sad, now things have changed as he can work and earn money and she is not worried any more, implying a change caused entirely by Mankong and his exceptional qualities. The commentary concludes that 'one can be happy every single day, regardless of the external social situation', stressing again the first theme of a happy life achieved through perseverance, hard-work, self-reliance and care for others.

The commentary in the introductory part of the film centres on Mankong's commitment to persevere in order to work and to become self-reliant despite obstacles of poverty, impairment and illiteracy. Later on and throughout the film, interview accounts of Mankong's determination in trying and remaining to be hard-working and economically independent are incorporated. Testimonies of his family and other market vendors are also included to demonstrate their admiration for his determination, hard work and friendliness. This thesis is also evident in an interview testimony of the market owner who gives Mankong a stall free of charge. His comments about Mankong include, 'hardworking', 'not being burdensome to the society despite his impairment… thus I am happy to have him working in this market'. The accompanying visual tropes focus on the unforgiving conditions the subject is placed in but which he amazingly can overcome. The images of Mankong's arduous movements, close-ups of his twisted upper body, arms, legs, pushing his loaded

trolley up the bridge or working on his plot are repeated in a slow-motion and with an uplifting tune.

The theme of perseverance or overcoming an unyielding and antagonistic environment can be implied from a sequence in which Mankong works the soil. The presenter tries himself in order to find that it is actually very difficult even for a strong, able man, to prepare the clay soil as it keeps sticking to the spade in large lumps. He then makes an observation to the camera concerning the amount of effort required to work the soil of the whole plot all alone as Mankong does on a regular basis.

> Presenter: It is really hard, yes it is.
> Mankong: Not hard, I can try.

The presenter then repeats Mankong's reply with admiration.

Another sequence that conveys metaphorically Mankong's actual physical strength and perseverance is when he pushes his fully loaded trolley up the bridge. The sequence is shown in elaborated length, with a slow motion effect. One shot captures Mankong from beneath his bent head which is almost directly under the sun, in order to express the hot weather he usually works in. The sequence is accompanied by a war drum tune.

The work is presented as having a moral value and is expressed in the sequence when the presenter follows Mankong from the market back to home. Mankong then cleans the flip flops he has used all day while the presenter looks on.

Then there is a cut to a sequence at another time when the presenter shows a basket full of flip flops to the camera, all of which are all worn out in a particular way due to the way Mankong walks with his twisted legs. This is then followed by the presenter's comment:

> This flip flop is a certificate from the university of life to award Mankong's perseverance towards achieving self-reliance and dignity.

In some places, the film emphasizes the theme of mutual help among villagers. When the presenter asks about the reason for exchanging goods among themselves, one vendor, after receiving some vegetables from Mankong and handing a bag of mackerels back to him, says, 'To share. Yes, we usually share things this way at the end of the day so we do not have to buy food'. In another sequence when Mankong walks back home one evening, he stops at a food shop to collect a large bag full of cooked food. There is a cut back to a sequence at another time when Mankong drops off a big bag of vegetables at this food shop. Cutting back to the original sequence, the presenter approvingly summarises the sharing among people. The commentary then continues by indicating that 'along the way of being independent, it is impressive to see how Mankong receives help and support from many people'. This is accompanied by a visual trope of a collection of images of support in Mankong's daily life: help regarding transportation, food gifts and food exchange after the market.

It is perhaps worthy to note here the difference implied in the film between taking part in reciprocity and being a recipient of help. Not only do the films express

an admiration of the mutual help among people, it also shows how Mankong declines offers of help if he sees he cannot give anything in exchange. For example, at one stage the presenter offers to help push his loaded trolley across a busy road or carry heavy bags. In one scene we hear the answer to why he prefers people not having pity for him but buying his vegetables as if he were one of ordinary sellers. 'I can do things on my own. I do not want people to feel awkward. I want them to be happy when I'm around'. We can infer that receiving assistance without being able to return anything back is undesirable. This can be further linked to a neo-liberal emphasis on self-help and the conservative legacy that poverty handouts are for those who are too lazy to work and thus stigmatising the recipient. This is one defining feature of the welfare ideology in Thailand (Schmidt, 2002, p. 103).

Featuring in the films are elements emerging as part of the plot: the poverty, landlessness, poor child healthcare and lack of educational opportunity for people with disabilities. However, the film dips into these issues merely so as to provide context in which the protagonist somehow manages to thrive. The film chooses not to dwell on the motives behind the subject's decision and action of self-reliance, and behind his mother's relief that her son is now able to live independently even without her around. It may well be that an individual is determined to realise such goals because of the insecurity of disabled life without adequate welfare services. One only has oneself or close family members and not the state to rely on, an alternative interpretation to the story the film does not provide us with.

Having said that, the film does contain a mild social criticism when the presenter, while observing Mankong working the hard soil relentlessly, asks about the plants Mankong would grow if he owned a piece of land. Mankong, sounding more as if relating a dream, names different kinds of fruits and vegetables that he wants to plant. This is followed by a moment of silence from the presenter. He then says to the camera, 'Look at the difference between people who do not have and those who possess in abundance. This world is not balanced, right, Mankong?'. There is no reply from the taciturn subject of the film. A sentimental tune running throughout this sequence demands extra attention from the viewer and the scene signifies merely an allusion to a very complex issue. Thus it can be said that the film does not totally ignore the social dimensions or the circumstances shaping the life of an individual. It is simply, as implied by the film, much easier to begin working on oneself than to expect complex social issues to be resolved or to yield themselves to our demands.

3.3.2 Ake the penguin: a man who draws life with his feet[35]

Akachai, or Ake, is 1.10 metres tall and has no arms, only two short legs. His appearance resembles a penguin and that is how he has come to be known in the Bangkok art college where he studies. He works after class, sketching in a night market. He is from Nakonsawan, Central Thailand and carries the dream of returning to the rural area to be an art teacher. The film can be argued to underline the themes of *'the life-changing qualities of hard-working, self-reliance, resourcefulness and a*

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[35] The film was broadcasted in two parts on 5 and 12 August 2008.

happy and extrovert personality'. This can be viewed as an attempt to reverse the negative image of disability. The second theme is one of *'the crucial role of love and support from family for people with disabilities'*. The third is *'a plea to the public to improve opportunity for people with disabilities'*. There are other elements alluded to in interviewees' accounts, such as educational opportunities, and electricity and sanitation in rural areas. These elements, however, are not given main emphasis as they might disturb the main theses of the film, although in a real world they have a causal relationship to the themes (cf. Shepherd, 2007, pp. 14-16).

The three main themes are implied from the plot. After introducing his impairment, the plot follows Ake's life in the college: attending lectures, completing coursework, spending time with friends and participating in student activities. After suggesting that his life is not far different from most students, the plot takes us on to describe the special features that serve him as a subject of a *Kon Kon Kon* film. In his accommodation we see how he learns to adapt to a world not built with people with disabilities in mind, some self-made facilities and his life skills. The plot then takes us to his much needed part-time jobs at night which provide him with extra money to survive in Bangkok. The plot continues with Ake at home with loving parents in a rural village during a term break. His cheerful and up beat personality is made obvious and emphasised throughout the plot. The ending focuses on his future and a plea for better opportunities for people with impairment.

Arguably, one of the film's main aims is to correct prejudices against disability. This is done through presenting the real life circumstances and experience of a disabled. First, Ake is presented as similar to the non-disabled in terms of having dreams and of being committed to contributing to society. Second, Ake requires extra effort to fulfil these goals. The end of the film implores the public to have compassion towards people with impairment.

The film attempts to reverse negative images of disability by addressing areas of distorted public opinion about disabled people. These can be summarized as three common stereotypes and negative representations of disability in electronic media proposed by Gartner and Joe (1987 cited in Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 198): disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their fate; and disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them. Moreover, 'the meager nature of the lives of disabled characters' which leads toward bitterness and anger and consequently 'secludes the offending party within a drama of his or her own making' has been widely depicted in the media and literature (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 198). In this film, Ake is presented as a cheerful, considerate, creative individual and a contributing member of society; his life is well lived and widely admired by people around him. The cheerful and happy tone is clearly spelled out throughout the film in the perspective argument that captures images of Ake's smiling face and his amusing remarks towards friends and himself. The perspective argument also deploys up-beat, humorous interview accounts of art student friends and Ake's interactions with them. The commentary argument

including testimonies of friends and teachers informs the audience of Ake's cheerfulness and optimism, 'living without feeling inferior', 'being determined and goal-oriented', 'not being a burden and can do many things just like us'. This is supported by Ake's own account as, 'I can do things by myself, there is no need to be a burden to others. I never look at my body as inferiority. That will only discourage myself'. This account expresses well the theme of the positive image of disability: satisfaction and happiness in living among others.

The fact that Ake can live harmoniously within society is effectively conveyed in a sequence in the college canteen. It shows how he understands and accepts the limitations of his body and illustrates his creative approach or survival strategy to be able to live happily with others, without having to exclude himself. The sequence starts with Ake approaching the till to order and asking for the food to be delivered to him at a table. The dish is served to him a little later. Then a sequence follows in which his friend puts a straw into a bottle of water and moves it closer for him to have a sip. After a playful conversation and the meal finishes, the final shot shows Ake walking over to the food seller, gesturing to her to take money from his shirt pocket. The commentary running along this sequence stresses Ake's ability to adapt well in order not to let the environment inhibit his life. Later in the film when the presenter visits his accommodation, we witness how he lives, how he reaches a light switch using a long stick and how he cooks rice for himself, which is shown in detail and with amusing and light-hearted editing and accompanying soundtrack.

The disabled subject is portrayed with the positive characteristic of being hard-working. A scene in which he works drawing cartoons in a night market to earn extra cash incorporates the presentation of his skilful foot movement and accounts from passers-by paying compliments such as 'amazing', 'a wonderful example for all lazy people'. The scene ends when we see Ake, after finishing at the market at one in the morning, doing his coursework until four and grabbing a short sleep before attending a lecture in the morning a few hours later.

The film's theme of presenting a positive image of people with disability relies on a faithful depiction of living with disability. This necessitates a realist style, although arguably a compromised realism and thus resembles the psycho realism common in films rather than social realism appreciated by social scientists. Psycho realism is one effect of realism in films (Nichols, 1991) and maximizes our identification with character, scene, action and story. This is achieved through the adoption of the 'zero-degree style' which minimizes its own status as socially constructed reality (Nichols, 1991, p. 173). This includes editing that maintains consistent screen direction and eye-line matches across cuts; and editing in relation to movements that draw attention away from the cut. It is aimed to build a sense of coherent physical orientation and spatial volume that centres on the intersubjective realm of character relations and to direct all of our curiosity, anticipation, empathy and suspicion to the realm of the story itself (Nichols, 1991, p. 173).

A scene after Ake finishes work at the night market illustrates the use of psycho realism in the film. The camera shows a close shot of Ake packing up his drawing equipment and a further shot of him slowly crossing the road with his equipment on his shoulders. Then there is a perceptual, or Ake's eye-level, view of a beggar sitting on the footpath. The camera pans to capture Ake walking past the beggar. Then the presenter who accompanies him asks him a question, with a beggar behind as a background.

Presenter: How do you feel when you see this?
Ake: I don't know. It reflects something (Pause). It is like we cannot choose our life. Life depends on opportunity.
Presenter: Some normal people try to make themselves look pitiful, frail or disabled to earn money this way, while for you if you decide to sit and beg you will easily get some money. How do you think of these people?
Ake: I think those who beg have many different problems. Nobody wants to be a beggar. This depends on his life chances. A person becomes a beggar because he has no choices and chances.
Presenter: You look at them with sympathy.
Ake: Yes.

The scene ends with a slow-motioned shot of Ake continuing to walk back to his accommodation alone accompanied by a sentimental soundtrack. We hear a voice-over of Ake: 'If they have a better chance, they probably don't beg. Moreover, the society is not giving enough opportunities to them'. While the visual track continues, there are two more voice-overs of him; the first saying, 'Now I have my opportunity, I want to try my best' and the second, 'I don't just say to myself that I cannot do this or that. I'm a human, like others though I look different. Try hard, very hard first before you give up'. The final shot shows Ake disappearing behind a gate to reach his accommodation when Bangkok is already asleep.

Psycho realism in this scene creates a shared space between Ake, the beggar and the audience and linkages of tolerance; first from Ake towards the beggar, and then from the audience or society to poor people with disabilities. The subtle editing creates continuity of viewing and a unified message to the audience. Moreover, the scene lends support to the first thesis of the film: a sociable disabled person with no resentment for his impairment. In addition, the scene shows Ake's sophisticated view of why people become beggars: because they do not have opportunities. Unfortunately, the interview does not follow this direction to highlight the trap of poverty and the social conditions which make it difficult for people to find employment and be economically independent. The film decides to continue with its own thesis, inserting voice-overs of Ake about self-determination, 'I don't just say to myself that I cannot do it. You have to try hard, very hard first before you can say in the end you cannot do it.' This illustrates one caveat of psycho realism and its universalisation of subjectivities. It pushes political and economic reasons to the side while inviting the audience to acknowledge common emotional chords such as love, fear and trust which are then made as the universal ties that 'bind us altogether, wherever we might be' (Nichols, 1991, pp. 171-172).

Parental and family care toward people with disabilities is conveyed through interviews with his mother. In one interview, Ake's mother recalls painful demeaning remarks she and Ake experienced which motivated her to give Ake the best care they could afford. When Ake is back at home during the term break, we see his mother

giving him some cash for his living in Bangkok. An interview with his father reveals that he tried to teach young Ake to do all activities by himself, 'Because if he doesn't try to do it, who will do it for him?'. In an interview with an elder brother who supports Ake's study in which he states that, 'Nobody can take knowledge away from you. You must do it, trust me', we learn that they all financially support Ake's education and Ake is the only child among five who receives an education. Scenes with the family not only lend support to the film's main theme of parental love and support towards people with disabilities, but also imply a number of issues beyond the individual level. The film's idyllic portrayal of Ake's rural village, as a peaceful place and as a contrast to his chaotic and difficult life in Bangkok, can be undermined by the fact that there also exists prejudice and discrimination on disability similar to almost everywhere. This may have fuelled Ake's family to support him in education and to pin their hope on it in delivering him a better life. Yet, the cash support from his family is insufficient for the high cost of living in Bangkok. This socio-economic factor should provide a direct explanation of why Ake has to do part-time jobs and to adopt such a heroic pattern of life. It also implies high cost in sending a disabled child to a university. One can further imagine the amount of relief people with disabilities and their family would have from welfare benefits and education loans and other education and career welfare policies for people with disabilities.

The portraiture of the real life of people with disabilities is not complete without the political reality of disability. Social realists emphasise the more direct, accurate depiction of disability and argue for the incorporation of what is 'left out of

the picture for the sake of a dramatic portrayal' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 199).

They would appreciate a fiction in which a wheelchair hero comments 'God dammit,

how I hate stairs' (cf. Irving Zola, 1987 cited in Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 199) or in

which a hearing-impaired detective is subject to the routine or disastrous

misinterpretations of daily life (cf. Hafferty and Foster, 1994 cited in Mitchell &

Snyder, 2001, p. 200). However, in this film's purported real life coverage, the political

message is too faint. Too much is left for the audience to perceive and interpret while

it should have been addressed more explicitly. Apart from glossing over facts about

how Ake was rejected from school and suffered from demeaning attitudes, the film

chooses to remain reticent about his daily risk from crossing the road in front of the

college. Although shots of Ake crossing the road are made to appear in many places

in the film and the camera clearly puts itself in the position to allow us to see how

Ake is too short for motorists to see, the commentary does not address this issue.

Likewise, in one sequence at night when the camera captures Ake from behind while

he is crossing the road so we can see the dimly lit street and speedy cars surrounding

him, the danger of this is not spelled out in the commentary. This is obviously

different from when the film addresses Ake's individual virtues and competence,

which is richly commented on. Thus, it can be argued that the film has as its main

focus the subject's triumphant encounter with an antagonistic environment. In doing

this, social structural issues are downplayed and become secondary, used mainly to

demonstrate the hostility of environment in which the subject successfully manages

to thrive. A disabled succumbing to difficulties, being defeated by external

circumstances of any kind, or even sighing at obstacles is unlikely to be the subject of a *Kon Kon Kon* film.

Having said that, the film does carry a collective issue; it contains a theme of a plea for tolerance and understanding towards people with disability. Near the end of the film, we see a sequence in which Ake talks about the difficulty of being disabled and getting employment, his dream of becoming a teacher to help expand opportunity of education for poor people, 'If I am in that position, I should be able to do many things.'. Then there is a cut to a sequence in which his competence, confidence and desire to be a teacher is shown; he teaches a class of young students to draw and the students admire their teacher who teaches with his feet. The final scene comes when Ake is pictured walking alone on a gravel road in his village, with a voice-over:

> Presenter: If you had to be a plant, what kind of plant would you be?
> Ake: I want to be small grass. Even though it seems useless, it covers the surface of the earth and keeps it moist
> Presenter: Why? Don't you want to be a big tree?
> Ake: I can't be a big tree. It is impossible. All I ask is for big trees to kindly allow for water and light to fall on me. That should be enough.

This is followed by a shot of grasses bending down in the wind and a shot of light cascading down through the canopy of a big tree before the film ends.

This political engagement with disability rights in the scene is perhaps too vague and fails to specify what rights should actually be addressed. In addition, the scene conveys a sense of submission on the part of people with disabilities and

benevolence from the non-disabled. People with disabilities have to prove that they deserve to be helped through their commitment to hard work and to be a competent contributing member of society. This implies that welfare provision as a right is far from sight in Thailand, where the image of the deserving poor is still very strong. This is obvious in the previously-mentioned comment from a passer-by who upon seeing Ake drawing in the night market suggested that it was 'a wonderful example for many lazy people'. This represents the Thai's version of the deserving poor. It also summarises well the film's implied point of view that one should work hard by oneself first in order to be entitled to assistance; unless you help yourself first, no one should help you. Trying hard by yourself, let your family help you along, then the intervention will come, if it is considered necessary at all, is how the three themes of the film can be thread together.

3.3.3 Boonlai the great trader of Leung Nok Tha[36]

Boonlai has impaired movement and speech muscles. He lives with his parents in Yasothon, Northeast Thailand. Every day, he travels with his bicycle to sell vegetables. He spends money on supporting his family and travelling. The film can be seen as containing the implied themes of *'hard-working'; 'honest living'; 'self-reliance'; 'responsibility to one's family'*; and *'cheerfulness'*.

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[36] The film was broadcasted on 15 July 2008.

The main themes form the plot, which is typical of the expository mode of representation. The plot presents a sense of awe that despite many physical obstacles, the subject manages to thrive beautifully, keeping his integrity intact. Boonlai, despite being introduced as mentally disabled and as having no formal education, is shown running his business in selling vegetables strategically and honestly. The commentary both from the narrator and testimonies of villagers tells us about his profitable, but yet ethical, business; his product is reasonably- or even low-priced; he is capable of planning what to buy and how to sell to make profits. Then the awe-inspiring factors are introduced: his impairment and his lack of formal education. The testimony of his mother relates the story of a spasm during his childhood that left him impaired. Then, as the perspective argument, we see slow-motioned close-ups of his present impairment: distorted limbs and tense facial expression when he talks. Following this, the plot takes us to his daily life: waking up at three in the morning to cycle twelve kilometres to a wholesale market to buy vegetables, then carefully preparing the vegetables and selling them. After finishing his work of the day, Boonlai is seen at the bus station, helping passengers carrying luggage and chatting with people who work there. Then we observe his weekend hobby activity, which is travelling, and we are told that Boonlai has been to many tourist attractions and landmarks around the country. The finale of the film shows the contribution he makes to his family: he lends money to his parents to invest in the family farm and buys food for the household.

The subject's competence, earnestness and commitment to be self-reliant and a contributing son is conveyed throughout the film. With regards to him as a hardworking trader, we see different shots of Boonlai with his fully loaded bicycle at different locations, indicating the wide area he covers daily. One shot of Boonlai cycling on the road under a blazing sun is juxtaposed by an interview in which he says he never wants to stop working as work will give him money in time of sickness. The sequence continues with a testimony by his mother in which she states that Boonlai goes out to work even if he will earn only twenty baht at the end of the day. A sequence that demonstrates his resolution is when he runs, despite his impairment, to deliver a bag of onions to one customer in a car far from where he is. As Boonlai runs to deliver a bag of vegetables and get his ten baht we can glimpse his determination and how he chooses not to ignore even the smallest chance to sell, the money from which will contribute to his self-reliance. The shot of Boonlai running is played in slow motion with a corresponding uplifting tune. His competence and honesty is demonstrated in the sequence in which he measures out onions into small bags. Each bag should weight five-hundred grams and we know how accurate he is through the next shot when the presenter puts one bag on the scale and admires the exact weight. Likewise, we are shown how he returns a sack of garlic after starting bagging and finding that some are not of acceptable quality. His behaviour can be associated with the voiceover of his mother heard earlier in which she says that one should not aim for a high profit but for a small one sustained over a long period of time.

Though he cannot read, there are many shots of interaction between Boonlai and the presenter that show Boonlai as a competent person. One shot sees a presenter challenge him with math problems while he is bagging his vegetables, 'If I buy five bags and give you a hundred baht note, how much is the change?'. Boonlai replies almost immediately 'fifty'. Then follow some more difficult questions which he can all answer correctly. The presenter admires him and says, 'No one can cheat you'. Boonlai replies, 'Oh yes, I have a master degree'.

A great sense of responsibility both for self and others is conveyed by a sequence when Boonlai brings home big bags of food and proudly presents them to his parents, in a rather 'ceremony-like' manner, showing his happiness in contributing to the family. Then there is a further testimony by his mother.

> He has done this every week for the past four years. I am very proud of him. He never begs or takes. I told him many times to stop and take more rest. He said, I go out to work, not to take drugs or play. I go to make money so I am not a burden or problem to anyone.

This film places almost its entire emphasis on Boonlai's resilience and resourcefulness and none on the political reality shaping his life. It aims to provide motivation for individuals to try hard by themselves first, without relying on external help, a messaged conveyed through light-heartened entertainment. Provoking critical reflection is not prioritized, compared to the moral themes which are emphasised through the manipulation of photographic image and soundtrack and through commentary. The context of Boonlai's life and his decisions regarding work, saving money and taking care of his family can be constructed from his accounts; however, a

critical audience can ask questions about social structural issues surrounding living with disability and poverty in Thailand. Boonlai was asked to leave the school after a few weeks due to the lack of facilities for students with special needs. The motive behind Boonlai's hard work is to save money in time of sickness due to the lack of reliable welfare provision. The declining potential of a rural household to produce food and essentials and the consumerism can be assumed as part of the distant factors underpinning why Boonlai concentrates on earning money and is proud to support his family through purchasing food and items. His family's reliance on him for loans for farm activities implies the importance of loans for small farm households and the limited access to them. We can imagine the likely situation of his parents borrowing from a loan shark and suffering from high interest rates that will perpetuate the difficult situation of the family.

3.3.4 Three small friends with big hearts[37]

This film is about three young disabled people who leave a boarding school for people with disabilities to live on their own. They start their first year as students at a university in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand. Sod, with chronic muscle disease, is the first to move out. He then encourages two friends to leave too. They are Yale, suffering from the same disease and who requires a walker, and Joy, affected by chromosomal abnormalities. Joy has stunted growth, a heart disease and severely short eyesight. Implied themes in this film are *'self-reliance'*, *'resourcefulness'*, and

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[37]The film was broadcasted in two parts on 4 and 11 January 2011.

'the right attitude that one can design one's own life'. These themes are made as central aspects of achieving a meaningful life. However, one subject of the film, Yale, notes the significance of a factor beyond the level of people with disabilities themselves: the 'opportunity' offered by society. This is for him more important than his own perseverance. Nevertheless, this fact is subsumed underneath the film's theses on individual perseverance and moral choices. Moreover, although given a space in the film, poverty faced by the subjects and their family bears little relation to their action, and thus only serves to provide context for the subject's uprooted moral strength. Likewise, the film chooses to hint at collective issues such as pavements and road safety for people with disabilities, but themes centring around individual resourcefulness dominate the film.

The plot follows the steps Yale and Joy take in living independently, with Sod the pioneer providing support to them. The first step is moving out of the boarding school into a rented room. Yale lives with Sod while Joy lives alone, but not far from her two friends. They are shown handling many day-to-day issues the non-disabled take for granted such as locking the door and operating an electric fan. Then the stage of going out of the house arrives, showing their struggle with uneven pavements, no ramps and negotiating roads without pedestrian crossing signals. The next part of the plot shows how university friends help to prepare rooms for them to live on campus. The last part of the plot shows the current life of Yale as a university student.

The theme of achieving independent living is explicit both in visual tropes and commentary. There is a repetition of sequences of the subjects practicing every-day activities. The sequences are accompanied by their testimonies. One example comes at the beginning, when shots of Yale and Joy buying their own food, washing clothes, locking the door, crossing the road and operating an electric fan, are followed by a cut to Yale saying, 'I will try every way to survive in this society'. Likewise, after a sequence in which Yale and Joy are seen walking on uneven pavements without ramps and attempting to cross the road in front of the university through a flow of speedy traffic, there is a cut to an interview with Yale saying, 'I choose to live outside. I just have to stand up and go out. I have to do this no matter what the conditions are. I must do whatever it takes to live in this society meaningfully'. The arrangement of these sequences, with interviews and testimonies woven in, stresses both the difficulties faced by people with disabilities on a daily basis and yet also their resolution to adapt to these. It is perhaps similar to what Goffman, in analysing the significance of society as the source of individual's social being, terms as deference or the part of behaviour that shows appreciation and celebration of an actor's relationship to the recipient (Goffman, 1967, pp. 56-76). Yale's acceptance of a difficult situation and disabling physical environment can doubtless be explained as showing proper deference to the society as part of developing his 'self' as a disabled in Thailand. Deference as a way of showing respect can be viewed as an attempt to achieve acceptance and to be 'respected' in return, which is important for him as a disabled to survive. He is driven deeply to accepting what the society gives him, with appreciation and without resentment and that forms the social being that is so

'admired' in the content of the film and wider society. However, this kind of deference implies submissiveness, and the absence of dialogue for fairer treatment. It is interesting how deference might underlie Yale's determination to try his best to live meaningfully and how this is welcomed and praised by media such as *Kon Kon Kon* programme. This might also offer insight into the Thai perception that there are predominantly personal and few public problems to be faced, and that solutions usually concentrate at the level of individuals rather than beyond.

The importance of being able to rely on oneself is expressed in Sod's testimony, after sequences of Yale's and Joy's arduous morning routine. We then hear Sod, as the person who encouraged them to independent living.

> Many people ask me if I can take care of them. I said I may not be able
> to take care of them. But if they do not take care of themselves, who in
> the world will take care of them forever?

The issue of poverty is made explicit in this film; although, again, there are no clear linkages to the subject's moral decision. The living conditions of Yale's and Joy's families are shown. The interviews are focused on struggles the families have been facing in order to support their children in university. For example there is a close-up of Joy's mother tearful reply about a difficult financial situation with her testimony: 'If she (Joy) doesn't study, who will take care of her in the future?'. This shows the fear and hope of a mother of a disabled. We also learn that Joy's younger brother suffers from the same illness which represents another challenge for the family. A close up and slow-motion shot of Yale's mother's hand holding banknotes to

pay for her son's uniform is accompanied by an upswell of a sentimental tune to emphasise their financial status.

A critical audience would be able to expand from such subtle intimation. The reason why self-reliance is the only option for a disabled is because to count on their impoverished family is not sustainable in the long run and to count on state welfare is unrealistic (cf. Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 58; Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 249). Moreover, poverty has a close relationship to sickness and disability in the sense that the former creates the latter which in turn perpetuates the former (Shepherd, 2007). The financial pressure of a rural family to support their child's education is doubled for family with a disabled child. Schools for children with special needs are rare and located mainly in large towns. This requires many commitments from the family (cf. Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, pp. 16-17). All these may lead us to ask whether it is at all sufficient to place demands on disabled individuals and their families to achieve despite the lack of basic facilities; and what difference a state, which is surprisingly left out of the picture in almost all *Kon Kon Kon* films on people with disabilities, can make by providing better basic services to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities within society.

The subjects' commentary is used extensively and this is where we can identify a difference between subjects' accounts and commentary offered by the filmmaker. The commentary of the presenter is not the only agent that sets an

agenda in this film. There is a competing commentary given by the subjects. The sequence in which Yale, now a fresher, is asked about the most important factors that brought him this far. He replies that the first factor is his parents who encourage him to live harmoniously with others in society, the second is the society that welcomes and gives him opportunities. 'Nothing is more important than opportunities because they can change your life', and the third factor is his own determination and perseverance. A little later however, an anchorperson offers a concluding remark focusing purely on an individual's moral strength in acting bravely and resolutely, ignoring the enormous significance of family support and of enabling structural factors in the life of a disabled.

3.3.5 Makud: a mighty heart in an undersized body

This film[38] is about Makud who has no arms and no legs only small outgrowths under her shoulders and her hips. She and Pornchai, who has impaired mobility muscles, and Som-O, with severely damaged eyesight, form a team who buys and sells recyclable items in Chaiyapuhm, Northeastern Thailand. The film's implied themes are *'the value of work', 'resourcefulness', and 'self-reliance yet caring for family'*. *'These values can change life'* is another thesis implied in the film. The film selectively emphasises certain elements to substantiate its themes while leaving other elements, mainly those involving distant forces, which somehow provide non-linear character of causation to the struggle of the three disabled.

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[38] The film was broadcasted in two parts on 12 and 19 January 2010.

As in the above examples, the main themes are woven into the plot which focuses around the three lives affected by impairment, aspiration to be self-reliant, and survival choices. Makud is shown to be the head of the team. She is shown to be skilful in planning, calculating, bookkeeping, organizing and contacting customers. We are told that she has acquired these skills and others such as reading, writing and crocheting by asking others and practicing on her own as she never attended school. We learn that she lives with her mother and that she works in order to be able to take care of her mother as other non-disabled people do. After relating Makud's short biography, the plot follows the team on their business and hints at an impending rift. Som-O complains of how Pornchai on the other motorcycle drives too fast and does not want to wait for him as he can only drive slowly due to his severely damaged eyesight. Som-O also questions the money handled for the group by Makud. The plot then invites us to learn more about Som-O. He lives with his grandmother who is also blind. Som-O eventually leaves the team to train as a masseur, an occupation more suitable and safer for him than being a driver. The plot moves on to tell us about Pornchai. He is originally from another province but decides to stay with Makud because he knows she needs help and thus helping Makud gives him 'meaning' in life. The plot ends when Makud tells of her dream to buy a pick-up truck with Pornchai to sell fruit together. However, there is a sense of uncertainty when Makud mentions the possibility of Pornchai leaving too. This will mean Makud will have to find a new way to continue making a living.

The theme of resourcefulness can be implied from the way the film, through its commentary and perspective arguments, centres around what the subjects do in order to achieve the purported goals of a 'meaningful' life. Makud is presented as having undertaken many jobs such as selling cosmetics and making handicrafts. We learn that she gets five-hundred baht as a disability welfare benefit, which she uses to invest in her recycling business to make the amount go further. Som-O joins the team as a driver despite having to face risk on a daily basis due to his severely poor eyesight. Later, after finding out about training as a masseur, he soon leaves the joint venture. The value of work is related to being self-reliant and being able to provide support for the family. This is clear from Makud's account of the reason she works, which is to prove that as a disabled she can support both herself and her mother. Her mother, who according to Makud once 'dumped' her disabled small daughter (Makud's father saved her), admitted that she feels lucky to have a daughter such as Makud, implying a change driven by the protagonist's trait of character, her commitments towards work, self-reliance, and supporting the family. The development of these qualities is portrayed as the only life-changing factor.

The film is based on the moral interpretation of the three lives and thus the above themes are the result of a moral framework, while the subject's life trajectories can alternatively be interpreted as a survival choice. Their lives and decisions can be viewed as related to poverty and lack of enabling environment as much as, if not more than, a romantic description of life subsumed under the term 'destiny'. These three lives lived with impairment are just a fraction of the many disabled in Thailand

who are left to struggle by themselves with limited educational or vocational training opportunity, unwelcoming job market, inadequate healthcare service and insufficient disablement benefits. It is true that these disabled subjects exhibit great moral strength in trying to make their own living, but they may not have too many alternatives and thus trying to get by is not a choice but a necessity. Nevertheless, addressing or hinting connections with the social condition is not the focus of the film which only aims to view the virtues. In one scene, Makud's hard work is interpreted to suit the film's thesis, the moral value of work. Throughout she gives reasons for trying to find jobs as 'to have income like others' and 'to take care of my mother, just like all people do'. However, in the sequence below she is encouraged to admit that the moral value of work is a key issue. The presenter tries to rephrase or even reshape Makud's response to suit the film's theme.

Presenter: Why do you have to work this hard?
Makud: I want to have my own income so that when I'm old, my relatives will be inclined to take care of me.
Presenter: But work also gives values to life and you are working because of that too, aren't you?
Makud: Yes.

By focusing almost entirely on individual morality, or the lack of it, as the sole explanation for an action, the film glosses over other factors beyond the individual level and deems them insignificant. A distorted depiction of disability is caused by the failure to highlight that disability is a result of interaction between impairment and physical and attitudinal environments (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). The failure of a politicized interest in the disability plot results in disabled characters that are either extolled or defeated as a result of their ability to personally adjust to or

overcome their tragic situation. Under this condition, the public is 'encouraged to view matters that are rightly located within social settings as residing in individual achievement and/or failure' (Hafferty and Foster, 1994 cited in Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 198).

3.3.6 Nong Song: my daughter my angel

Two parents from Nan, northern Thailand feature in this film[39] about how they have taken good care of their twenty-two year old daughter, Nong Song, who has had a severe mental disability since birth. The film is developed under the theme of perseverance and self-reliance, a typical *Kon Kon Kon* theme, but unlike others it concerns a persevering mother who is determined to help her daughter to achieve a certain degree of self-reliance. Thus the main theme implied is *'parental love and care for a disabled'*.

Following the introduction of how the story should be perceived – 'how Nong Song is a sign of the devotion of the family', the plot follows Nong Song's mother caring for her daughter while working as a teacher. Each weekday morning is shown as following a single pattern. Nong Song's parents get up early. The mother takes care of her, while the father prepares food for the family. After breakfast, everyone leaves home: the father goes to teach in one school and the mother takes Nong Song with her to the school where she works. We then see how the mother

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[39] The film was broadcasted on 17 November 2009.

both teaches in the class and takes care of her daughter who sits outside the classroom. The plot includes a scene where the parents take Nong Song to a hospital for a routine health check and to a centre for disabled children to improve her skills. The plot ends with a sequence of a visit to a temple where the mother prays for Nong Song's health.

A concentration of shots follows in which the mother is seen taking care of Nong Song with acceptance and willingness. The voiceover of Nong Song calling out '*Maer Maer*' ('mom mom') is returned to throughout almost the entirety of the story: for example, during morning rush hour and while her mother is teaching. This is treated almost as part of the background soundtrack, as if a normal feature of family life. Almost always we hear the voiceover of the mother replying '*Ja*' ('yes'). A repetition of sequences of Nong Song constantly coming to her mother while she is teaching is used to stress this point as well. A parallelism of shots of the mother inside the classroom with her students and of Nong Song sitting in front of the classroom is used to demonstrate the two roles she performs, both with calmness and kindness. At the end of the film, we hear how she accepts that taking care of Nong Song is her responsibility and one that she has long stopped questioning or trying to avoid.

In order for her mother to take care of Nong Song all day, her colleagues at schools are shown to be tolerant. The school principal says:

> We allow Nong Song's mother to take care of Nong Song while she teaches. This is to help her to keep the job and to take care of her daughter at the same time. It is what we can do to help.

Throughout the film, shots of the mother and father training Nong Song to help with small tasks in the house are shown in slow motion and the audience's emotion is aroused by an upswell of a sentimental tune. In one sequence, a shot shows the mother helping Nong Song to carry a basket of washed clothes to the hanging rail. The next shot shows Nong Song slowly starting to work on the clothes, then there is a cut to the shot of the mother watching. This sequence is preceded by the voiceover of the mother expressing her desire for her child to be as little burden to society as possible. The sequence ends with a shot of Nong Song being kissed as a reward. Moreover, when the mother and Nong Song are shown hugging and the manner in which she tenderly handles her daughter is repeated throughout and shown in a slow motion, accompanied by soothing sweet music. The last shot of the film shows a figure of a small angel hanging from a window frame. There is an over-exposition of the window to sharpen the contrast of the background light and the angel figure. The shot repeats to us the point of the film which is how Nong Song has been treated like an angel by her parents. Family care is very crucial when the world outside is not friendly to people with disabilities.

We can get a glimpse of how tolerance and understanding from colleagues is a contributing factor to the quality of care work by family members of people with disabilities. There are other factors that a critical audience can take away from the film. Cash transfer, support for carers and options to have flexible working hours are among many things the state can provide or influence. However, the state, as common in *Kon Kon Kon* films about people with disabilities, is made invisible,

perhaps to emphasis the 'heroic' efforts of the subjects. With weak role of the state, the few insurances left are self, family, praying and merit making. The latter is the most common insurance that Thais turn to, as we see at the end of the film when the mother asks from a Buddha image for Nong Song to live a long and healthy life.

3.3.7   A countdown to death: lives of Kan and Kee[40]

Seventeen year old Kan and thirteen year old Kee suffer from a metabolic syndrome. They have both the height of a three year old child, with distorted joints, deteriorating eyesight and other painful symptoms. Kan has become too weak to walk and can only lie still. He can merely watch Kee, his younger brother, playing heedlessly and wishes that Kee would slow down and prepare for next stages of the illness, some of which he is himself experiencing. They live with their parents in Ratchaburi, Central Thailand. The film implies, apart from the common *Kon Kon Kon* theme of *'parental love and care for people with disabilities'*, two related themes: *'acceptance of everyday hardship'* and *'an individual's autonomy to change his/her own life'*.

The plot is constructed along these two themes: the congenital illness that causes suffering but one that can be approached in a spiritually constructive manner by choosing how to spend the rest of one's life. Kan follows this pattern while his brother does not. The plot focuses on Kan's special medicine he needs to cope with

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[40] The film was broadcasted on 16 February 2010.

his illness from his mattress: Buddhist discourses recorded on CDs. He is shown to listen and to recite Buddhist texts most of the time, not only to help soothing the physical pain but also to make sense of a life tainted with illness whilst preparing for the next one. Running in parallel is the contrast in Kee's response to illness where he is shown as only playing outside the house and ignoring any contemplation of life. The plot includes a scene in which their parents take them to the sea. The contrast continues: Kan on his mattress listening to his CDs and solemnly reciting Buddhist texts while Kee is seen running and playing. At the temple we hear a number of voiceovers about karma or the consequences of past deeds and we witness how Kan is committed to collecting new good deeds by offering food to monks and refraining from unwholesome thoughts in order to have a better next life. Again we see that Kee plays and does not care much what his elder brother is trying to teach him. The last scene shows the parents taking the two to the casting of a Buddha image which is believed to bring good luck, prosperity and is a special act of merit making.

The acceptance of difficulties, yet the ability to transcend this status given at birth, is clearly demonstrated through commentary arguments. The mother declares in an interview that Kan became more accepting and calm about his illness and pain after attending a talk by a monk who stated that 'We cannot choose our physical body but we can all choose to do good things'. This is followed by an interview sequence in which Kan locates the source of his suffering in his past life, saying, 'I used to wonder why me, why this illness. Now I know it has to do with my past karma. I used to harm other lives in the past life'. The commentary stresses the point

again by saying, 'Every minute on the bed for Kan is not useless. He spends it reflecting on and accepting life'. We can witness how Kan does not give up but tries to take action to shape the rest of this life and the one after. His mother reveals that Kan wants to come to the temple every Buddhist day. Moreover, Kan stresses the importance of taking care not to have any unwholesome thoughts, saying, 'I am afraid of dying with an impure mind. If that happens, you will go to a bad place'.

The studio address at the end of the film stresses the didactic point of the film, using 'we' to insinuate our complicity with the world of this commentary (cf. Stones, 2002b, p. 367).

> If we really believe that bad karma is behind the illness of the two brothers, the most important point is that Kan is not just passively taking the consequences of his past karma, he tries to change by doing good karma. This means he has the right understanding about life, even though he could not leave his bed. His story should remind us all of how we should live the life we now have.

Self-responsibility and autonomy in shaping one's own life is emphasized throughout this film. The theme incorporates conservative thinking about the acceptance of stratification based on status at birth, then subverts it with the neoliberal meritocracy. By proposing that one should accept the given congenital unequal status in order to start constructively living with it or growing from it, the film can be argued to continue the social stratification, with only a shift in the basis of division, from entirely on the accident of birth to individual performance/talent. People are born unequal but the opportunities are spread equally for all to improve their lives is the argument of the film. Both conservatism and neoliberalism assign

little importance to social structural forces in shaping an individual's life. The two traditions often minimize the intervention in unfair structures, such as market mechanisms, that create unequal life chances and opportunities, and rather legitimize the merits of self-help (see chapter two).

3.3.8 Royah the princess frog[41]

Saowanee, nicknamed Royah, was once a beautiful businesswoman. A kidney-related illness transformed her into a dwarf with swollen eyes, lips and distorted joints. The implied theme of this film is '*cheerfulness and optimism despite hardship'*. There is a secondary theme of *'support from others'*, a theme that features in the perspective but not in the commentary argument. The following analysis will focus on how the second subtle theme is ignored in the presenters' commentary. In doing so, the mental strength of the subject of the film is made to appear out of a vacuum. Once again, the linkages to socio-structural issues surrounding lives with disability are missing. Such lack of retroduction results, not only in the disabled subject's purported cheerfulness being rather disconnected from her social environments, but also in the glossing over of her obvious sadness appearing in many parts of the film.

The first and primary theme of cheerfulness and optimism is made explicit by the plot. The introduction starts with the earlier part of Royah's life, through old

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[41] The film was broadcasted on 24 March 2009.

photos and her testimonies, about when she worked as an executive in a modelling agency eight years before. The film then shows her present appearance, through close ups of swollen eyes, lips, face, distorted joints and the height loss. We are then briefly shown a shot of Royah's sad face before the commentary quickly shifts the mood, perhaps even glossing over it by declaring, 'But the illness can only change her appearance, not her spirit'. This is followed by a sudden voiceover of Royah's laughs, then by a collection of shots of Royah either laughing loudly and making jokes about other patients, and by people's comments about her including 'I never see her cry!' These prepare us for the commentary which introduces the film by stating: 'How she can manage to stay beautiful from the inside, this is what we will find out tonight'. The film continues by supplying us with sequences of different components of Royal's daily life. In a hospital ward where she receives weekly treatment, we are informed, with help from the commentary and perspective argument, how she makes people smile and be cheerful. In a sequence in her home, we are supplied with a testimony of Royah's mother saying, 'She (Royah) never worries about anything. She can accept the situation very easily and she is cheerful all the time'. In a further sequence when Royah visits her friend we see how she teases and makes people laugh. We are subsequently given a glimpse into to her hobby of selling cakes in a local street. She reveals that the activity is a challenge for her and is intended to keep her business skills and confidence intact. All these plot events lend support to the theme of cheerful personality and of autonomy, courage and dignity despite hardship. They describe, rather than explain; they do not provide causal connection to her purported

'inner beauty', to her cheerfulness and to her courageous attitude towards her worsening health conditions.

Another rather descriptive element in the film designed to support its theme of 'great personality' is the sequence in which Royah sells cakes from her wheelchair on the pavement. She describes the activity as being for fun and to challenge herself to communicate with and persuade her customers, the skills she wants to maintain from her past as a businesswoman. Royah says:

> I never give up. Even the first day I used the wheelchair, I didn't cry at all. I was too busy to cry; there was so much work to do at the company.

Then she shows a message she has written in her diary.

> We should not judge people from the outside, but from what they do.
> The true success starts from me.

Running throughout this detailed description to support the primary theme is a secondary theme about available support for Royah from friends and medical staff. This theme has the potential to explain the first theme, but the film decides not to link them as such. Thus, the film includes this theme, but not in connection with the first one. This theme derives mainly through perspective argument; the film includes this theme in its visual track but does not address or comment on it in the presenters' commentary. Rather it is Royah's own accounts that supply us with the context indicating how influential these supports really are in her life. Such examples include: when a nurse regularly sets aside some food for Royah to have after her

treatment;[42] when Royah's friend supports her on a regular basis by buying her some medicine; or when she becomes emotional upon seeing her former business partner who has been giving her financial support for medical expenses all along. Royah says about this man 'Without him, I would have died long ago'. Unfortunately, the commentary does not pay attention to this line, apart from applying regular manipulation of sound and image to dramatize the event. The film prefers to adhere to the theme of Royah's intrinsic strength and cheerfulness, which is undoubtedly made to appear in a vacuum.

In a similar vein, the film does not place any emphasis on the role of Royah's supportive family, although she suggests this is how she keeps herself cheerful and happy despite her changing appearance. 'Even if I look worse than this, as long as I breathe and have my family with me, life is fine.' Another time, she reveals what keeps her cheerful as, 'The secret medicine is moral support from family, friends and nurses. No one wants to see me die. Everyone wants to see me continue fighting'. In both cases, the interviewer and the commentary do not elaborate on the significance of others to Royah's personality. The most obvious negligence is at the final plot event in which Royah gives ribbon roses she has made to ward members. The interviewer asks why she is doing this and Royah replies, crying:

> So that they know I love them. They are nice, nobody else is. Without them I would not have lived this long.

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[42] Royah is Muslim and does not eat food in the hospital canteen.

On a Valentine occasion, she is also shown going back to her former business partner to present him with a heart-shaped bouquet. She cries while saying, 'Please take care of this heart'. She also gives a bouquet to a young model, saying, 'I spent the whole night making this for you. This is for you, Alex. Take care of yourself, your mom and me too, please'. The film then reaches its climax with the presenter providing the conclusion that, 'Royah's health is not improving, but she does not feel disheartened and will keep fighting'. A shot of Royah dancing joyfully in her wheelchair is followed by the studio conclusion, offering the now familiar point:

> We cannot decide what situations we will face in life, but what we are in charge of is how to confront those situations and with what attitudes. When Royah overcomes sad and self-defeating thoughts, she can realise that she is surrounded by many beautiful things such as friendship and many other pleasures in life'.

The arrangement of these elements at the end of the film represents a tension between the perspective and commentary arguments of the film. From the perspective argument, it can be inferred that support from others is very crucial for Royah's integrity, not to mention other material conditions in her life. Without it, Royah's life would be the opposite and she would not appear in a *Kon Kon Kon* film as a moral hero; there is a clear sign of insecurity and vulnerability when she needs to secure every bond she now has for her to be able to appear happy and cheerful. However, the commentary glosses over her obvious sadness and insecurity as well as the connection between her internal world and the external one.

A critical audience should be able to grasp more distant factors such as the underdeveloped citizenship rights to social services and social insurance in Thailand.[43] This may be the reason why Royah values her relationships with others so much and why her family and friends are compelled to support her. Moreover, her cheerful and relaxed attitude, despite having to rely on others, can imply the concept of 'the deserving' in the Thai cultural context. Royah's account declaring that she never feels regret for the transformation of her life from working successfully to staying home all day and that 'it is time to stop walking and let others take care of me' implies the moral value of work which entitles one to receive assistance, compared to those 'feeble-minded' who never work and thus do not deserve any handout. Royah is depicted as once being very successful and a contributing member of society before and therefore she does not feel stigmatised when helped now.

After eight films with a very subtle and indirect social focus, the last two films show *Kon Kon Kon*'s more substantial retroduction, assigning emphasis beyond the present moment and the individual level, although this is done arguably in a more sporadic manner.

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[43] Social welfare involves three main areas: 1) social service (healthcare, education, career, housing, protection of rights and properties); 2) social insurance (benefits for work-related sickness, disability and death, retirement, maternity and unemployment); and 3) social assistance (assistance for the vulnerable such as the elderly, people affected by disasters, the homeless) (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 67). See more in chapter five.

3.3.9 Theerawat Sripathomsawat: towards an unfettered life of people with disabilities[44]

Theerawat is a wheelchair user. He runs 'The Centre for the Promotion of Independent Living for People with disabilities' in Nakonpathom, Central Thailand. His team of disabled staff help improve the lives of disabled by working both among them and with the community. The first implied theme of this film is that *'the right attitude/ mindset can change one's life'*. This theme also conveys autonomy to better one's life. The second theme is that *'opportunity from the society can change lives of P'* as well. These two themes are made to run in parallel, representing the film's move to focusing on social issues.

The plot begins with a meeting organized by Theerawat and other disabled staff members of the centre. The meeting is joined by people with disabilities in the area and representatives of the local government. An interview with Theerawat reveals the need to push the local government to include needs of people with disabilities in its plans. Then the plot moves on to a house visit by Theerawat to a disabled who became paralysed after a car accident. Theerawat suggests that he gets an operation so that he can do more than lying in bed at home. This is followed by another visit by another member to a young man who became paralysed after a motorcycle accident. The young man refuses to talk and his mother expresses her

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[44] The film was broadcasted on 16 October 2007.

concerns and cries about her son's lack of motivation to live. We learn more about Theerawat, that he became paralysed from the neck down after an accident during a rugby match as a university student. His mother took good care of him and he became more motivated after earning his first income from making T-shirts. He now owns a photo frame shop. The plot moves on to another meeting in which disabled individuals talk about their plans in life. Then the plot describes the life of Pichet. We are told that after a motorcycle accident left him paralysed, his caring mother's death left him alone in the house for ten years. He only became motivated with help from the centre; a fact illustrated by a shot of Pichet drawing with his mouth while lying on a bed. The plot ends with an outdoor drawing event organized by the centre. Many disabled people express their happiness from joining this activity.

It can be argued that the two themes are made to be interrelated in this film; a disabled's self-image and attitude to life is affected by the attitudes and actions of others in society. At the beginning of the film, we observe disabled people revealing their experience of being undervalued as 'bad luck', or seen as 'useless'. Now they become empowered by the work of Theerawat and his organisation and see themselves as capable as the non-disabled in achieving goals in life.

The sequences about Pichet convey the sense of positive change enabled by support from others. The shots of him lying on the bed, running alongside his voiceover recounting the sad past, are seen in slow motion, accompanied by a melancholy tune. These are then juxtaposed to Theerawat's account of the help his

organization gives to Pichet. In the next shot, we see Pichet painting with his mouth. Pichet's renewed hope and potentials, as a result of receiving encouragement and opportunity, is depicted through the last sequence of the film. A long shot shows Pichet on his wheelchair painting a picture of a historical palace in Nakon Pathom. We can see the painting being completed to portray a palace in front of him. The sequence is accompanied by the *Kon Kon Kon* theme score with a slow motion effect. In seeing a disabled attempting to paint something as grand and intricate as a palace and his ability to do it, we have an intimation of the aspiration of the disability to contribute to society and their capability to perform the role, if they are given opportunities.

To enhance the ability of a critical audience means a media text takes the audience beyond sympathetic understanding to gain a glimpse of what 'opportunity', often vaguely used in films, actually means. The change induced by emotional involvement alone is insufficient and thus should be assisted by critical understanding of how social circumstances can shape people's attitudes, life path and possibilities. This understanding can start simply as being self-reflexive of our rather unexamined belief of poverty and that the poor are feeble-minded and lazy. It is challenging to think beyond to how poverty can be rather created and perpetuated by the way society has been organized; and thus how everyone, regardless of social status, deserves to live with such basic entitlements as rights. This is one way the term 'opportunity' can be narrowed and its usage goes beyond charitable handouts to the poor and people with disabilities. After all, the social explanation of poverty includes

insufficient and ineffective welfare systems (Narong Petchprasert, 2003), spanning education, healthcare, housing, the protection of life and property and measures against contingencies in life (ibid.). If poverty and the failure to intervene in it can be approached more in this manner by the media, the public can be reminded of how, for example, even a better quality emergency rescue service is relevant to well-being. It can save lives from unnecessary impairment, which could otherwise induce vulnerability in an individual's life. This is demonstrated by most of people with disabilities in this film who became disabled through accidents.

3.3.10   Suchin: a woman who used to walk with her heart [45]

Suchin does not have legs and moves by crawling with the support of her two arms. She was the subject of a *Kon Kon Kon* documentary on 4 October 2005, in which she was shown as a hard-working disabled from Suphanburi, Central Thailand who tried relentlessly to support herself and her family. Suchin received a large sum of money from the public. She became the focus of attention again in 2007, having lost all the money and becoming indebted after a man she was married to for a short period left her. The implied theses are both moral and social; the former explains the tragedy in terms of *'Suchin's own ignorance and lack of judgment'* while the latter argues that Suchin's fall should be understood in terms of *'how social factors shape one's personality and choices one makes'*.

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[45] The film was broadcasted on 27 November 2007.

The plot starts with newspaper coverage of Suchin seeking help from the authority in settling a dispute over assets between her and her ex-husband. We are taken back to the rural village where the story began two years previously when Suchin first appeared in a *Kon Kon Kon* film as a hard-working, resilient, resourceful, honest, and poor yet dignified disabled woman; afterwards she received a six million baht donation from the compassionate public. We now learn that Suchin has left the village to avoid debtors. We hear her sister condemning the transformed Suchin who stopped working and began to spend money carelessly. We also hear neighbourhood opinions about how ignorant she became. Subsequently, the plot reveals where Suchin is now, hiding from the debtor. She stays in a construction site with her new boyfriend in Samut Sakorn, Central Thailand. In the interview she admits that she has lost the entire six million baht donation. She did spend some to improve her life: refurbishing her house and building a convenience shop. Then the plot takes us to what Suchin has to face now: the film follows Suchin as she reports the con-man to the police and seeks legal assistance from the Lawyer Council in Bangkok. An analysis section in which Suthipong Thammawut, *Kon Kon Kon* founder, is interviewed adds weight to the previous scene. Suthipong Thammawut locates the source of the incident away from Suchin to suggest how being disabled has shaped her decisions. He then makes a reference to other *Kon Kon Kon* subjects, Song and Reang, offering a rather sudden contradictory remark. He comments that compared to Suchin the pair know how to make wise decisions about their donated money. The plot ends with Suchin moving to a new place as the construction camp moves on.

The film offers, alongside its usual moral thesis, a social one. It explicitly implies that the cause of the scandal emanates from both Suchin's own ignorance and the man's dishonesty and immorality: this comprises the moral thesis. However, the social thesis enters when Suchin's thoughtlessness and ignorance is analysed in relation to her past; with conditions, choices, aspirations and fears arising from her disability. These have inevitably influenced her to spend money in such a manner. There is an attempt to offer an internal analysis of Suchin as a structurally positioned actor and to steer away from locating the fault superficially in her recklessness. Having said that, this internal analysis is given much less space in the film than the usual prevailing moral thesis. When Suthipong Thammawut offers an internal analysis of the incident, he does not try to be specific when he says,

> Suchin has been shaped to act in that way. It all starts when she was born with *such* impairment, in *such* environment, with *such* opportunities and limitations.

Viewers who do not have prior knowledge of Suchin will find it difficult to decipher what 'such' means. After a brief social analysis of Suchin as being influenced by social circumstances, about one minute of screen time, the film then compares Suchin with Song and Reang, a couple who also received a large sum of money from the compassionate public. They are compared as being equal in terms of poverty and education, but what Song and Reang have much more of than Suchin is 'thoughtfulness and strength'. This marks a return to *Kon Kon Kon*'s much-loved moral thesis and when the film concludes that money cannot improve one's life, and is not a guarantee of happiness, without one's moral strength.

Therefore the film arguably offers an interpretation of the event that is differs little from moral 'everyman' opinions offered by Suchin's neighbours and family which stop only at easily-identifiable factors such as her ignorance and weakness of mind. We hear from neighbours that, Suchin has changed to a 'totally different person' who 'doesn't care about advice' and 'often scolds us back'. A friend of Suchin, who is a teacher in a local school, comments that with money Suchin had many people wanting to be friends with her and she could have luxury and comfort. Her friend then painfully, and with a hint of anger, recounts Suchin's response when she advised her not to get married to the man.

> Teacher, you are not disabled, you are perfect. You have many options.
> I am disabled. One day a man comes into my lonely life. He loves me
> and takes care of me. Do you expect me not to grasp this chance?

Though the film takes on this recounting of Suchin's own words about her own decision, this is very brief and imprecise as analysed above. A moral thesis soon resumes and dominates. A little later, we see a shot of Suchin walking, or to be precise crawling, out of the building after a meeting at the Council of Lawyers. It conveys the sense of the fate of a woman whose life becomes messed up after her own decision to divert from the moral way of living. The slow motion shot captures Suchin from behind as she crawls past the large sign of a legal institution accompanied by the *Kon Kon Kon* theme score before cutting into a break, leaving the audience with a possible imagination that her life would not necessarily have to involve such a kind of institution if she had taken the morally right path.

3.4   Analysis of the Kon Kon Kon thesis and implied fabula

The textual analysis above suggests theses and in turn *fabula* implied by *Kon Kon Kon* films on people with disabilities. These theses evolve around individual ability and traits. Qualities such as self-reliance, perseverance, resilience and resourcefulness, and care and helpfulness towards others are portrayed as causal forces for a respectable and happy life. The implied *fabula* or 'the story of characters and events as it actually happened in real time and space' (Stones, 2002b, p. 361) can thus potentially be that 'when faced with obstacles, one tries to overcome those obstacles by oneself first because external assistance will never make a real change for a better life.' The *fabula* can be taken further to read that 'when everyone acts this way, the society functions well and harmony is achieved'. The films imply a less complex view of life. On the level of individuals, inner or moral strength is exaggerated as the only factor that matters. The role of external factors is only to challenge individuals to defy hostile environments. External factors make one's life saturated either with material enjoyment or hardship. Thus great human beings, rich or poor alike, should thrive beyond external reality and realize true human potentials. The films aim to empower individuals by emphasizing the ability to transcend external circumstances.   This implies the disconnectedness between self and society embedded in the film's logic. Durkheim's moral individualism offers a more comprehensive view of human beings in that we are all social beings in the sense that the self and society are not exclusive but presupposing each other (see chapter two). The main purpose of each film is to offer the public new positive images of disabled people, replacing the old one of individuals embedded in anger, resentment, isolation

and self-pity, and that despite discouraging conditions these disabled thrive and reach the true potential of being human.

This implied *fabula* claims that a 'real life' is a linear path filled mainly with the individual's great realization and moral struggles, or the lack of them, with less or no reference to explanatory forces from social institutional elements, and no allusion to abstract distant forces. This bears a resemblance to a *fabula* of a simple folk tale, a narrative in which 'the complex field of possibilities and constraints, a plurality of social and psychological factors is subsumed' due to the focus on individual moral struggle (Stones, 2002a, p. 220) and an individual's moral weakness or strength is made the only causal explanation. This style of simplistic and linear narrative is the opposite to a more configurational, non-linear character of causation which 'combines an emphasis on relatively abstract, relationally constituted notions such as the family structure, the job market, state-societal relations, or the democratic system, with those more readily identifiable entities such as individuals, groups and organizations' (Stones, 2011, p. 8). The fairy tale simplistic narrative is not salient as a Thai way of media coverage. An example is a weekly newsmagazine (Nation Sudsapda, 12 November 2007) about Suchin, one of the *Kon Kon Kon* subjects discussed earlier. The article expresses a strong abhorrence towards Suchin and is filled with the words 'disgusting' and 'sad'. The author condemns Suchin for 'using money to buy love' and as a woman 'so thirsty for love that she can be easily fooled' and 'appears even more handicapped judging from the way she spends money'. There is no sign of attempt to cast the net further away from Suchin who is perceived

as fully capable of making rational, moral choices. The article's allusion to her internal perspective 'so thirsty for love' resembles more an external observer's analysis and thus does not bring to the reader any insight of how complex Suchin's world is. Instead, she is presented simply as a stereotyped character.

On the basis of sociological benchmarks, the contextualization guided by the above *fabula* is unlikely to be adequate. If a decent life is a result of moral choices which are made to appear in a vacuum, critical realism would not totally agree. Critical realism provides building blocks for a non-reductionist perspective; it believes that an outcome in a specific context is the result of a very complex interplay between levels and mechanisms. As such the world is an open system where casual chains can be infinitely complex and the final consequence, in this case a life with virtues or vice, depends on many contingently intervening factors (cf.Stones, 1996, pp. 28-31). To reduce an explanation for an honourable or wrongful life to only entities observable by the camera cannot bring us any closer to recreating how such a life is constructed.

In addition to critical realism, the hermeneutical approach proposes that an individual carries cultural baggage from the past which affects how s/he understands and responds to a situation (Stones, 1996, p. 49). C. Wright Mills argues similarly when he noted the significance of understanding an individual's biography and the institutions within it is enacted, that '...to understand the biography of an individual, we must understand the significance and meaning of the roles he has played and

does play'. To understand these roles we must understand the institutions of which they are a part' (Mills, 1959, p. 161). To apply hermeneutics and Mills' sociological imagination to the Thai contemporary rural context, the roles, institutions and their significance could be as follows. From birth, a role as a son/daughter with impairment in a poverty stricken family would imply at the very least bad luck and a burden, a non-contributing member and one who lacks potential due to barriers in getting a formal education or training. As a disabled child in a village, s/he can be an object of bullying for other children, of benevolence for other adults and can be deemed another ignorant citizen for government officials who come to the village only to mobilise support for national economic growth or for the next election. As a disabled adult s/he is now embedded in poverty in almost all possible senses including impaired body, lack of capability (information, education, confidence), discriminating and isolating social relations, lack of security and protection, behaviours (abused by the more powerful), disempowered and excluded from institutions and lack of or weak organizations of/for people with disabilities (cf. Chamber, 2005). This speculation is not far from reality. A similar pattern is spelled out for disabled people in Thai society; that their bodily impairment can have tremendous effects on their whole life (Kotchakorn Srisamphan, 1994 cited in Decha Sungkawan, 2002, p. 4). Many people with impairment are more prone to negative self-images. They deem themselves worthless and incapable and become secluded and susceptive to further distorted images of self and others. This can result in mental problems which may cause further bodily illness and other complications. Thus, those with impairment are more prone to become economically, politically and socially excluded and

disadvantaged (ibid.). Consequently, social impacts are the source of an individual's self-image, his /her consciousness and the very growth of mind (Mills, 1959, p. 161).

If 'telling a story makes the moment live beyond the moment' (Riessman, 2008, p. 63) suggests that stories function to alter the ways we view mundane everyday events and that stories can accomplish change (ibid.), the moment *Kon Kon Kon* films would like to relay is an ordinary person defying, resisting and defeating powerful structures. This can refer to the medical professional, patronizing piecemeal charity handouts, and cultural ideals about the body. The function of *Kon Kon Kon* films is thus to induce change in individuals' attitudes and behavior, empowering people to stand up and defeat limitations imposed upon them. The films promote the positive images of disabled individuals, providing them with voices and acknowledge their capability and autonomy. As such they naturally lack sufficient space for acknowledging how those attitudes and behaviour are initially socially influenced and connected. In the linear moral narrative of the *Kon Kon Kon* films, we learn sporadically and unsystematically about the social contextual conditions of the life of the subject and the many others growing up in similar conditions. Rather, we are presented with emotions and aspiration. Audiences experience the subject's action as a direct outcome of her/his morality and not as an action of a social actor whose reality is complex. However, this latter representation applies to other *Kon Kon Kon* films about the non-disabled. An example is a film about a notorious criminal and his attempt to rectify his fault which is presented without being subject to a simplistic, moral argument (cf. Krungthep Thurakij, 22 March 2003). Perhaps people with

disabilities have gained a 'privilege' in the media, that is, they can only be impeccably 'moral' and thus a source of inspiration.

3.5 Conclusion

A film can be analysed as having four levels of meaning: referential, explicit, implicit and symptomatic (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, pp. 60-63). This is a suitable framework to summarise themes and the implied version of reality proposed by *Kon Kon Kon* films about people with disabilities. At the referential meaning, the films present lives with bodily impairment and physical illness in contemporary urban and rural Thai society. On the level of explicit meaning, the commentary and perspective arguments argue for personal qualities in overcoming physical hardship such as perseverance and resilience. On the level of implicit meaning, the abstract idea is that the well-being of people with disabilities is not dependent upon structural intervention or assistance. Finally, there are four possible symptomatic meanings or 'what the films bear in terms of a particular set of social values or ideology' (op.cit. , p. 63). First, being independent from external reliance and thus being self-reliant and resilient is a good example. Second, all people, disabled and non-disabled, should aspire to this. Third, there is a shift in attitude in which values are assigned, from an individual's status at birth to merits given on the basis of a person's achievement. Finally and relatedly, individuals have autonomy to design their life because the power and influence of traditional institutions on them have, purportedly, diminished in contemporary society. Although the films are constructed as simple moral tales, aiming to empower viewers, these motivating narratives offer a non-comprehensive

view of social life, poverty and social exclusion. The next chapter continues by placing

these themes and style of (limited) contextualization into the context of late modern

living. It identifies the structural factors that influence the production and popularity

of such portraits of disability, and such individualistic accounts of social life.

Chapter 4: The social context of production and reception of *Kon Kon Kon* films

4.1   *Introduction*

The previous chapter explored *Kon Kon Kon* films in order to identify themes, the nature of contextualization and their implied reality. This chapter discusses these elements of the film as reflecting late modern society. The chapter draws on literature on the transition to late modernity to explain the basis on which the films are produced and viewed in such a way that individuals and society are disconnected and only the former is in the spotlight. The chapter places the production and consumption of *Kon Kon Kon* films, identified here as 'human interest' stories, in the context of reflexivity and agency empowerment and the ambivalence of late modern society. The aspect of reflexivity refers to having a critical distance from the commands of modern structural features, for example the state top-down policy, Fordism, and rigid codes of conducts. The subsequent late modern ambivalence manifests in the coexistence and tension between the new and the old: the increased individual autonomy/ responsibility to make choices in life, on the one hand, and the continuing authoritative forces of social institutions such as market mechanisms and the consolidated use of political power on the other. The latter permeates and conditions the scope of choices one faces in reality, regardless of the promotion of autonomy circulated by consumerism and discourse on rights and liberty. This is what Bauman (2000) refers to as the gap of the contemporary era between autonomy *de jure* and autonomy *de facto*. The opinions of producers and viewers of

Kon Kon Kon films are used to demonstrate this condition of late modernity: the infusion of autonomy *de jure* in the media and the missing context for realization of autonomy *de facto*. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with the Creative Executive and Executive Producer of the series. Audience perception is based on comments from viewers of thirty-one videos on YouTube. Each video contains a section of one of the focused films. These videos are made available on YouTube by individual account holders who do not reveal any connection to the filmmakers, thus indicating their genuine interest in the original films through their posting of the videos for others to watch. These empirical materials, despite their relative thinness, are crucial in providing the beginnings for understanding the complexity of late modern radicalized individualism in Thai society. The first section discusses the radicalized individualism of late modernity before the second part focuses on the role of sensational media texts in creating discrepancies between freedom to dream and awareness of actual social conditions that affect the realization of such dreams but are omitted from the media.

4.2   Methods

4.2.1 Interview with film makers

The method of semi-structured interview is used to obtain views of *Kon Kon Kon* film makers. The use of an interview guide in the method enables more specific issues or questions to be addressed while at the same time allows interviewees' own perspectives and interests to arise and construct the conversation. Interviewers can

depart from the guide by varying the order, changing the wording of questions and asking new questions that follow up interviewees' replies (Bryman, 2008, pp. 437-438). The method embraces both focus and flexibility. The researcher is able to pursue a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of the topic, in order to cover the areas in focus. These are then filled with perspectives of the interviewees (op.cit. , p. 442).

The interview aimed to understand the production of *Kon Kon Kon* films and the development of their theses on disability and poverty from the perspective of the film producers. The interview guide was prepared to cover the following areas: the objectives of making the films; the broad production process and the process of characterization of the subject of the film; the different weights assigned to diverse theses of morality, individualism, communitarianism and political structure in films about disability and poverty; experience of filming poor people with disability; and institutional constraints and enablements in media production. Permission was sought to interview three members of TV Burabha who involved in the production and distribution of the films. The permission was granted; the interview date was given and the interviews were permitted to take place at the company in Bangkok. However, on the day of the interview, only two interviewees were available, the Creative Executive and the Executive Producer.

The interviews and relevant document were in Thai language. Both interviews took place in a meeting room of the company, with only the interviewee and interviewer in the room and without interference from telephones, computers

and mobile usage. Each interview started with the interviewer introducing herself, purpose of the study and of the interview and how the interview would be used in the study. The interviewee was then asked to read and sign the consent form which specified a brief outline of the study, methods used to collect and analyse data, which had just been explained to them. The interviewee was told that a digital recorder would be used during the interview. Information about the interviewee on name, current position and number of years employed in the company was obtained. The first interview lasted 1 hour 46 minutes while the second lasted 2 hours 3 minutes. Both interviews were structured according to the same interview guide. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. This way, the research familiarizes with the data and start to identify key themes along the process of transcription (cf. Bryman, 2008, p. 456).

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcript. The method comprises searching out underlying themes in the material. This is done through manual coding or reviewing transcript and writing notes about significant remarks or observations of parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance (cf. Bryman, 2008, p. 542). The extracted themes are then illustrated with quotations (cf. Bryman, 2008, p. 529).

4.2.2 Thematic analysis of audience comments

Audience perception is based on comments from viewers of thirty-one videos on YouTube. The aim is to find out reactions of the public viewers regarding

disabilities, poverty and hardship in the films. Each video contains a section of one of the focused films. There are: one video on *Ake The Penguin: A Man Who Draws Life with His Feet*; seven videos on *The Happiness of Mankong*; nineteen videos on *Three Small Friends with Big Hearts*; three videos on *A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee*; and one video on *Makud: A Mighty Heart in an Undersized Body*. These videos are made available on YouTube by individual account holders who do not reveal any connection to the filmmakers, thus potentially suggesting genuine interest in the original films and enthusiasm to share them with others.

Each video was viewed followed by information being collected: the name of the video, the description, its duration, the name of person uploading it, the date of uploading, the number of viewing, the number of likes and dislikes, and all comments for each video with the name of the person who wrote those comments. These were compiled and printed out. In total, there are 326 comments for all the 31 videos, with some video received no comment at all while one video on *A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee* received as many as 120 comments.

Thematic analysis was applied to the comments. Patterns of meaning or themes were identified across a data set (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The coding and analysis used a combination of both theory-driven deductive and inductive approaches (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58). The analysis started with reading through all comments. For the deductive approach, each comment was then identified with themes from literature regarding characteristics of human interest

stories and their effects on viewers. These are: the level of transcending physical and political differences to create a platform for the realisation of universal and fundamental questions/lessons about life; the use of narrative arc filled with poignant conflicts and resolutions to maximise audience identification with and emotional response to the characters; the identification of individual solution compared to collective action. Other codes emerged from the data as well, a bottom-up inductive approach. These are: admiration for the characters as inspiration for oneself; condemnation of oneself and others for laziness and weakness; the relationship between karma and disability; and praise for the programme. Quotations from these comments were then translated into English and used to illustrate points about the identification of *Kon Kon Kon* with human interest stories and the popularity and relevance of the genre in postmodern Thailand.

4.3   *Late modernity: radicalised individualism*

Individualism incorporates wide ranging orientations. Chapter two discusses this in association with neoliberal welfare ideologies including: equality of opportunity, freedom of individuals to prosper and pursue their own interests, emphasis on individual efforts, and the spirit of self-help and hence the tendency to individualise poverty or blame it on defective behavior rather than social arrangements. This section expands on these orientations by locating them on the path of the development of society from traditional to modern and late modern, with the demise of traditional transcendental collective goals and hence the birth of the human as the central character. This value, placed on human dignity and

equality of opportunity for all, is argued to underpin the production and consumption of human interest stories such as *Kon Kon Kon* films.

Traditional societies are held together by the similarity of members [46] and thus a very limited level of differentiation, division of labour and individuality. There are in each of us two consciences: first, what we share with our entire group, which, in consequence, is not ourselves, but society living and acting within us; and the other which, on the contrary, represents only that which is personal and distinctive to each of us, which makes her/him an individual (Durkheim, 1902 in Lukes, 1973, p. 149). Following this, members of traditional societies cannot really be called 'individuals' because they share the same beliefs – the conscience collective – in almost all aspects of life. Members are to a *same* degree enveloped by the *same* conscience collective (ibid.). The solidarity which derives from resemblances is at its maximum when the conscience collective is exactly co-extensive with the individual's entire conscience and coincides at all points with it. At that point, individuality is non-existent (Durkheim, 1902 cited in Lukes, 1973, p. 149). The individual is absorbed into the conscience collective. In this way, one cannot be an individual in society and is either 'in' or 'outside' a society (Craib, 1997, p. 65). As the conscience collective acquires a religious character (Lukes, 1973, p. 152), 'social' hence becomes religious or sacred in traditional societies. In

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[46] The type of solidarity in traditional societies is called 'mechanical solidarity' (Craib, 1997; Lukes, 1973; Pope, 2008). It is called mechanical because it holds society that is an aggregate rather than a system of mutually dependent elements and thus it can shed part of itself without necessarily losing its unity, just as a cell can divide into separate and self-sufficient parts. The parts of the whole are connected 'mechanically', rather than forming an 'organic' unity as the parts of a differentiated biological system do (Giddens, 1978, p. 26).

other words, the collectivities – the regularities and institutional patterns – have a 'superhuman character'; that is, they are 'superior to human interest' and 'beyond the pale of discussion' (Lukes, 1973, p. 152). Traditional societies, with similarity in beliefs and personality of members, have a very basic level of the division of labour, no more than the sexual division of labour implied by the different biological make-up of men and women (Craib, 1997, p. 65). There is a low degree of interdependence (Lukes, 1973, p. 150); members engage in the same basic activities, often a matter of subsistence hunting and gathering (Craib, 1997, p. 65).

Modern societies, on the other hand, are characterised by significant structural differentiation (Giddens, 1978, pp. 25-26) and hence increased individuality and agency. They are more organised, that is, involving interdependent and specialised roles, belief and sentiments (Lukes, 1973, p. 148).[47] In fact, society becomes more capable of operating in harmony in so far as each of its elements operates more independently; the division of labour fills the role that was once filled by the conscience collective (Lukes, 1973, pp. 147-148). The division of labour and the principle of individuation is the social glue that holds together social aggregates of the more advanced society.

The conscience collective in modern societies becomes less important as it covers a smaller proportion of life (Craib, 1997, p. 66). It becomes more abstract (Pope, 2008, p. 80) as the intensity and the determinacy of collective states have

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[47] The type of solidarity holding a modern society is called organic solidarity - 'the interdependence of individuals or groups in systematic relations of exchange with one another' (Lukes, 1973, p. 148).

diminished (Lukes, 1973, p. 156). In fact, the only modern supreme value or conscience collective is attached to individualism: individual dignity, equality of opportunity, work ethics and social justice for all (Lukes, 1973, p. 158). It is now the shared conviction in 'human life and dignity' that acquires a religious character, the sacredness, while other collective values become profane. An individual, so long as her/his conduct has not violated her/his title of man, shares the degree of god and thus inviolable by everything mortal (Durkheim, 1951 quoted in Emirbayer, 2003, p. 264). This *'cult of man'* is the only remaining bond, uniting individuals in one thought when societies expand and individual differences multiply. The only conscience collective of modern society is captured in the following quote.

> There is an area in which (the conscience commune) becomes stronger and more precise; that is, the way in which it regards the individual. As all the other beliefs and all the other practices take on an increasingly less religious character, the individual become the object of a sort of religion. We have a cult of personal dignity...if it is common in being shared throughout the community, it is individual in its object. If it turns all wills towards a single end, that end is not social...It is still from society that it derives all its force, but it is not to society that it attaches us: it is to ourselves (Durkheim, 1902 quoted in Lukes, 1973, p. 156).

The content of the conscience collective of modern societies thus becomes increasingly secular, human oriented, and rational, as opposed to traditional conscience collective which attaches supreme value to the 'society' and collective interest and which is transcendental and superior to human interest (Durkheim, 1902 in Lukes, 1973, p. 156). The morality of advanced societies is more human and more rational (Lukes, 1973, p. 157). The belief system which

Durkheim took to be characteristic of the modern conscience collective places a supreme value not only on individual dignity, but also on equality of opportunity, a highly developed work ethic and social justice (Lukes, 1973, p. 157). The modern conscience collective composed of *'human interest'* and rational ends are captured in the following quote.

> It does not attach our activity to ends which do not concern us directly; it does not make us into servants of imaginary powers of a nature other than our own, which go their own ways without considering the interests of men. It simply requires that we be kind to one another and be just that we perform our duty well, and that we work to achieve a situation in which everyone will be called to the function that he can best perform, and receive a just price for his efforts (Durkheim, 1902 quoted in Lukes, 1973, p. 157).

Apart from the rather vague universal conscience collective in equal rights and freedom, post-traditional societies need another set of human oriented conscience collectives. These are conscience collectives of strong master identities and social anchoring in nations, classes, local communities, families and their gender-specific norms (Pakulski, 2009, p. 271). They are 'shields' of modern or industrial societies against change-generated uncertainties and anxieties, following the demise of conscience collective of traditional societies (ibid.).

Given all of these modern features brought about by the development away from traditions, we next need to examine late modernity. Late modern society[48] marks both features continuing and disrupting from the modern one. Late modernity arguably continues the state of diminishing determinacy of

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[48] A period from 1900 and primarily since the World War II (Cohen, 2008, p. 328)

conscience collectives and transcendental supreme purpose. The shift towards human oriented conscience collectives continues, be they in the form of the nation-state, bureaucratic, class, gender and career based organization patterns of society. The break with the early modern is, however, marked by the non-exclusiveness of any of these conscience collectives, compared to their cohesive, all enveloping nature in early modern societies (Pakulski, 2009, p. 272). Late modernity does not abolish the laws and authorities of class, gender and ethnic statuses, nor make them redundant. It does not make all choices worth the same or permit interchangeability of values. It merely brings all authorities into being at one same time for them to cancel each other out and all lose their exclusiveness (Bauman, 2000, p. 64). The dissolution of 'national ethical service prescription' means it is now down to an individual, as her/his responsibility, to distinguish between the good and evil from a vast array of choices (Bauman, 1995, p. 5). In early modern societies individuals, upon being disembedded or released from the stiff, all-enveloping frames of estate, ascription and the divine chain of being, seek to be re-embedded in class and to conform to class bound conduct (Bauman, 2000, p. 32). They are the target of 'manufactured' membership of modern societies which guaranteed safety and satisfaction (ibid.). Similar guarantees are provided by the cohesiveness of the nation-state, bureaucracy, gender and career. In late modern societies, however, there are no single frames or targets to be reallocated. The boundary between right and wrong is blurred (Bauman, 2000, pp. 57-59). Individuals are faced with the responsibility to explore both capabilities and where to apply it as there are no more clear, safe ends to guarantee satisfaction

(Bauman, 2000, p. 62). This is a radicalised individualism of late modernity which puts more pressure on individuals to make choices about selfhood as there is no support from quasi traditional identity anymore (Pakulski, 2009, p. 272). In addition to responsibility to choose, individuals are charged more with taking consequences of their performance (cf. Bauman, 2000, pp. 31-35). These are rights of self-assertion, what Bauman refers to as autonomy *de jure*. This autonomy brings with it unprecedented freedom of experimenting and an unprecedented task of coping with their consequences (Bauman, 2000, p. 38). The task encompasses: not following the rule or surrendering to the norms (Bauman, 1995, p. 62), constructing specific identities and sustaining them through appropriate lifestyles and consumption (cf. Pakulski, 2009, p. 272), surviving one's own irredeemable loneliness, knowing that risks in life need to be confronted and fought alone, compulsive self-critique, and having no one to blame for one's own misery (Bauman, 2000, p. 38). One is compelled to seek the causes of defeats in one's own ignorance and there are no remedies other than trying harder (ibid.). With the fading of all-defining regularities and institutional patterns and the consequent expansion of choices, even more reflexivity is in place. *Reflexivity* refers to practices guided by observation and thought and requires discursive consciousness[49] which is an awareness when one lacks the taken-for-granted ability to go on; when it requires a synthesis of fully conscious thought and taken-

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[49]Giddens distinguishes between practical and discursive consciousness. Practical consciousness is constituted by taken for granted knowledge and drives us to take actions without conscious reflection, such as when we say 'hello' without giving a second thought (Cohen, 2008, pp. 327-330).

for-granted skills, or for practices that require pragmatic problem-solving[50] (Giddens cited in Cohen, 2008, pp. 327-330). It is similar to *social agency* – or the capacity of a social actor to make a difference, to produce historical variation (Cohen, 1989, p. 24) and to *active agency* – or the reflexive awareness of actors and their skilful capacity for adjustment and adaptation within the unfolding course of an interaction (Stones, 2009, p. 90). Social or active agency cover resistance, improvisation, innovation, creativity, critical distance and reflection (op.cit. , p. 96). It is commented that in modern society such reflexivity has become more crucial as reflexivity must intervene to apply the general conscience collective to particular cases (Lukes, 1973, p. 156).

Thus, the current lack of master patterns in late modern society arguably requires more activation of discursive consciousness from individuals than ever. Modern forms of reflexivity empower social actors to challenge taken-for-granted forms of authority including for instance family, professionals and the state (Cohen, 2008, pp. 327-330). While people in modern societies remained tradition-bound 'locals' in many respects, in late modern societies almost everyone exercises a range of cosmopolitan freedom. Actors now have the right to decide on, or in many cases are compelled to choose, everything from their medical treatment to their cultural lifestyle (ibid.). The side effect of these constant challenges of applying agency and reflexivity is often anxiety. This can be explained as when actors conduct themselves for extended periods, they rely on practical

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[50] Examples of discursive consciousness include illness, disaster, puzzle solving or artistic creation (Cohen, 2008, p. 329).

consciousness almost exclusively; this practical consciousness forms ontological security (Cohen, 2008, p. 327). The dynamics of late modernity disturb this taken-for-granted competence in negotiating familiar ways of life; late modernity does not permit us to take much for granted for very long (Cohen, 2008, p. 332). The disturbed security is best captured in the following quote:

> The recurrent need to make informed decisions about uncertain events opens up everywhere from career paths, to retirement planning, to the choices parents make for their children. Trust, which is an integral feature of ontological security, cannot be taken for granted when so many weighty decisions need to be made (Cohen, 2008, p. 330).

The extent of autonomy and responsibility in late modernity is alarmingly high and causes anxiety partly because it is not a choice, but a fate (Bauman, 2000, p. 7). The 'fluidity' of late modern lives emerges in Bauman's assertion that,

> In the absence of a Supreme Office…, the question of objectives is once more thrown wide open and bound to become the cause of endless agony and much hesitation, to sap confidence and generate the unnerving feeling of unmitigated uncertainty and therefore also the state of perpetual anxiety…not knowing the ends…most of human life and most of human lives will be spent agonizing about the choices of goals, rather than finding the means to the ends which do not call for reflection (Bauman, 2000, p. 61).

After discussing features of late modernity and the break with the past marked by the abundance of competing values in place of a single supreme social anchoring and thus by the increased autonomy of individuals, the following section looks particularly at the role of media in influencing such phenomenon. Media is discussed as promoting freedom and power to choose and to be, or autonomy *de jure.* It is also where the negligence in the social and political

dimensions which actually determine autonomy *de facto* manifests. This discrepancy will be explored, illustrated by views of the *Kon Kon Kon* producer and audiences.

4.4 *Media: the demise of public issues and the reproduction of the gap between de facto and de jure autonomy*

The functioning of the late modern individual's self-assertion cannot be understood without investigating the role played by the media. Individual viewers are reinforced in their individuality through the media which presents stories about the way people individually define their problems and try to tackle them, deploying individual skills and resources (Bauman, 2000, p. 51). Individuals are reassured that the solitary fashion in which they live is what all other individuals do (op.cit. , p. 39); that whatever resources such an undertaking may require can be sought and found in their own skills and courage (op.cit. , p. 68). By looking at other people's experience, one hopes to locate the troubles which cause one's own unhappiness or to come across a stratagem which one may have missed in living (ibid.). The public space becomes emptied of public issues and filled by private confessions, stories of success and failure, experiences of coping with individualisation. Therefore, troubles and solutions become privatized and are made non-additive and are not amenable to summing up into a common cause (op.cit. , p. 35). The only advantage of the company of other life sufferers is to refresh and re-boost the resolve to fight the troubles alone. The art of public life is

narrowed to the public display of private affairs and sentiments. Public issues which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible (op.cit. , p. 37). The public space is no longer the 'agora' where private problems can be translated into the language of public issues and where public solutions are sought, negotiated, agreed for private troubles (op.cit. , p. 39). Thus, the media helps reinforcing autonomy *de jure*, precisely, by circulating the perpetual disembeddedment of identity and lifestyle choices and the decontextualisation of such choices. People are told repeatedly that they are the master of their own fate, have little reason to accord topical relevance to anything which resists being defined within the self (op.cit. , p. 40). They are naturally tempted to reduce the complexity of their predicament in order to render the causes of misery intelligible, tractable and amenable to remedial action (op.cit., p. 38). Individuals have eyes focusing on their own performances and consequently diverted from the social space of collectively produced problems.

The way beliefs, values and style have been privatized and individuals decontextualised has tremendously negative effects on the public sphere and citizenship. This marks the end of the definition of the human being as a social being, defined by her/his place in society (Bauman, 2000, p. 178). The emphasis on autonomy *de jure* of many media texts that feature private moral narratives masks a gap between the poor and the rich in carrying out this task of self-assertion. An individual's range of resources or latent enablements and constraints are to a large extent influenced by her/his positions in society (Cohen, 1989; Stones, 2005;

Whittington, 1992). This manifests when one can afford to play down the risks, insecurity and consequences of identity shopping when one's resources are plentiful (Bauman, 2000, p. 88). The poor, on the other hand, are driven by the same seductive consumer culture as the rich. However, their desire to taste is contrasted with their impoverished reality (ibid.). The gap of control over identity construction between the rich and the poor divides human situations and prompts cut-throat competition rather than unifying human condition (Bauman, 2000, p. 90).

As a result, there is a late modern gap between autonomy *de jure* and autonomy *de facto* – or the capacity to control the social setting which renders the task of self-assertion feasible or to materialize the choices one desires and to gain control over fate (Bauman, 2000, pp. 39,49). The media saturated with private stories of struggles and triumphs make the prospect of the individual *de jure* ever turning into the individual *de facto* seem remote because to achieve individual *de facto* requires becoming a citizen (Bauman, 2000, p. 40) with awareness of the collective conditions that affect rights and duties of individuals. Giddens identifies one feature that affects citizenship. This is totalitarianism and the consolidated use of political power (Giddens, 1990, p. 8). Despite the sociological founders contention that the arbitrary use of political power and despotism belong primarily to the past, we can still see the rise of fascism, the Holocaust and Stalinism. In fact totalitarianism has become more frightening as it connects political, military and ideological power in more concentrated forms than ever before in the emergence

of modern nation-states. The industrialization of war and nuclear weaponry have made the world today a fraught and dangerous one, not a happier and more secure social order (ibid.). Unless citizens understand better the power relations and engage more meaningfully in affairs that underlie the actual activation of their autonomy *de jure*, the abuse of power in the form of totalitarianism is likely to continue. It is thus contradictory when reflexivity – or the use of knowledge to break with the past and to orient oneself towards the future (cf. Giddens, 1990, p. 46) – was in place disproportionately at an individual level and not enough at the societal level where it should have been in operation more meaningfully.

As we have seen, *Kon Kon Kon* films about disabled people can be argued to sustain or mystify the gap between individuality *de jure* and individuality *de facto* by focusing almost exclusively on the former; the films focus on legally enforced freedom and right of self-assertion at the price of elaborating on or even hinting at, whether and how those rights are actually being activated. The films have features of the genre of the *human interest story*. Human interest stories presume a set of facts that are of interest in themselves, rather than for an instrumental end such as changing policy. In journalism, human interest stories cannot be classified in other rubrics; it is not considered political, social, economic or cultural news (Boudana, 2012, p. 203). They presume a personal, emotional connection between the subject and the audience (Fine & White, 2002, p. 64) with stories focusing on the predicaments and circumstances of particular individuals (op.cit. , p. 58). The human interest stories have principles of narration that reduce

the actors and situations to stereotypes and that inspire universal and fundamental questioning about life, death and human destiny (Boudana, 2012, p. 203). With the focus being on the individual, the moral concerns are precisely those that involve the human condition and are directed away from any need for collective action; the call for collective action and political involvement is muted while local solutions are appreciated and deemed sufficient (Fine & White, 2002, p. 74). Human interest stories are linked with poignancy and overt emotionality (Carter & Williams, 2012, p. 223) and therefore the genre is discussed as missing any wider structural context for critical discussion (Bonfiglioli, King, Smith, Chapman, & Holding, 2007; Boudana, 2012; Carter & Williams, 2012; Fine & White, 2002).

Human interest stories have other specific potential. First, they provide powerful collective representations and create a group of common interests. Individuals can come to recognise that their fellow citizens share their attitudes and emotions. This permits topical engagement and the creation of a focused community to express a shared perspective, fulfilling needs that are not covered by other journalistic genres (Boudana, 2012, p. 212; Fine & White, 2002, p. 59). Second, human interest stories represent a nomic force which counters anomic forces and the absence of control that most citizens feel (Fine & White, 2002, p. 60). Human interest stories do these through their identification of potential, their narrative arc, and the discursive space they occupy within the public sphere (ibid.). Audiences identify with the principal characters and settings, seeing in them either

similarity to themselves or often a meaningful and symbolic difference, or sometimes both. The audience often develops a powerful deep personal identification with these figures making mass media an interpersonal communication (Fine & White, 2002, pp. 66,77). Furthermore, human interest stories must have a narrative thrust, that is, being situated in time and filled with conflicts and resolutions like a fictional narrative (pp. 70-77). Finally, human interest stories should have the ability to provoke discussion and to direct citizens' attention to shared values through the provision of moral guidance (p. 73). It can be argued then that human interest stories contain didactic moral lessons. For them to be deemed useful for the audience, they need to be situated within a context of values (ibid.).

Kon Kon Kon films are made as inspiration to the late modern audience to overcome mental and material obstacles and to achieve a meaningful life using resources available in oneself; one should not refer to external factors of social-political conditioning which would be seen as a distraction to the task of self-realization or as an excuse to avoid the task. The films contain values which focus on individualism such as relentless perseverance, resilience, self-reliance, equal opportunities, autonomy, the power of mindset and attitude, and selflessness towards family, friends and community (see chapter three). This can be understood as a reductionist approach to portraying disability experience, focusing only on aspects in accord with neoliberal ideologies. According to the *Kon Kon Kon* Creative Executive, Jira Bunprasop, these ideologies are the most important part of

being human and people with disabilities are in the best position to demonstrate them, as shown in the interview excerpt below.

> Disabled subjects in the films are fighters. We do not have much to learn from the non-disabled but a lot from disabled people, from their relentless perseverance, from the fact that they have to try tremendously with all limitations in life. But they have a great heart. They survive despite many difficult conditions and limitations to live a normal life in society. This is the inspiration they can give us all, especially those living lazily, idly, and caring for nothing and helping no-one. Despite living with comfort, these people are real losers… A student jumps from a building because she has a pimple or she receives a low mark at school. What does this tell us? It tells us that she is weak from the inside and that she only has herself to think about. Compared to a disabled, who should live with grievance and misery, but in fact they do not. They never become obsessed with themselves but try to survive, to reach the higher status of human. They survive by themselves and help others too, their family… This is a meaningful life (Jira Bunprasop, 2011).

Reference to disabled people as inspirational is a main feature of human interest stories such as *Kon Kon Kon* narratives in order to promote the late modern conscience collective of individualism: individual dignity, equality of opportunity and work ethics. However, the reduction of social life, advertently or inadvertently, only to those neo-liberal standards is achieved at the expense of casting the net further to other cultural and material perspectives that determine greatly the availability and access to opportunities. This representation fits into 'the drama of adjustment'. According to Longmore (2001), the drama of adjustment in films and media representations of disability has plots which show the disabled characters as either bitter, self-pitying, never being adjusted to their handicaps, never accepting themselves as they are and treating the nondisabled angrily and manipulatively (pp. 5-8); or as being compensated with spiritual, moral, mental and emotional superior skills and striving courageously (pp. 8-9). The first

form – the bitter angry disabled villains – portrays disability as a problem of psychological, self-acceptance and of emotional adjustment; disabled characters lack insight about themselves and other people and require emotional education, usually by a nondisabled character rebuking and demanding that they act responsibly (pp. 7,13). The second form – people with disabilities with special gifts – conveys that the gift of compensation comes to those who cope and deal responsibly with their affliction. It also suggests that disabled individuals can best prove their social acceptability, their worthiness of social integration, by displaying some physical capability (pp. 8,10). Both forms imply that success or failure in living with a disability results almost solely from the emotional choices, courage, and character of the individual; they exhibit a distorted view of living with disability. Social discrimination and civil rights are insignificant compared to personal emotional coping, or personal acceptance. This is best demonstrated in the following quote:

> It points to one of the social and cultural functions of that image […]: in a culture that attributes success or failure primarily to individual characters, "successful" handicapped people serve as models of personal adjustment, striving, and achievement. In the end, accomplishment or defeat depends only on one's attitude toward oneself and toward life. If someone so tragically "crippled" can overcome the obstacles confronting them, think what you, without such a "handicap," can do. Another obvious social function of the psychologized image of […] disability is to make it an individual rather than a social problem. Prejudice and discrimination rarely enter into either fictional or nonfictional stories, and then only as a secondary issue (Longmore, 2001, p. 9).

The purpose of *Kon Kon Kon* films about people with disabilities is to initiate topics for public discussion and ultimately the improvement of collective issues. The films do this through telling stories about disabled individuals thriving through mental and physical limitations, while social mechanisms are left unexamined. It is believed by the Creative Executive that such sensational private stories are sufficient to start the learning process that will bring positive change to Thai society.

> The distinctiveness of *Kon Kon Kon* is presenting stories about how to fight and handle sufferings and unyielding conditions relentlessly. We do not go deep into the cause of disability because it is not our priority but news coverage should. We just want to get people start discussing about change at any level. Film producers are not god and we cannot change the society overnight. The society needs a learning process. People will eventually get to the core of a problem and stop fiddling about with superficial solutions. I believe that private stories can reflect public issues (Jira Bunprasop, 2011).

The same point is conveyed by the Executive Producer of the series, Theerarat Duangkamol.

> We convey social meaning but in a very, very subtle way. We are not going to say to officials right in the face that you have not been doing your job properly but the audience can pick up these dysfunctions of the system (Theerarat Duangkamol, 2011).

Moreover, by emphasizing the authenticity of a life coverage, that the crew was really there, and not relying on flashback or news footage because, according to the Creative Executive 'the present life of the subject is the worthy lesson in itself already'(Jira Bunprasop, 2011), the films sacrifice explicit voice and describe more than explain. This discursive shyness is a typical caveat of much direct cinema which has been criticized for encouraging an abnegation of responsibility on the part of the filmmaker (Stones, 2002a, p. 220). It is an

innocence either feigned or genuine which allows a retreat from the intellectual rigor of documentary practice (Corner, 1996 cited in Stones, 2002a, p. 220). The lack of explicit voice is acknowledged by a columnist writing about Suthipong Thammawut, the founder and anchorperson of the programme.

> He is not going to point out who is the best and who the worst. There are factors that cause a situation to be in a certain way. If we notice the way Suthipong presents an issue, we will hear the phrase 'is it possible that…?'. This is his way of offering to the audience a chance to exchange opinions among themselves which is the main purpose of the programme (Pisit Saebe, 2004, p. 95).

However, to induce the public to construct such tentative and highly indeterminate social narratives may need more powerful intimations of social complexity, those through which 'we begin to ask our own questions about the missing pieces' (Stones, 2002a, p. 228) that have social and political import.

Although the film producers believe in the power of their private stories to highlight collective issues and thus justify their discursive shyness, comments from viewers show no such connections. Rather, viewers express identification with the character in terms of facing life all alone, being the sole creator of one's own life, taking all the blame for one's own misery, and hence the aloneness of coping with late modern anxiety. The advantage of the company of others is to discover and locate causes of one's own unhappiness and to reassure that whatever resources may require to overcome that unhappiness can be sought and found in one's own skills and courage. In addition, the comments show viewer

reflection on didactic messages centering on the moral value of work, self-responsibility and self-help. None imply social reflection.

> He calls this 'not difficult'. For a person who makes life difficult for himself like me, I now repent. (Male, a comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

> I am happy to attend the graduation ceremony in the same year as you. It was a good memory. I thought getting a degree was hard, but when I saw you my tiredness has gone immediately. Please keep on fighting. You are wonderful. (Female, a comment on "Ake The Penguin: A Man Who Draws Life with His Feet,")

> This reminds me of my time at Chiangmai University. I had a broken leg. It was very difficult, but not as difficult as these three people. They really try hard in life. (Male, a comment on "Three Small Friends with Big Hearts,")

> How lucky I am to have everything, including sound health? There are many people whose life is many times more difficult than mine. You have all my support. (Male, a comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

> You have my support. You are a divine for being such positive and diligent. If I meet you in person, I will talk to you for hours. Hahaha. (Male, a comment on "Ake The Penguin: A Man Who Draws Life with His Feet,")

> "I can do it myself… I do not want anyone to be troubled"…This is great. Keep on going. (Female, a comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

> Many of us complain about fate and about test given to us by the nature, "why life is so difficult?" Now take a look at these people. They fight without complaining anything to the sky above and with a smile. What they receive back is praise from all around. Thank you Mankong for being my role model about life. Whenever I am tired or disheartened, I will think of you. (Male, a comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

> Thumbs up and a big round of applause for your non-disabled spirit. (Male, a comment on "Three Small Friends with Big Hearts,")

> Kan was the best of human being. Even though he was in a difficult condition, suffering from illness, he continued practicing Dhamma very well. From the way he spoke and from

> his thoughts, I believe he is now in a good place, as he wished. I am very sure about this. (A comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

In terms of didactic lessons drawn from a human interest story, some comments imply that the film narrative acts as a reminder of values and principles in life; such as courage, determination, overcoming fear and procrastination, and altruism. This represents a reinforcement of norms to counter an absence of a dominant moral code in late modern societies (cf.Fine & White, 2002, p. 60). The use of disability narratives as a source of moral support was more prominent during Thailand's economic crisis in the nineties. This was to counter the sense of loss and to restore hope and inspire the public during economic hardship (Thanomnual Hiranyatheb, 2008, p. 208). Disability narratives, associated with the empowering and regaining of hope and autonomy, have gained immediate popularity, mainly because they serve as moral support to the non-disabled and to restore the collective sentiment of fortitude, resilience and self-help: the neoliberal ideologies. The ideology of self-responsibility is used to judge, not only oneself but also others.

> Do not tell yourself that you cannot do before you actually try. They are humans and I am too, even though without limbs. Ask yourself have you tried hard enough before admitting to yourself you cannot do it. Is it actually, you cannot do it, or you are not doing it? (A comment on "Ake The Penguin: A Man Who Draws Life with His Feet,")

> One person's weakness is turned into a remarkably hard-to-copy strength, all with perseverance... Sometimes over-thinking does not get you much, it is better to just do it. I keep this as my moral support. (A comment on "The Happiness of Mankong," 2009)

> Suffering is a good thing, it should be made aware of, so that we can overcome it. (A comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

> A good example of support and care for one another. (A comment on "Three Small Friends with Big Hearts,")

> To all those criminals out there with good hands and feet, watch this. (A comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

> Shame on you, those lazy people with good hands and feet. (A comment on "The Happiness of Mankong," 2009)

> A disabled knows how to earn a living...those with healthy hands and feet who do not, be very ashamed of yourself. (A comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

With an emphasis on these socially accepted aspects of disabled individuals, the external context is made redundant, or to be treated only as a basis by which to highlight the contrasting high quality of the mind. This intentional overlooking of external context, be it bodily limitations and cultural, educational and economic barriers, may probably be deemed as important for *Kon Kon Kon* in order to combat the negative images, ambiguity and even invisibility of people with disability or perceptions of disabled people as 'anomaly' (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 295), 'as passive and incapable people, objects of pity and of aid' (p. 288) 'as the creature who has been deprived of his ability to create a self' (Kreigel cited in Shakespeare, 1994, p. 285). Consequently, it may be argued that the films help improve the images of disabled people. This is evidenced in almost all comments by the audience above. Having said that, the inspiration generated by stories about adjustment and about the special gift of moral strength and the goodness of the heart of people with disability can divert attention away from prejudices and inequalities that prompt the adjustment in the first place.

Thus, the final aim of *Kon Kon Kon* human interest stories to create a society better equipped with knowledge, compassion and justice is daunting without social context highlighted in the film. Moreover, by overemphasising the disabled people who are presented as having successfully defied the authoritative life-shaping power of social structures, the programme arguably ends up supporting the state's lack of responsibility to people with disabilities. This affects the citizen's *de facto* autonomy. By excluding the state from the forum, the films may be argued to support the long-standing welfare ideologies within Thai culture and to adopt the late modern trend of neoliberal individualism. The ideologies demand that individuals take care of themselves and family while preserving the limited state welfare scope and status quo. The likely consequence is an excessively imbalanced weight on an individual to perform well against all odds. Another adverse effects of a narrative of successful living is that it acts as a criticism for those that fail to achieve (Bury, 2001). Very often redemptive politics in most documentaries, by avoiding real conflict in the society, push all responsibilities on individuals.

> It is a politics articulated by textual mechanisms which fix the individual subject as responsible, as either fulfilling, or not fulfilling a morally given imperative and this in turn results in a notion of triumph or guilt (Noel King, 1981 cited Geiger, 1998, p. 16).

The Executive Producer believes that it is possible for all disabled to be similar to the subjects of the films, that is, to be independent. The two interview excerpts below demonstrate the autonomy *de jure* circulated in the media or the purported freedom and power to choose and achieve goals while relying only on oneself. The ability to overcome difficulties without losing moral compass, with

positive outlook intact, is the focus of *Kon Kon Kon* motivational self-help media

texts and human interest stories.

> There are two groups of disabled people: those feckless and those who thrive no matter what. *Kon Kon Kon* films aim to inspire the former to become more of the latter, so that they become less burdensome and pathetic to the society. As media producers, we must think carefully which group to represent for the greatest benefit of the society. It is the second group that we want to see as the role model. They are not obsessed with their own misfortune, nor do they blame others and wait idly for death to come. Rather they believe they are the sole creator of their own life. I want this group to inspire the other to get up to face the world and their disability. It is getting difficult to find such exceptional disabled individuals to be in our films (Theerarat Duangkamol, 2011).

> Perfect human beings are those who know how to survive and can survive successfully and happily within the given conditions. This is the meaning of to live and learn. We don't believe that disabled people cannot live by themselves except those who are really impaired. But then again, some subjects of our films prove that this is also not impossible. Faith enables you to achieve everything (Theerarat Duangkamol, 2011).

The tendency to downplay social contexts when individual autonomy is at

the centre of a discussion manifests in another aspect of the films: their purported

emphasis on human rights, equality and diversity. In the films, there is a clear

move away from authoritative judgments, mandates and opinions of medical

professionals or government officials who would provide official labels of the type

of impairment or illnesses, the suitable rehabilitative treatment, or guidance on

how to live a life as a disabled. There is a sense of lowered or less demarcation

between us (the non-disabled) and them (disabled people) in the films; people

with disabilities are not an anomaly to be managed and disciplined. The films make

no space for footage involving medical identification; there is no need to identify

or assign significance to external physical conditions. A positive side of this representation is to pull the subjects of the films from the world of finitude and stereotyped certainty and cast them into the universe of under-determination and openness (cf. Bauman, 2000, p. 62). This is one feature of the sentiment of 'being-for', a significant moral emotional and unity with others in late modernity. It recognizes and defends the uniqueness of the Other, a connection with other without judgment and distance. Having said that, representing disability in this style of shared similarity and non-demarcation can pose challenges. Carter and Williams (2012, p. 220), studying the coverage of a sport event participated in by people with learning disability, argue that omitting the disability reference or not defining athletes by their disability ,although many regard people with learning disability as 'normal' members of a diverse community, may support the erroneous belief that impairment is not central to the athlete's life and identity. This is one of the complex tensions inherent in representing disability in media (Carter & Williams, 2012).

The omitting of authoritative stratification and the reliance instead on individual initiatives, personality or agentive capability such as resourcefulness and resilience is similar to a feature of the community culture movement, the civil society movement and the principles of self-sufficiency in Thailand. These are a reflexive response to the economic crisis of 1997 and to the failure of the state's top-down modernizing approach since the 1960s.[51] The films' limited explicit focus

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[51] A turn to a community-based approach can be seen as a strike back after decades of failure from state policy. The movement towards increasing autonomy of commoners in Thai politics is evidenced,

on the performance of the state is likely to be due to the belief that poverty is caused by state, their decision, policies and implementation, and thus to escape from it, it is unwise to wait and expect from the state as in the past. This is a reflexivity characteristic of the late modern. Late modernity is a radicalization of modernity, or modernity coming to understand itself (Giddens, 1990, p. 46). Reflexivity is a fuller understanding, a self-clarification of modern thoughts, in the late modern society or where 'people are left with questions where once there appeared to be answers' (op.cit. , p. 49). The Executive Producer, Theerarat Duangkamol, responds to a question on the lack of reference to the state in the films as the following.

> When disabled people in this country (represented by the subjects of the films) have all been disappointed by the state, they do not want to count on it anymore, the welfare system or whatever. They have lost hope on what they used to think as reliable. They have found out that they should not have hope with these people anymore and thus they have to do something by themselves. … This tells us about the failure of the state. The programme wants to tell this to the audience but in our own subtle, artistic way (Theerarat Duangkamol, 2011).

Community-based approaches, while claiming to restore the power of people, however, have been criticized for diverting attention away from deep

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at least since the mid-1980s with the community culture movement. It has been a guiding light for many NGOs arguing against the top-down development policy in Thailand starting in the 1960s (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 216). The movement proclaims, according to Seri Phongphit, 'Let [the people] be themselves; let them be subject to their development; give them back their power, their decision, their education, their health, their government, their values, their self-respect, [their] confidence' (E.W. Gohlert, 1991 cited in Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 216). It argues that development should be rooted in villagers' own knowledge and should try to strengthen local culture and preserve village-style social relationships (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 216). This is similar to the principles of self-sufficiency brought to the fore by the 1997 economic crisis. It emphasises a return to cultural roots as villagers; self-reliance and mutual support in a pre-monetary order, among other things (McCargo, 2002, p. 6).

structural issues and refracting responsibility away from the state to individuals and their community. The scaling down of economic desires and demands, as part of principles of self-sufficiency, places the responsibility for adaptation firmly upon individual citizens despite large scale political failure (McCargo, 2002, p. 6). Moreover, it is noted that there is a great danger of the current over-emphasis on civil society to replace the state. This detracts or hijacks the focus away from what is of immediate importance which is more pressure on the state to take up basic responsibilities and enhance its capacities (Schmidt, 2002, p. 102).

The value, circulated in human interest stories, assigned to locating sources and solutions of problems solely on oneself, instead of equally seeing the social configuration of such problems, can motivate the audience to pursue their own goals. This is a fairy tale depicted by the media despite the actual possibility of success allowed by the labour market and other social political arrangements. In terms of economic mobility, we can but ask how far one can achieve despite unforgiving conditions. Debraj Ray uses the United States as an example of societies where an increased aspiration may lead to increased effort by individuals, but not their exit out of poverty as a result. This is attributed to the fact that in such a society, culture may be 'constructed' to enhance impressions of economic mobility. One source for this construction stems from the familiar 'truncation bias' created by the media (Ray, 2006, p. 412). Reports of successes dominate, but not mundane 'failures'. This truncation bias grows with the underlying inequality in that society (ibid.). The ideology of neoliberalism is becoming more far-reaching in

its ideational impact, working through specific institutions and regimes such as media (Heron, 2008). The ideology presents us with a world of limitless opportunities allowed by technological rapidity, a borderless culture of material contentment, all available at the click of a button or the swipe of a card. The media will carry nothing serious or any kind of critical analysis of the conditions of a globalised world (ibid.). As such it is unlikely for human interest stories to deliver social dimensions to audiences. Media in late modern societies is discussed as a space where stories about private worries, confessions, secrets and intimacies replace public issues (Bauman, 2000, p. 39). *Kon Kon Kon* films about disabled people fit into the parade of sensational, watchable entertainment of the epoch. The programme makes use of tools associated with 'docudrama', by which Sutthipong Thammawut means:

> A documentary about a person's life narrated as a fiction. We select sensational aspects of that life, aspects that tell a story of flesh and blood, twisted fates, and poignant parts of living (quoted in Bancha Ondee, 2005, p. 62).

Prasarn Ingkanan, the producer, emphasises the sensational elements of *Kon Kon Kon* that extract idiosyncrasies of individuals or phenomenon:

> Docudrama has a combination of documentary and a fiction; it is documentary with an input from fictional element which is the accentuation of emotion. In each film we make, there is sadness, loneliness and affection, the common elements of human life... and we draw these out from our experience as another human being spending time with another human being. Take the topic of beauty queens, other programmes would probably focus on general atmosphere, reporting about hair and makeup and how things are done. *Kon Kon Kon* asks a different set of questions, how can you take a nap in a taxi without ruining this intricate high hair do? Is it difficult to get on and off a taxi with all these dresses and accessories? How and where do you get change between events? How do you get

home late at night? We seek more detail in real life (quoted in
Bancha Ondee, 2005, p. 95).

With regards to the media representation of disability, the films can similarly be argued to have a reductionist approach. The films individualise disability; disability is portrayed as predominantly determined by individual stamina and determination in enduring and overcoming, rather than as an outcome of the interaction of material-cultural reality with individual personality. Therefore, disability is depoliticized; issues of unemployment, underemployment, lower wages, inaccessible education systems, inadequate disability benefits are deprived of their significance and contribution to disability experience. Although references are made to structural, collective issues, they have little or no explanatory function in the films, compared to sensational matters such as the resolution of people with disabilities and the benevolence of the non-disabled which underlie the films' arguments. The films' location of the source of explanation of disability at the individual level is a reminder of the Thai cultural belief in karma used as an explanation for predicament, illness and impairment. The film "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee' incorporates the subjects' view of disability as a tragic start to life which needs passive acceptance in order to move on. This is similar to the view of impairment as individual tragedy in the individualizing medical model (cf. Oliver, 1996 cited in Shakespeare, 2006, p. 15). It is not the films' intention to offer an alternative explanation to disability. The film colludes with the cultural belief that disability is an individual misfortune or even failure in the past life and hence it needs no further explanation such as social-

political ones. Some of the many viewer comments that associate the cultural belief in karma with the viewing experience of the film are illustrated below.

> May you triumph in this storm of karma… (A comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")
>
> Kan may have bad karma from the previous life, thus he has to face life like this one now. May he have a better next life! (Male, a comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")
>
> May your bad karma finish in this life and may you only have good things in the next one. Please, all the Debtors, forgive them for their sins and do not follow them anymore. (Female, a comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

Some comments, however, express other aspects of disability, such as a better understanding of bodily impairment, social discrimination against disabled people and its impact:

> I cried. Being born with disability means one can't go out to where one wants to. Besides, with poor eyesight one cannot see things clearly. (Male, a comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")
>
> Disabled people usually want to help others, to make the world a better place. The non-disabled tend to behave badly because they have never suffered from this dirty world (A comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

Moreover, despite making rather weak or no accounts of social explanation, of all 326 comments, there is one that alludes to structural problems, in this case inequality and injustice, in connection to the disability experience:

> I want to take money from those corrupting politicians to buy a piece of land for Mankong. (A comment on "The Happiness of Mankong,")

Audience comments on YouTube reveal another aspect of human interest stories in relation to individualism. The genre is purported to be essential to a democratic order and permits topical engagement and the creation of a focused community to express shared perspective, hence it has a potential to construct a community (Fine & White, 2002). It happens that posting comments on YouTube can be a way of releasing emotions stimulated by the narratives. However, when looking further at the level of topic engagement and unified community through shared perspective, these seem rather limited, judging from the extent of communication among viewers through their comments. There is no continuing discussion about the topic among viewers; almost all of them are one-off comments. Moreover, the sense of individualism is stronger than community; the comment-writers find connections *between* themselves and the subject of the story rather than *among* themselves, or rather than with others within their immediate community. In fact the level of sharedness created by the experience of watching *Kon Kon Kon* human interest stories is so thin and fragile that one comment-writer is attacked for mentioning that he is a supporter of a controversial religious sect. Comment-writers do not really form into a community of shared value since the only value probably shared is individualism and how each individual self can get on with their separate lives .The first of the two comments reads:

> Is this the teaching of Dhammakaya? It is so profound. There is
> just only one place that can teach at this level. Saddhu. (Male, a
> comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

Another person interacts with:

> Excuse me, sir. Is Dhammakaya the only place that can teach [dhamma]? F...you. Go back to your mother ship. (Male, a comment on "A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee,")

We have discussed late modern conditions that influence the production and consumption of *Kon Kon Kon* films. This is how human interest stories are constructed to serve contemporary society. First, the narratives inspire and empower individuals towards the sense of autonomy which is very much on demand in late modern societies. The narratives likewise enhance the public opinion that disabled people are normal, individual, and capable members of a community. This representation emphasises the conscience collective of the epoch: equality of dignity, opportunity and the moral value of work. The didactic lessons serve to reinstate moral guidance to individuals in times when dominant moral codes of conduct have faded or in the ambivalence of competing values. Having stated this, by the quality of the mind as the central thesis, the production and consumption of the narratives neutralize the existence of bodily pain and limitations which in fact affect life in a significant way. Moreover, with the emphasis on agentive capacities, the narratives sacrifice the social perspective of how disabled people are faced with prejudices and inequalities in their everyday life; the film production and consumption provide little social depth to disability experience.

The stress on individual qualities and the tendency to mute physical and social circumstances, apart from demonstrating a feature of late modern media, implies a deep-seated feature of Thai culture: the discomfort to discuss concrete

relationships, context and history. This can be translated as a comparative lack of reflexivity as to how society is run. The level of societal reflexivity can be judged against a benchmark offered by cultural interactionism. Cultural interactionism seeks to understand how people solve problems of democratic living through the group engaging in reflective talks about its concrete relationships with the wider social world (Lichterman, 2007, p. 28). The point that can be applied in this context is the importance of being able to talk daringly and self-critically about one's own group and the ongoing partnerships with other groups. Self-critique means to find out about one's own group's distinct collective representation or customs, or 'the basis of how it draws boundaries to open some lines of conversation and action while closing or damping others' (p. 31). Customs could impede the process of democratisation when they:

> …made it difficult to talk reflexively about relationships between the group and the wider world because that kind of conversation threatened the group's own sense of what the groups was for. As a result, the groups' own forms of solidarity, their own customs, made it difficult for them to create new civic ties outward. Often they did not dare to imagine and talk carefully, critically, about the relationships they wanted to build, and so those relationships often never developed or were stunted. Instead they assumed they already knew what the world was like out there or that it was someone else's business to figure out relationships, or else they figured that an invisible hand would create broader relationships…(Lichterman, 2007, p. 31).

It can be that one of the customs at work for the ignorance of social context in media text in Thailand is the preference to safely focus at the individual level; and at the shortest possible temporal and spatial span. This way the forbidden discussions about the sacred structural issues are kept at bay. Voranai

Vanijaka comments on the present political turmoil of the country, attributing it to

the disease of ignorance, in that:

> Thailand is a country doomed to repeat past mistakes over
> and over because we simply do not learn from history. In fact,
> we are not required to. Moreover, we are not nurtured to.
> Perhaps even, we are encouraged not to (Voranai Vanijaka,
> 2014).

Likewise, Thongchai Winichakul takes a closer look at the dominant

historiography of Thai democratisation and finds cultural features behind simplistic

arguments. This is the lack of conceptualized narratives to explain the significant

role of the monarchy. The dominant historiography features simplistic arguments:

a liberal view of democratisation involving moves to push the military out of

politics; and a royalist account, that is fundamentally anti-democratic but concocts

a story of royals as promoters and supporters of democratisation. The monarchy

and monarchists, although having played the most significant role in shaping Thai

democracy, have been overlooked. This is due to the perception that the

constitutional monarchy is 'above politics'. Royalists thus have been able to

assume a superior status and claim the high moral ground that places them above

elected politicians, above the day-to-day events of political activity, and beyond

public discussion due to the *lese majeste* law that would penalise anybody who

defames the monarchy with up to fifteen years in jail (Thongchai Winichakul,

2008, p. 13). The concrete power relations of multiple layers are thus made

culturally irrelevant, leaving the public 'clueless about ourselves and the world

around us' and mostly only myths and propaganda are left hammering into

people's brain (Voranai Vanijaka, 2014). Apparently, ideals such as 'clean politics'

and 'against corruption' have dominated the country in the name of which the royalists have successfully undermined electoral democracy (Thongchai Winichakul, 2008, p. 13). The use of such grand narratives without reflexivity means to propound a set of general theoretical statements on how society should run. Citizens are to gain guidance from somewhere above without engaging in a self-critical way with concrete relationships amongst each other and with other groups (Lichterman, 2007). Members are deprived of the ability to steer society, leaving the task in the hand of others or 'the omnipresent being'. This might be the case of Thailand where beliefs in the power of mystical authorities to dictate destinies of human beings are not alien to the way of life. This sense of fatalism prevents people from discussing many issues any further. 'The omnipresent being' is arguably part of the sacred parcel that has not really been unpacked. This is evidenced by the connection of disability with karma in some YouTube comments discussed above.

The cultural reluctance to untangle power relations and hierarchy is one manifestation of the late modern gap between autonomy *de jure* and *de facto* in Thailand or the promotion of individualism and freedom without paying proportionate attention to conducive social cultural conditions. Durkheim described this as the incomplete development from mechanical to organic solidarity (Craib, 1997, p. 67). This encompasses, among many things,[52] the forced

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[52] Other elements of the incomplete development of organic solidarityy are: individualism eats away at its own foundations which is manifested when elites no longer identify with the well-being of their society but are concerned only with their own well-being (Lash 1995 cited in Craib, 1997, p. 66); the anomic division of labour which refers to the fact that the mechanisms by which competition could be

division of labour. This refers to the way people are allocated to positions to which they are not suited by their natural talents or their abilities, but rather through family connections (ibid.). This is what Giddens (1978, p. 31) calls the strains inherent in the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity. While the old form of moral authority wherein every man knew his place in a fixed hierarchy of things had faded, the new order of moral individualism has not yet become fully established (ibid.). According to Durkheim (Durkheim, 1902 in Lukes, 1973, p. 172), factors conducive to the growth of the complete division of labour include the declining significance of heredity in the allocation of individuals to social roles. Durkheim (Giddens, 1978, p. 32) states further that organic solidarity presupposes social justice and equality of opportunity otherwise it cannot function normally. *External inequalities* characteristic of traditional societies must be eradicated. These external inequalities are aristocratic prerogatives and the hereditary transmission of private property. In organic solidarity, when fully developed, the only principle governing the distribution of social and material rewards is that of *internal inequalities*, that is, the differential distribution of talent and capacity. In the case of Thailand, the transition from traditional to modern society is not so smooth, similar to many societies. Traditional institutions continue to exist, such as heredity, and some still occupy the sacredness such as the monarchy and religious belief system. These old regimes continue to survive in parallel with the development of modern institutions such as the political system of the Thai nation-state, the demands for democracy, the fast pace of change in economy,

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controlled and the markets regulated had not yet developed while industrialization had developed too quickly.

technology and the globalisation that brings a vast scope of change (cf. Giddens, 1990, pp. 6, 16). Thailand's unique modernisation thus encompasses the co-existence of old regimes and new configurations. This co-existence fails to encompass, as far as welfare interventions are concerned, certain significant features: the reflexive reordering of social relations in a more systematic way in the light of new inputs of knowledge (cf. Giddens, 1990, p. 16) and safeguarded individual rights in civil and political welfare (cf. Pakulski, 2009, p. 266). These are the issues of *de facto* autonomy that have been calling for attention from the late modern Thailand.

4.5   *Conclusion*

This chapter has discussed factors that influence the production and consumption of *Kon Kon Kon* human interest stories. The heightened conviction in individualism and autonomy in the society and in the media conflicts with the much-needed attention to the actual context in which autonomy can become realized in a meaningful way. This conflict is related to a condition of late modern society in which individuals are charged with an unprecedented volume of agency and responsibility to choose identities and lifestyles. This promotion of self-assertion, although promoting the autonomy *de jure* of people with disabilities and their new positive image, is argued here as downplaying the discussion of a wider context which greatly influences the exercise of autonomy and the range of lifestyle choices available to individuals in the first place. Thus, ideologies of self-help and responsibility are disproportionately featured in the production and

reception of human interest stories. It is a media form arguably favoured by the late modern conscience collective of individualism. Human interest stories offer compelling, sensational poignant stories of individual experience in trying to achieve autonomy 'by law'. However, the context for this to be translated into real self-assertion, that is, the issue of (underdeveloped) citizenship and rights are left unattended. The ambivalence of late modernity is also reflected in the image of disabled people. The co-existence of features from both traditional and late modern societies is reflected in a mixed, contradictory portrayal of people with disability. These are traditional meta-narratives centred on past karma, modern patterns of adjustment and rehabilitation, and the late modern themes of rights, equality and individuality.

From both the filmmaker and the audience, it is evident that *Kon Kon Kon* has one great capacity: to generate a talking point, to start up a conversation, whatever that might be about. The next chapter takes its cue from this and imagines what other types of conversation can be generated, if we take social context a little more seriously.

Chapter 5: A sociological commentary on *Kon Kon Kon* films about people with disabilities in Thailand

> We can all help to create a widespread social awareness and what might be called social thinking, which is often in contradiction to common sense which usually sees the world in more individualizing and natural terms... and help people to make the link between the private problems of individuals with the public problems of cultures (Plummer, 2001, p. 191).

5.1   Introduction

The focus of the previous chapter falls on the way in which media representations sensationalise the image of disabled people overcoming obstacles such as poverty and prejudices by relying purely on their own resources. This depiction then acts as a source of inspiration and encouragement for late modern viewers. Earlier, the films discussed were presented in terms of their focus on lives at the finish line – people with disabilities who cope successfully. This chapter looks back to earlier stages and makes explicit the situations or factors faced. While the films relate stories of the great triumph of mind over matter – the exercise of agency or the capability of an individual to 'make a difference' to the immediate demand of the context – the chapter traces the underlying roots of these issues. It argues that the decisions and actions of disabled individuals to be self-reliant and resourceful presuppose existing social conditions. The baggage of the past posits either enablements or constraints on the decisions and actions of disabled individuals. In order to achieve their objectives, human interest stories tend to sacrifice this social depth. Nevertheless, it is this depth that provides

resource for audiences to be able to read the stories in a more informed, sophisticated manner and hence to have a critical distance to the individualistic worldviews that dominate late modern media.

The chapter is structured as follows. It first outlines the theoretical frameworks used: the position-practice relations and agent context's analysis, both a development of structuration theory. The strength of these two frameworks lies in their possibility to take us from a surface level of conduct towards the 'structures within agents' and from there to the external structures that are resources for those internal structures. Furthermore, they shed light on the possibility of applying non-reductionist approaches to explaining experiences such as disability. The second part of the chapter continues by demonstrating the application of these frameworks on excerpts from *Kon Kon Kon* films. The external structures that will be shown to be connected to the decision and actions of the disabled poor in Thailand are: social structures of economic liberalism; the structures and politics of welfare; and socio-cultural ideologies.

5.2   Frameworks

5.2.1 Position-practice relations

The concept of position-practice relations counters the inclination of reducing an explanation for a social phenomenon based exclusively on either structure or an agent's actions. The *Kon Kon Kon* film thesis is subsequently

analysed as being voluntaristic. Voluntarism is criticized as considering that what happens is purely a function of the unconstrained human will (Sayer, 1992, pp. 92-97). However, we cannot rely on the opposite, structuralism, either as it tends to ignore the activity of agents and their skills; holding that social conditions do the acting (ibid.). One way to start stepping away from reductionist approaches is to understand the relationship between society and action by agents. Society does not reproduce itself; agents perform the act of reproduction and transformation. However, agents always act on the basis of social conditions. In other words, society is pre-given and an ever-present condition; individuals never create it but act within it to reproduce or transform it. Social agents hence can be seen as retaining the capability to act otherwise than they do (Cohen, 1989, p. 45) or to act against what it is demanded of them by the structures. In other words, structures shape and pose *latent* enablements and constraints which are then used by agents in their act of reproduction or transformation. The result of such an act will then form the structures or conditions of the next round of action. The above sets of relationship form part of the nature of social life called the duality of structure and agency**.** The concept, the heart of structuration, captures the essential recursiveness of social life (Giddens, 1979 quoted in Cohen, 1989, p. 42) in which structure is both medium and outcome of social practices.

In order to approach position-practice relations it is important to introduce structure and agency in the way as they have been discussed as part of the duality of structure and agency (Cohen, 1989, pp. 39-47, 200-228; Stones,

2005, pp. 84-86)[53]. Giddens (1984) develops structuration theory to draw attention to ontological explanation of structure and agency and the interplay between them, thus building a social theory that tries to fix the divide between objectivism and subjectivism or structural sociology and interpretative sociology. This is done through the concept duality, instead of dualism. The general, abstract ontological explanations are developed further into strong structuration theory by Stones (2005) in order to provide more concrete, or ontology-in-situ. According to strong structuration theory there are two types of structures: external and internal. External structures refer to objective conditions of actions autonomous from the agents in focus; they pre-exist and post-date agents. They act as latent constraints and enablements available for agents to internalize and make use of. External structures range from physical levers (in the forms of physical settings, objects, body, for example) to ideational/structural levers (in the form of negative and positive sanctions, procedures, customary practices, rules such as a structure of employment). Moreover, external structures include other agents who are helping to constitute structures and whose actions may change the structures facing agents-in-focus. Hence, agents-in-context include both those present in an immediate time and space and those distant. It is important to stress that structures are *latent* constraints and enablements. They lack any capacity to intervene in social conduct. Rather they *shape* social conduct by being internalized by agents and thus shape their capabilities. In other words, they establish the

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[53] Structure and agency form parts of the quadripartite nature of the duality of structure and agency which comprises of: external structures; internal structures; agency; and outcomes (Stones, 2005, pp. 84-86).

potential kinds of actions or relations in which agents may engage (Cohen, 1989, p. 220). This makes the duality of structure and agency different from collectivism which assumes that social constraints have properties analogous to natural forces that *determine* the course of social life (ibid.).

Internal structures refer to a part of the duality in which agents draw upon external structures as the medium of their conduct. External structures (physical, ideational levers and other agents) are referred to when an agent monitors her/his own power (and access to resources) in a particular situation. This process is called the internalization of the external (Stones, 2009, pp. 93-94) and results in two types of knowledge within an agent: the general dispositional and the conjunctural specific. The general dispositional is the general and transposable schemes of interpretation and ideals which agents have selectively internalized over a period of time as a result of living in the group/groups. It is in the form of memory traces and skills ready to be applied to numerous actions. To put it simply, structures of power relations, of meaning and of norms are intertwined in the external context in which one lives and acts and these external structures in turn reside within knowledgeability of agents (Stones, 2009, p. 92). The general disposition is comparable to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*[54] . *Habitus* includes cultural schemas; classification; typification of things, people and networks; principles of action, deep binary frameworks of signification, associative chains and connotations of discourse; habits of speech and gesture and

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[54] *Habitus* refers to systems of dispositions and generative schemes which constitute the group memory, rules, proverbs, laws which in turn constitute social practices (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 20).

methodologies for adopting this generalized knowledge to a range of particular practices in particular locations in time and space (Stones, 2005, p. 88). It is embedded in bodily postures and stances; ways of standing, sitting, speaking; and in the mind as schemes of perception, appreciation and thought (ibid.). The conjunctural specific is the agent's perception/knowledge of a specific situation; that is, how to deal with a specific location and specific people which compose the situation at hand. An agent draws upon the general dispositional, the *habitus*, to formulate this knowledge. There are two parts to this. The first is the perception of the usage of material things. Material resources have an external basis but they also have an internal, hermeneutic basis. Only once the external structures (a knife, a food processor) have been perceived as internalized knowledge by agents who then act on this basis – that is, they need to exert pressure on a knife to cut or that they have to put a cooked mixture into a food processor to process into creamy soup – will those external structures become a tangible and actual part of action (cf. Stones, 2005, p. 71). The second part to the conjunctural specific is the perception of whether one owns or has the ability to acquire the use of those resources (Stones, 2005, p. 73). This involves the agent-in-focus's position in relation to other agents-in-context. In societies with complex divisions of labour, power over the constitution of one's own capabilities (resources) will typically be highly circumscribed; much will depend upon others within the external structures (ibid.). The conjunctural specific is equal to 'the positional', representing the agent's sense of normative expectations laid upon him, of his capacities and of his power to mobilise resources, in one particular situation. It is a knowledge required

specifically to 'deal with this room with these people' (Stones, 2005, p. 89). An agent will be processing at least three sets of knowledge about other agents-in-context: their interpretative schemas, their power capacities, and their likely manner when dealing with tension between ideal normative beliefs and pressure to act in the immediate conjuncture. The third is inevitably tied to the second, which is one's sense of the distribution of power.[55] In a nutshell, agent-in-focus, in composing the conjunctural specific, establishes the 'hermeneutic[56] structural process' of oneself and of those others (Stones, 2005, p. 91-93).

The above has implied the level of autonomy and indeterminacy, varying from one agent to another, from one situation to the next, in the reproduction of social practices. Even though external structures represent regularities in social life, we cannot conceive these regularities as elements of a trans-historical order of uniformities (Cohen, 1989, p. 24). Thus, the regularities of society manifest as material constraints or opportunities, negative or positive sanctions and structural constraints or opportunities (ibid.), depending on agent and context. It is difficult to presume that social activity will be produced everywhere and always in a manner that corresponds to the order. In principle, any given pattern of social

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[55] An example is a new employer may not like what her senior colleague is about to do, but given her desire to be accepted and to continue working with or for that colleague, together with her relative lack of power, she may have to act according to pragmatic schemas that embody pragmatic norms rather than the normative ideals that will, thus, remain hidden from view (cf. Stones, 2005, p. 92).

[56] Hermeneutics refers to the meaning and understanding which people have towards a situation they are in. This meaning and understanding then forms the basis of the social interactions (Stones, 1996, p. 43). Hermeneutics can be discussed alongside agency in order to emphasise the role of actors as equally important as that of structural properties.

conduct may be altered by the agents (ibid.). Consequently, we need to discuss

agency. Agency refers to the capacity of an agent to exert control and transform

the institutionalized social relations in which it is enmeshed; agency is the power

to intervene (Whittington, 1992, p. 696) and indicates the ability of the agent not

to be consumed and overwhelmed by the immediate circumstances (Stones, 2009,

p. 96). It refers to the ways in which the agent either routinely and pre-reflectively,

or strategically and critically, draws upon her internal structures (Stones, 2005, p.

85) to act and it is manifested in degrees[57] of resistance, improvisation, creativity,

innovation, play, critical distance, and hierarchy of purposes (Stones, 2009, p.101).

In other words, the external structures that purportedly push actors around,

dictating to them and turning them into mere rule-followers, actually often have

limited power. Where this limit lies depends on the level of a person's agency.

Agency is comprised of three elements: knowledgeability, self-monitoring and

desires (Stones, 1996, p.44). First, knowledgeability is an agent's knowledge or

perception about the social context it encounters[58].Second, the agent needs to be

aware of and monitor her/his action and to adjust it according to her/his

perception of the terrain of action. Third, the actor also encounters her/his own

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[57] An example of the spectrum of active agency could be the reproduction of the social rule of 'work should come before play'. On one occasion, one may just unreflectively translate this into action, in which case the active agency contribution to the action will be on the minimal end of the spectrum. However, on certain occasions the person might decide to re-order their concerns and decide that they have been neglecting the play side of life, and then there would be a greater degree of active agency. They may reflect on this balance and consciously decide to keep following the principle of 'work should come before play', and in this case we could say that there is also a high degree of active agency (Stones, 2013).

diverse motives[59] which have to be organized and prioritized for a particular conjuncture.

To reiterate, in order to avoid structuralism or voluntarism – which is the case in many late modern media texts such as *Kon Kon Kon* human interest stories – the relationship between structures and agency needs to be addressed more widely. Part of the relationship can be summarized as agency filters the influence of external structures, mediating them and selectively storing them as internal structures which form the raw material or medium of action. Thus, structures can only shape, never definitely determine the action; external structures can act as latent constraints and enablements and thus only become constraints (or enablement) because agents perceive them as such, as impinging upon (or facilitating) their goals. Nonetheless, agency itself, far from being free-floating, can in many respects be shown to be rooted in (enhanced or inhibited by) structures. First, it is tied to the general dispositional, or to an agent's learned *habitus* (Stones, 2005, p. 86). Second, the outcome of the activation of agency relies upon whether the relationally constituted external structures they face – and the actors within these – will be impermeable or malleable to their attempts, not only to interpret them, but also to change them (Stones, 2009, p. 101). Ability to exert control and

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[58] This refers to perception about temporal and spatial settings, material stratum, and perceptions about other agents' power, resources, normative adherence against pressured for pragmatism – see above on the conjunctural specific and Stones, 2005, p. 89-91.

[59] Many practices in day-to-day life are directed by unconscious motives (Cohen, 1989, p. 52) which dispose agents to undertake routinised, institutioinalised, predictable forms of conduct in order to avoid anxiety, mistrust, shame, doubt and guilt and to preserve self-esteem. This basic security system constitutes the personality of an individual agent (ibid.).

to resist and change the independent influence of external structures depends on the positions within organizational hierarchies and horizontal position and relations, but also on other positional social categories such as class, age, cultural capital, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity (Stones, 2005, p. 115). As such, social elites often have more resources to find ways not to comply and to do so with impunity (op.cit.). There are three conditions that would have to be met for actors to be able to resist external structural pressures (Stones, 2005, p. 114). First, agent-in-focus needs reflective distance from their conditions of action in order to take up a strategic stance. Second, the perceived power or capability of the agent-in-focus to resist structural forces is crucial. Finally, agents need to have adequate knowledge of alternative possible courses of action and of their probable consequences (ibid. and see also Whittington, 1999, P. 704-708). The absence of these three conditions will only limit the ability of the agent to do other than what is expected of him from the influence of external structures.

The concept of position-practice relations sums up very well the relations between agent, agency and structure. It demonstrates, in its first part, the existence of structure or, to be precise, a web of relations, in which an action is formulated. An agent is thrown into multitudes of positions and the associated institutionalised practices, with the attached relations (hence the name 'position-practice relations') and with interdependencies, identities, rules, resources attached to these relations (Cohen, 1989, pp. 207-213). These position-practice relations can be argued to determine both the intrinsic causal powers of an agent,

on the one hand, *and* the activation and outcome[60] of those powers in a particular event/interaction, on the other. This actual activation and interaction forms the second part of the concept; the concept has an equal emphasis on the concrete carrying out of those position-practice relations by agents.

We now look at each of the two phases of the concept more closely by focusing first on the institutionalized position and associated practices and relations. Position-practice relations are defined (Cohen, 1989, p. 210) in terms of *identities* embedded in one or more circuits. For example, a positional identity is definable in terms of observable attributes, qualifications, prerogatives and obligations. Furthermore, position-practice relations are defined as a cluster of *practices* through which the identity and associated attributes, qualifications, prerogatives and obligations are made manifest and other people can and do acknowledge. Moreover, it is inclusive of a range of *relations and interdependencies with other position-practices* with which a given position-practice must be, or contingently may be, interrelated when the 'incumbent' enacts her/his prerogatives and obligations. These relations and interdependencies with others include both those vertically and horizontally and both those co-present and distant.

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[60] According to critical realism – which provides an ontological foundation for the concept of position-practice relations, an object, in virtue of its nature, has intrinsic causal power or potentials. These powers can be dormant or activated by virtue of the combination with other powers or processes (cf. Sayer, 1998, p. 128) (see chapter two).

These positions and attached practices and relations can be compared to intrinsic causal powers in critical realist ontology. The ontological realm of 'the real' in critical realism refers to intrinsic causal powers of an object as emergent from internal, necessary relations it has with other objects or from its nature and position within a particular structure (cf. Sayer, 1998, p. 128). In terms of the interactional model of disability, these causal powers form parts of 'intrinsic factors' of a person with disability (cf. Shakespeare, 2014, p. 74) such as aspects of her/his potentials, attitude, personal quality, aspirations and types and severity of impairment. They will in turn interact or be activated by virtue of their combination with the extrinsic factors of social circumstances present in a particular event. With regards to structuration, these causal powers or intrinsic factors represent 'regularities' stemming from structural properties of systems. These social institutions, social routines or customary and institutionalized practices are subsumed under 'mutual knowledge' (Cohen, 1989, p. 42) and are carried out or recognized by the majority of members of a group (op.cit. , p. 39). They are properties that enable system to be reproduced by agents over time and across spaces (op.cit. , pp. 46-47). This is another way to explain how agents do not reinvent skills on the spot every time, but rather arrive on the scene with such institutionalized knowledge intact (op.cit., p. 202). Social systems need enactment by agents to instantiate them, through which they are reinforced or transformed. Thus, these structural properties are merely possibilities and potentials and can be simply general, trans-historical and isolated, like the environment of a laboratory. They can be perceived as intrinsic position-practice relations.

We arrive at the second part of the position-practice relations. The enactment of these social regularities in an actual situation – or what can be called the *in-situ* position-practice relations which give these regularities their flesh and blood in reality. It encompasses the internalization and instantiation/enactment of social rules and regularities by agents. When agents are exposed to routine practices, they reflexively monitor physical, social and temporal elements of their circumstances, the hermeneutical process based on internal structure as discussed above. This monitoring is the regeneration of the relevancy of these physical, social and temporal elements. These familiar modes of conduct and its physical, social and temporal elements are continually repeated and recognized by numerous members. This embeds an awareness of these practices deep within members' tacit memory, re-grooving their cognitive outlook and reinforcing the 'mutual knowledge' (Cohen, 1989, pp. 46-47). To add to this second phase, there are numerous ways in which agents and the reproduction of position-practice relations may depart from established routine. These include agents making mistakes, strategic forbearance,[61] the possibility of novelty or the generation of unprecedented forms of conduct (Cohen, 1989, p. 45); and matters of style (op.cit. , p. 210) or arguably other possibilities enabled by the agency, as indicated above. The internal hermeneutic processes of agents, in addition, depend on a range and composition of structural rules and resources that an agent can draw on to inspire and empower her action. In other words, agents may exploit their own plural

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[61] Actors who retain the competence and capacity to reproduce routine practices may refrain from doing so, for example through strikes, tactful neglect of situational improprieties (Cohen, 1989, p. 45).

social identities and those of others and mix and match them in order to empower

or legitimate their conduct (Whittington, 1992, p. 706). The reproduction can also

be affected by situational contingencies[62] (Cohen, 1989, p. 210). This contingency

can be argued to derive partly from the vast relevant networks involved in one

social intercourse; a feature characteristic of late modern societies. We have seen

from the above that actors-in-context all undergo hermeneutic internal processes.

This vast range of information can be beyond the capacity of agent-in-focus to be

thoroughly knowledgeable, resulting in some unacknowledged context of action

and hence numerous possibilities for and outcomes of the instantiation of social

rules.

By recognizing the contingency and contextually variable character of social

events, as enabled by this second part of the concept, explanations in social science

go beyond pre-determined, all-embracing, all-explaining, law-finding ones which see

the world in terms of grand structures (Cohen, 1989, p. 24). The world, according to

critical realism, is an open system where causal chains can be infinitely complex.

Thus, the final consequence of an action depends on many contingently intervening

factors (Stones, 1996, pp. 28-31). The intrinsic causal powers of each entity interact

with and articulate one another in an indeterminate way; thus one structured

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[62] The meaning of contingent can be implied from Zygmunt Bauman, in *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992), and his reference to context or structures in which agents operate as 'contingent, that is, they have no overwhelming reasons for being what they are and they could be different if any of the participating agencies behaved differently' (quoted in Stones, 1996, pp. 61-62). Sayer (2000, pp. 86-92) explains contingent relations as when two objects stand in any particular relations and the nature of each object does not necessarily depend on its standing in such a relation, such as a person and a lump of earth. The opposite is the necessary relation such as slave and master, landlord and tenant, for example.

intrinsic causal power could produce quite different results in different contexts (Sayer, 2000, p. 5). This is what the realm of 'the actual' encompasses: a combination of many diverse forces and processes and how their combination qualitatively modifies each constituent element (cf. Sayer, 1998, p. 128). The enactment of regularities of systems hence becomes varied across agents and contexts, as Cohen suggests in terms of the role of agents and their actions in duality. It becomes difficult to presume that social activity will be produced everywhere and always in a manner that corresponds to the order of nature. In principle, any given pattern of social conduct many be altered by the actors (Cohen, 1989, p. 24).

We have discussed both the intrinsic position-practice relations that determine the intrinsic causal powers of an agent[63] and the *in situ* position-practice relations which determine the activation and outcome of intrinsic causal powers of that agent as those causal powers interact with those of other context-specific agents/institutions. These latter contingent or external relations bring about context-specific tensions between different structural regularities through a 'chance encounter' (Sayer, 2000, p. 13) of agents/institutions.

The implication of position-practice relations is that, first, we are able to see the agent-in-focus as being caught up in the flow of positions and their relations and thus the need for a much greater sense of force of what is absent in

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[63] This applies to institutions as well as agents (Cohen, 1989, p. 39); institutions, similarly to human agents, have causal powers. Institutions here refer to social routine and/or customary practices. They are carried out or recognized by the majority of members of a collectivity, such as paying taxes, establishing a labour contract, using a car, political procedure and culinary conventions (ibid.) .

the constitution and presencing of action (Stones, 2005, p. 93). First, the causal powers of a person, her/his roles and identities are emergent from relations to others (Sayer, 2000, p. 12), in other words, from being embedded in institutionalised positions and practices. An example is that of how being a teacher can only be explained in terms of a cluster of institutionalised relations to others such as students, principal, parents, school board committee and relations to other parts of the context such as to educational institutions. This external structural context and subsequent relations have internal and necessary relations[64] to the causal power a person – or what a person can and will do as a social being (Sayer, 1992, pp. 103-111). This implies that causal power inheres not simply in single individuals but in the social relations and structures within which they are situated. The implication is that it is important to distinguish the occupant of a position from the position itself. It is futile to try to discover a guilty person and to replace her/him when attention should be equally, if not more, on the structures of positions, rules and powers (Sayer, 1992, pp. 92-97), or arguably to overly praise individuals, for a similar reason. Second, the implications of the concept can continue beyond the acknowledgement of institutionalized practices and relations to the actual performance of those practices and relations by incumbents in real encounters.

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[64] Internal and necessary relation is used to describe two types of relation. First is a relation in which each part of the relation is dependent upon its relation to the other such as landlord - tenant. Second, the former in the par can exist without the latter but not vice versa, for example state and council housing (Sayer, 1992, p. 127).

The concept lends support to a non-reductionist, interactional approach to the study of disability experience. In chapter two, we discussed how disability experience is best understood as a result of an interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Shakespeare, 2014, pp. 72-89). Intrinsic factors include an individual's nature of impairment and physical pain together with her/his attitudes and personality. These interact with extrinsic factors, which are the enabling or disabling environment, attitudes of others, and wider cultural, social, economic issues, in producing an experience of disability (ibid.). The framework of position-practice relations offers a perspective that connects intrinsic factors with extrinsic factors. Firstly, the emergence of intrinsic factors of impairment, attitudes, aspirations, has internal, necessary relationship with or is constituted by the extrinsic factors or social historical factors that an agent was exposed to. These include poverty (or affluence), the quality of education and health care services, the extent of democratic attitudes in relationship among actors within specific time and place. Secondly, the enactment phase demonstrates how the constituted intrinsic factors of the agent play out in a specific environment of extrinsic factors, in a specific time and space. Similarly, Bhaskar and Danermark (2006; see also Williams, 1999) propose looking at disability as a laminated system; that is, as one comprising at least three broad elements: biological, psychological and social. Using an example of the experience of dysphagia,[65] what happens at the biological level, such as receiving a correct diagnosis and being offered surgery, has a direct bearing upon psychological well-being, such as a sense of relief and a comfort from being taken seriously, as this

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[65] Dysphagia is a summary concept for a person's problem of not being able to swallow solid and/or liquid food, a kind of eating disorder (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006, p. 290).

illness can be often overlooked and not believed by others. At the social-cultural level, since eating has an important role and values connected to it, people suffering from dysphagia are highly vulnerable to social exclusion. They tend to hide the symptoms, not discussing them in public, relating to psychological mechanisms such as shame and guilt. The significance of a non-reductionist approach is captured as follows:

> Without taking all these mechanisms into account we will have only a fragmentary understanding of her situation, resulting in less possibility of a good strategy for improving it (Bhaskar & Danermark, 2006, p. 291).

By exploring how a multitude of factors interact in each particular case, disability is revealed as a variable experience, not static, and different for a person at different place and time. This is a similar sense of indeterminacy yielded when applying the concept of position-practice relations. The institutionalized social-cultural positions with attached obligations and relations, together with rules of conduct and values, as in the form of mutual knowledge shared with others in the society, are extrinsic factors. They provide the conditions for the development of a significant part of the intrinsic factors of an agent, such as inspirations, attitudes in life, motives, personality and abilities[66]. At the same time, intrinsic factors are

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[66] These can be compared to what Archer (1995, p. 257) identifies as intrinsic causal powers that are emergent from time-and-space bound features, or from being born into a certain group or strata of society. They are identities and interests endowed from being part of collectivities sharing the same life chances and having same interests (to protect or improve those chances) (ibid.) or in other words from being embedded within specific social relations (Sayer, 2000, p. 12). The other set of intrinsic causal powers identified by Archer refers to fundamental, pre-social capacities. One of these primitive capacities is an ability to be aware of the continuous sense of self. This is emergent in virtue of being born as homo sapiens and possessed even by the aphasic, autistic or amnesic, no matter how small it is (Archer, 1995, pp. 257, 291).

autonomous, in the sense that they mediate the extrinsic factors, changing these latent enablements and constraints into a myriad of possibilities in the phase of enactment. These dynamic interactions between the two sets of factors hence produce an experience of disability that is uniquely specific to each context and indeterminable. The reduction of the explanation of disability experience to either set of the factors, such as linear narrative human interest stories, will not serve to enhance a critical understanding of disability.

5.2.2 Agent's context analysis

After outlining features of position-practice relations, we turn to another method: agent's context analysis. Diverse structures (cultural, social, economic, etc.) and other agents, both present and absent, compose the knowledgeability of the agent and causes her/his desires to be ranked, modified or negotiated, as discussed earlier. One way to explicate these dynamics involved in agent's composing her/his action is through a method called Agent's Context Analysis (ACA). Agent's context analysis starts with the internal dynamic within an agent. This is manifested in both her/his accounts – that is, her/his interpretations, meanings and reasons – and her/his actions. In other words, ACA starts with the level of consciousness of an actor (Stones, 1996, p. 93). Through attention to this process of internal dynamics, attempts are made to identify knowledgeability and dispositions of the agent-in-focus concerning the conjunctural context faced. This includes the agent's perception of her/his various positions called upon by the conjuncture; other agents-in-context, both present and absent, who also need to be perceived by the agent-in-focus as all

having their own internal dynamics. Knowledgeability is also the way in which an agent draws upon perceptions of rules (such as systems of punishment and reward) and resources (such as power relations and systems of meaning) to handle the situation. Moreover, the internal process simultaneously involves another two aspects of agency: the agent's reflexive monitoring of her/his action; and the filtering of her/his own different motives and desires against the demand of the situation (ibid.). In other words, ACA starts with the agent's hermeneutic frames of meaning – or an agent's perception and knowledge about (competing) sets of values, belief systems, norms and techniques (cf.Stones, 2005, p. 30) – and with her/his subsequent action. The second part of ACA involves the researcher expanding this internal dynamic of an agent outward into the structural contents of those perceptions. This can be identified as connecting inner views with the social nexus of interdependencies, of rights and obligations, of asymmetries of power which provide conditions for action and for consequences of the action (Stones, 1996, p. 93). The researcher should identify the terrain – strategic, ethical, aesthetic, and communicative – that faced and faces an actor and constitutes a range of possibilities and limits to her/his action in the current situation. The main purpose of ACA is twofold: first, to make explicit the actor's perception of the range of potential courses of action, choices, and alternative strategies; and then to assess this perception of an agent against the actual structural pressures, constraints and possibilities; that is, the conditions and consequences of action that the actor is not shown to be aware of (ibid.). This allows one to get a glimpse of whether the actor is accurate or mistaken. This twofold method is crucial in allowing us to connect agents with structure,

avoiding both voluntaristic and overwhelmingly structural accounts of social events. ACA draws one back from an actor's conduct towards the structures within it, and from there to the structuration processes external to her/him (Stones, 2005, p. 183). It allows one to look at 'the enabling and constraining conditions of action as internally experienced and as externally existing' (ibid.).

This second phase of ACA necessitates a reconstruction that examines three main parts: the biography of the agent (in order to identify any formative and enduring influences); present daily life spheres (for diverse frames of meaning and their combination or tension and for constraints, opportunities, risks and costs); and lastly the agent's knowledge of plural systemic conditions or mechanisms (for the acknowledged and unacknowledged conditions of action and consequences) (Stones, 1996, p. 93). Together, the three parts help to delineate a social event as conditioned by antecedents and as located in networks of relevant relationships. This helps us to cast a net further away from the surface event to a broader external frame of networks of social relations into which the agents have been thrown, and 'without which one cannot make sense of them or what they do' (Stones, 2009, p. 990). The frame thus brings out 'the configurational quality of social processes, whereby the necessary current and prior conditions or constituents of surface events exist, in large part, elsewhere, outside the particular interaction in focus' (Stones & Ake Tangsupvattana, 2012, p. 224).

The above frameworks of position-practice relations and ACA can supplement the linear narrative of *Kon Kon Kon* films by making more explicit the structural contexts presupposed by the conducts/decisions of the subjects of the films. The linear narrative starts with a brief introduction to the life course of these disabled individuals: how they were born of poor rural families and received poor health care. They also experienced difficulties in accessing and remaining in formal education due to their poverty and physical impairment. Discrimination and bullying is present in most of these plots. Subsequently, the main tenet of the narrative follows in the form of despite these constraints, disabled subjects endeavour to receive informal training and transfer of knowledge from family and friends in order to earn a living. They finally gain acceptance from the community through their hard work, trustworthiness, competence and deference. The *Kon Kon Kon* narrative depicts these as a series of conducts of free-floating autonomous agents; the films provide only faint hints of correlation between the world-in-here and the world-out-there. The following section consists of a commentary to the films, explicating how the subjects of the films, rather than acting out of unconstrained human will draw actively and creatively on resources from the terrain of numerous possibilities and constraints from the surrounding structures. Many of these possibilities and constraints are shown as being co-configured, the processes which stretch away beyond the surface event itself. The three most relevant networks of relationships are identified as the social structures of economic liberalism; socio-cultural ideologies; and the structures and politics of welfare in Thailand.

5.3   *An augmented narrative*

This part starts with an excerpt from one of the films in which we can identify social connections using the methods outline above. This is aimed to enhance audience critical comprehension of social relations. We start by applying ACA and then the two parts of the position-practice relations respectively.

5.3.1   Agent's context analysis: Som-O's internal dynamic

Agent's context analysis will be applied to the following sequences from the film *Makud: A Mighty Heart in an Undersized Body.* The film is about three disabled individuals. Makud, who has no legs and only small outgrowths under her shoulders, Pornchai, with impaired mobility on both feet and hands, and Som-O, who has severely damaged eyesight. The three form a team of two motorcycles, buying and selling recyclable items around Konsarn District, Chaiyapuhm Province, Northeastern Thailand. The following sequence shows Pornchai riding, with Makud tucked into the front of the motorcycle, and leading the team while Som-O rides behind them towing a cart loaded with goods. Som-O is left behind as Pornchai has failed to slow down at an intersection and has driven away without checking that Som-O was following. Som-O does not know in which direction his teammates have gone. He stops by the side of the road

Interviewer: Som-O, where are Makud and Pornchai? Where have they gone? You cannot see them, can you? What has happened?

Som-O: What? Am I losing them again? I don't know (where they went). He rides too fast. He never waits for me. I left before them but waited for them, even with this heavy loaded cart. I stopped and waited for them.

After a while, Pornchai comes back to find Som-O.

Som-O: Why didn't you tell me when turning right or left? Why didn't you wait for me after turning?
Pornchai: (silence)
Makud: (to Pornchai) Go slowly. He (Som-O) cannot go fast.

After finishing, Makud calculates the money earned.

Pornchai: (reading from a scrap of paper) Total four-hundred and thirty baht.
Som-O: Did he (the man who trades with them) also give us the money for the petrol?
Makud: Why are you asking like this? You were there with me when he gave us the money. Go get a table. I'll count the money and tell you all details. I never cheat.
Som-O: I didn't say you cheat. I just want to know because I could not see how much he gave.
Makud: Four-hundred and thirty baht, then deducted two-hundred and thirty-six baht for the petrol … It is one-hundred and ninety-four baht left. Then divided by three… It's 64.5 baht left for each of us. How come it is so little? (Laugh)

At Som-O's house

Interviewer: How many people live here? There are only you and your grandmother. Where are your parents?
Som-O: They have migrated to cut sugar cane.
Interviewer: Your grandmother is totally blind. What do you have to do in the house?
Som-O: I cook and clean.
Interviewer: Do you have to help cleaning her and taking her to toilet?
Som-O: If she can walk, there is a rail that will guide her to the toilet. If she is too weak, I will have to help cleaning her.
Interviewer (to Grandmother): When Som-O leaves to drive for the recycling team, are you worried about him? He is almost completely blind.
Grandmother: Of course. I am worried, very worried. I don't want him to go at all but he says, 'what can I do, they just call me and I cannot say no'. I tell him to be careful and not to get run over. He says he will ride slowly.
Interviewer (to Som-O): I have seen many times a big gap between Pornchai's motorcycle and yours. Sometimes he has to come back to find you. Do you feel discouraged having such poor eyesight?
Som-O: I don't feel discouraged. I just feel the danger. If I die in an accident, there is nothing can be done about that. My family does not want me to do this job.
Interviewer: Yes, you cannot see the road clearly. And what did you tell your family?
Som-O: I told them I wanted to quit too, to go do something that does not involve driving.
Interviewer: What do you want to do?
Som-O: I am training to give traditional massage.

During a lunch break

Interviewer (to Makud): Are you upset that he (Som-O) wants to leave.

Makud: No. He is not happy working with us so I should let him go. I can do with just Pornchai.

Som-O: Why are you just saying it now? You could have told me earlier that you can manage with just you and Pornchai. So I don't have to come here.

Interviewer: Are you getting upset?

Som-O: No. No. It is just my time that is lost. I make extra effort to be here.

Interviewer: Do you feel Makud is taking advantage of you?

Som-O: Well, a bit. Like I don't know many things but she knows everything.

Makud: Because you don't know how to read, so I have to do all the paper and money.

Som-O: Like the other day, the owner of the shop gave us money to fix the motorcycle. I didn't know about this at all.

Makud: I did tell you.

Som-O: I swear you did not. I just want to make sure whether it is a loan or a free gift. I don't want to end up having a debt.

At a massage training course

Interviewer: Where are you going to work as a masseur after this training?

Som-O: I don't know yet.

Interviewer: When you were working with Makud, did you want to come here to get training instead?

Som-O: Yes, I have long wanted to come here. It has been my goal. It is the job that suits me and I love this job.

Interviewer: You come here to learn a skill so that you can take responsibility of yourself.

Som-O: Yes, yes, it is a skill. Yes yes, to take responsibility of myself.

Interviewer: Do you miss the time with Makud and Pornchai?

Som-O: (Pause) Yes, sometimes. But it is impossible to stay together like that forever. I have to find my own future. When I am old, there is no one I can rely on. I only have myself.

Som-O's internal dynamics or his knowledgeability and dispositions about the conjunctural context he is facing can be analysed as followed. We can begin by examining the way he draws upon rules such as systems of reward, and resources such as power relations and values, in order to formulate a range of possibilities and limits to his action. This can be referred to his competing concerns or value-laden dispositions which include to earn money; to keep the good relationship and social capital with fellow disabled Makud and Pornchai intact; and to have a safe and secure future for himself and his blind grandmother, who would be left with great difficulties if he dies. Second, by looking at these competing rules and values, we can also see

various positions, with obligations and power relations attached to them, called upon Som-O by the conjuncture: as a disabled son and grandson in a poor rural family; as a disadvantaged, poorly-educated job seeker; as a friend; and as a blind person. These motivational grounds combine with his knowledgeability of the social context and with his own hierarchy of values/desires resulting in him finally leaving the team to pursue his solo career in traditional massage.

His knowledgeability of the social context and negotiation of various desires can be further examined. Knowledgeability is determined by his perception of others in the context. First, due to her literacy, Som-O relates to Makud in terms of skills and connections in the business, having capacities to take charge of the business and to control the money. He, as a labourer in the team, is thus a replaceable part of the business. Nevertheless, Som-O considers Makud at the same time as more disabled than him and consequently he can be her helping hand. Therefore, he continues as part of the team despite his suspicions towards her as manager. His sympathy towards her may prevent him from directly confronting Makud and telling her that he wants to leave the team. There are many things that, as a researcher, are impossible to gain access to. However, it is likely that the three disabled share similar living conditions and want to stay united and this is perhaps why Som-O feels unsure of revealing his separatist desires to the team. Som-O may pit all these perceptions of Makud against knowledge of his own context in order to make a decision to leave. The decision is based on the knowledge that he gains only a little money from joining the recycle team and even this is inconsistent. He subsequently assesses this against

the risk from driving, with his blindness, on rural roads with many trucks and cars travelling at high speed and the many reckless road-users. He knows that he cannot read and see things clearly. Thus, a group activity where others manage the money is probably not going to give him peace of mind. He constantly checks rates of income and expense with Makud, making sure he is not losing more than he gains from the business; we get an impression that he does not want to get in trouble with other traders and debtors. The insecurity in income and livelihood may also form part of his knowledgeability. The monthly disabled benefit of five-hundred baht [67] does not give him enough insurance, and there is an immense sense of concern for the future as he knows there are few sources of reliable safety nets to guarantee a future for him and his blind grandmother. He needs to have a secure job as the only way to make a living. Turning now to the issue of value, the value of helping out and useful to others forms part of his hierarchy of values. Nevertheless, this is ranked second to values attached to self-responsibility, long-term survival of self and pursuing the job that he believes suits his capabilities as a blind person.[68] After all, the latter set of values serves more pragmatic ends. These values represent, at the same time, the plurality of the general dispositional as a medium of action waiting to be activated and transferred to different occasions by Som-O. These general dispositionals consist of the moral obligation (towards his grandmother and towards his fellows), the economic commitment (towards his own financial and livelihood conditions), and the

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[67] We learn from Makud in another part of the film that she receives five-hundred baht as a disabled monthly benefit. The local government decides how much to give to people with disabilities. The range is between five to seven-hundred baht.

[68] In Thailand, the blind are regarded as one of the best massage givers, with their acclaimed superior tactile abilities.

professional development (to acquire a competence in a skill and excel in a profession).

Upon looking further at the actor's biography, current daily life spheres and the knowledge of multiple systems surrounding him, we can get a bigger picture: an intimation of the structural contexts presupposed by his internal complexity above. We now focus on the structural constraint/enablements co-configured by the social structures of economic liberalism, the structure and politics of welfare and socio-cultural ideologies in Thailand. These networks weave sets of positions and practices into which the disabled poor are pushed, embedded in and live out. Before we begin to apply the first part of concept position-practice relations, it is important to stress that in addressing these structural constraints/enablements in this phase the chapter is well aware of pitfalls of structuralist views which tend to subject people as powerless dupes only acting out given roles, and which argue for the rule-governed character of action. However, while the chapter gives the subjective hermeneutic, interpretive dimension and skills of individual agents the value they deserve, it is equally important to recognize that there are certain regularities and totalising tendencies in the society. By looking at these regularities, we gain a 'longer-term, wider angle view on the structuring of social systems that would vanish as such if viewed through a microscope' (Stones, 1996, p. 93). We can understand better 'the historically inherited collective circumstances' (Cohen, 1989, p. 9) that pre- and postdate human agents which provide context and medium for the exercise of

agentive capacity and at the same time gets reproduced in the process of social praxis.

5.3.2 Position-practice relations 1: Som-O's intrinsic causal powers/endowment

The first stage in applying the concept of position-practice relations involves identifying institutionalised position and associated practices and relations. There are two principle sets of these in the case of Som-O: those regarding poverty and those centering on being disabled. First, identities, attributes, prerogatives, obligations and the relations made manifest or observable for the position of a poor person/household in Thailand applicable to the case of Som-O include: having a low level of assets including small landholding or landlessness and low capital; being indebted or vulnerable to debts; having poor health; having a casual, labour-intensive, low paid and dangerous job without/with little public social protection; having low education; having vulnerable and dependent household members; having low levels of social capital; and a low asset transfer from parents (cf. Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2013; Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003; Shepherd, 2007). These attributes derive from relations with family, community and the state as will be discussed below. Second, the identities and practices of a disabled person include: being physically excluded from participating in mainstream economic and social activities due to bodily impairment; deserving sympathy; being required to conform and thus being compliant with the standard of normalcy; and having less political representativeness and advocacy groups (cf. Beauchamp-Pryor,

2012, pp. 179, 182; Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, pp. 46-48). The subjects of *Kon Kon Kon* films are both poor and disabled and thus the position and practices associated with poverty become harsher and include having even fewer income opportunities, and in an even more casual manner and with a lower return. In addition, the two positions – being poor and being disabled – involve cultural institutions of religious belief and of ideologies. The former associates causes of poverty and disability with past life (cf. Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003) and the latter, such as neo-liberal ideologies of self-help and individualism (cf. Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012) subjects the disabled poor to identities and obligations of resilience, self-reliance and self-help.

The above intrinsic causal powers – capacities to behave in particular ways – and intrinsic passive powers – specific susceptibilities to certain kinds of change – of a deprived disabled person are emergent from contact with other actors and with material and ideational structures. Intrinsic factors relating to Som-O such as his potentials, personality and agentive capacity are shaped to a great extent by his positions and relations with his family, friends, other villagers, local government, the Thai state and global economy and culture. The initial causal powers/potentials are arguably similar to intrinsic endowment - or a portfolio of assets an individual/household has – highlighted in literature on poverty. The *in situ* enactment, the second part of the concept of position-practice relations, then applies when we explain a specific case of poverty; that is, when the intrinsic endowment of a specific individual/household interacts with a particular type of shock and

institutional context (such as presence or lack of safety nets) at a specific time and place (cf. Moore, Grant, Hulme, & Shepherd, 2008, p. 14). The two levels – intrinsic endowment and *in situ* enactment – are significant if we want to understand poverty and disability and plan suitable intervention. We need to understand the composition of each of the two levels and how they interact.

The portfolio of endowment is a result of intergenerational poverty. Intergenerational transmission of poverty and social mobility is determined by interaction of factors at two levels: household and extra-household levels (Shepherd, 2007, pp. 10-27). Within the household the focus is on the level and quality of assets and include factors such as delays in the development of a child; private transmission of assets; positive/negative aspiration; composition of the household in terms of genders and ages and dependency ratio; parental education and health; quality of parenting, nurturing and socialisation; domestic violence; and the socio-economic role of older people. At the extra-household level, attention is focused on the extent to which the economy functions to facilitate the poor's use of their assets to allow mobility, public transfer of resources from generation to the next,[69] characteristics of labour markets, conditions for young adult entrepreneurship and participation in social organization and politics, violent social conflict, the political economy of redistribution, social processes influencing the development of aspirations, social networks underpinned by social structures of class, caste, ethnicity and religion (ibid.). The interaction at the two levels determines intergenerational poverty. The

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[69] For example, through taxing the income of older generations to pay for the primary education system (Shepherd, 2007, p. 11).

possession, activation and return to a household's intrinsic endowment depend to a large part on political, economic and social arrangements. A high level of *human capital* is less valuable if an individual is not able to obtain a skilled job or if a person receives a lower wage due to *discrimination* (Shepherd, 2007, p. 16). Likewise, *land* and sufficient *labour* without *organized agricultural markets* may provide for security but do little for upward mobility (ibid. McKay, 2009, p. 6). Growth that does not address inequality is likely to harm the poor. *Urban bias* in the form of infrastructure concentrated in urban areas, such as schools, universities, hospitals, occupational development training, makes it difficult for most of the poorest to benefit since most of them are in rural areas (Shepherd, 2007, pp. 14-15). In addition to urban biased infrastructure investment, inequality also means *constrained access to critical markets*, such as land, commodities, finance, credit, housing and labour, faced by the poor. The labour market for the poor is likely to be casualised and offering little protection to workers (op.cit. , p. 27). Unequal societies also create housing ghettos with areas populated by the poor far from sources of employment or critical services like drinking water (op.cit. , p. 27). Moreover, *public expenditures favouring the poorest* such as on health, education, rural infrastructure are needed to protect them against downward mobility. The position-practice relations of an individual/household within the general economic, political, welfare conditions is very crucial, as captured in the following quote:

> Most poor people in developing countries are at least partially
> included in the mainstream but on adverse terms that do not
> enable them to progress in economic or human development
> terms (Shepherd, 2007, p. 16).

Literature on poverty illuminates an application of the concept of position-practice relations. An individual's life chances and choices are located in a network of relationships. This enables us to see her/his causal powers as tied to her/his positions and relations with household members and other external structures. We can see the constraints and opportunities woven for and endowed to an individual and less likely to see her/his action as an uprooted decision. We continue this section with possible endowment or causal powers of poor people with disabilities in Thailand stemming from the country's economic and social development which is configured by three highly connected spheres of social structures of economic liberalism, social-cultural ideologies and the structures and politics of welfare. We will be able to see institutions at local, national and international domains of different temporal settings are connected and constitute living conditions faced by a collective group such as the disabled poor.

5.3.2.1 Social structures of economic liberalism: an uneven growth

Vulnerability and poverty in Thai rural households like those of Som-O and his friends stem from industry-oriented growth since the 1960s. Thailand's economic growth was planned to emphasise the rate, rather than the composition of growth, equality and redistribution (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 1). The biases in terms of policies towards the growth of urban and industrial sectors at the expense of rural resources and development since the 1960s are discussed in chapter two. Biased policies included tariff protection given to

durable industries while imported agricultural goods were given free entry, rice premium policies, a decline in public expenditure in rural investment, natural resources relocated to facilitate manufacturing sectors and land cleared for intensive cash crop plantation with environmental and livelihood impacts on rural households.

Likewise, unequal relationships can be observed in the international trade that influenced Thailand's economy. Developing countries like Thailand are usually pressured into import liberalization by agreements at WTO, World Bank, IMF or other trade negotiations where they are pressed to open up their markets to goods from developed countries (Kaseki, 2007; Oxfam Hong Kong). The EU and the US dump their produce and goods, produced with large subsidies on developing countries and thus are able to keep the price low. This action seriously affects the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in developing countries as they cannot compete against imported produce. Very poor and undeveloped producers are placed in direct competition with developed industries that have benefited from years of investment and domestic subsidies that cause overproduction (Oxfam Hong Kong).[70] Poorer countries suffer in addition from trade barriers such as patents rights. Affluent and powerful multinational corporations pressure their governments into increasing their levels of protection for intellectual property rights; raising the prices of necessities such as seeds, medicines, medical textbooks, and computer software. As one result,

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[70] In Europe, farm subsidies have reached $51 billion, accounting for forty percent of the European Union budget. European sugar farmers are paid four times more than the world market price and this, in turn, creates a four-million ton surplus of sugar which is dumped on the world market with the help of $1 billion in EU marketing support, making Europe the second largest exporter of sugar. This surplus has caused world sugar prices to tumble by about one-third, costing Brazil $494 million in lost revenues, $151 million for South Africa, and $60 million for Thailand (UNDP, 2005).

poor people cannot afford the medicine they need (Oxfam Hong Kong). Moreover, developing economies are faced with the falling value of commodities (UNDP, 2005) especially in raw materials.[71] While this has been happening to countries producing and exporting raw materials, rich countries gain far more benefits from their industrial products (Oxfam Hong Kong). The 'coffee economy' in rich countries is booming, with retail sales reaching eighty billion dollars a year in 2005, compared with thirty billion in 1990. The world's six largest roasters have greatly benefitted from the condition of low wholesale prices and high retail sales (UNDP, 2005). Thailand's economy is highly dependent on international trade and investment. The low negotiating power during the 1961-1997 period saw the country's exports suffer low prices compared to the higher price of imported goods, resulting in trade imbalance. Exporters reduced costs by lowering wage and raw material costs, putting strain on labourers, small-scale raw material producers, and peasants (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, pp. 168-171).

Land, other assets and the level of vulnerability of rural households were affected to a great extent as a consequence of the country's economic development. From the mid-1970s, many households were involved in the economy merely as labourers in contract farming; in which they worked on annual advances from the local businessmen. As agricultural prices began to decline, it was difficult for farmers in more remote and less fertile upland areas to counter this by diversifying away from

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[71] In the late 1980s, for example, coffee exporters received about twelve billion dollars for their exports, but by 2003, they exported more coffee, but received less than half as much income, or $5.5 billion (UNDP, 2005).

cash crops (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 213). Together with a squeeze on natural resources for livelihood, small farmers ended up gaining very little from their produce and facing increasing deficit. Small farm households, land tenants and the landless, together forming the majority of rural households, were faced with income squeeze. This drove them towards a combination of coping strategies including borrowing, diversification into non-farm activities, urban migration and migration to settle in a new area, many cases of which were squatters.[72] The rural poor in Thailand can be classified into three major groups: peasants with farm holding; agricultural labourers; and casual wage labourers in non-agricultural sectors (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 7). The first group, accounting for fifty per cent of the total poor, either owned or rented land. They remained in poverty due to the falling agricultural prices, economic slowdown and debts. The second group, accounting for fifteen per cent, owned neither means of production nor production/occupational skills, and earned their living as waged labourers on other people's farms, experiencing insecure and casual income and work load. The last group was casual wage labourers[73] who were exposed to a low and inconsistent income and inconsistent job flow compared to those in formal sector. For example, home workers who were contracted to produce items at home were subject to an

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[72] By the early 1990s, over a third of the whole rural population were living inside the area actually assigned as official forest and were in turn considered squatters. They did not qualify for any land deed at all (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 159). A recent report found that there are at least three hundred and sixty villages living in the forest area and are all at high risk of being prosecuted by the state (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 41).

[73] In 2011, there was as high as 62.6 per cent of labour power in Thailand classified as wage labourers working in informal sectors (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 31), that is in agriculture, construction, fishery, domestic workers, home workers and the self-employed.

eight to twelve hour day, confining them to low payment with little opportunities to find other income sources. Labourers in formal sectors, on the other hand, were guaranteed to gain the minimum wage (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 31). Moreover, informal wage labourers are not protected against redundancy, health hazards from machine and chemical usage.[74] Such hazards can have tremendous effects on health and can damage income earning ability, subjecting the individual and household to vulnerability.

This terrain forms part of position-practice relations and thus the intrinsic causal powers of Som-O: potentials to be trapped in poverty despite having jobs. Similar to most poor people who have no access to capital, the only asset Som-O has is his labour (cf. Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2013, p. 5). However, he earned, as we know from the interview earlier, as little as 64.5 baht from the whole day in a recycling trade, much lower than the national minimum wage.[75] His job, which meant driving with blindness, exposed him to the high risk of accidents which would leave him and his blind grandmother in an even more vulnerable situation because there were no safety nets. Labour intensive work, with poor physical and legal conditions and low payment only maintain people in poverty, rather than providing a route out of it (ibid.).

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[74] The number of labourers experiencing danger at work was one-hundred and one in one-thousand informal labourers, compared to fifty-five in those working in formal sectors, 1.8 times higher (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 32).

[75] In 2013, the minimum wage for Som-O's home province, Chaiyapuhm , was three-hundred baht, similar to Bangkok (Ministry of Labour).

Trade liberalization, globalisation and Thailand's intensified economic and industrial development since the 1960s have left Thailand with growing inequality. Thailand's expansion of trade based on manufacturing, particularly in the mid-1980s, widened income gaps. Non-agricultural households benefitted from the export-led growth three times more than agricultural households (Medhi Krongkaew, 1995, p. 35). Disparities between sectors can still be seen when we compare the return to labour to the return to capitals; despite the majority of the population being wage and salary earners, in 2013 only forty per cent of GDP were wages while sixty per cent are return to capital enjoyed by business owners (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 48). Moreover, some areas attract more economic benefits than others, resulting in higher extent of globalization, growth, income and a higher ability to invest in education; such as coastal areas compared to inland regions (Treethep Nopakun, 2007).[76] At the national level, in 1975-1976, the richest twenty per cent of the total population received forty-nine per cent of the country's total income while the poorest twenty per cent received only six per cent. In 1987-1988 the share of the richest increased to 54.9 per cent while that of the poorest fell to 4.5 per cent (Pasuk Phongpaichit et al., 1995, p. 147). Concentration of land possession is another indication of inequality that has characterised Thailand. About ninety per cent of land is possessed by only ten per cent of the population. The figure for land left either unused or underused was as high as seventy per cent nationwide, indicating a lack of efficient land ownership planning and land and

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[76] During 1981-2005 in coastal regions, which had higher level of globalisation, an average income of people (20.5 million people) was 102,178 baht, while that of people in inland regions (43.15 million people) was only 31,627 baht. Moreover, the level of growth of the inland regions was only 60 per cent of that experienced by the coastal regions (Treethep Nopakun, 2007).

properties tax to facilitate the distribution of land ownership to the less well off (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 9). Thus, even though absolute poverty declined, relative poverty or income inequality increased in Thailand (Adisara Isarangkul Na Ayuttaya, 2007, p. 9; Medhi Krongkaew, 1995, p. 53). The second sphere that co-evolves with economic liberalism and contributes to structural disadvantage of the rural sector is welfare provision.

5.3.2.2 Insufficient welfare

Social welfare is a significant tool to alleviate poverty. The social-economic structure can place poor people in more vulnerable position when it prevents them from meaningfully participating in the social, political and economic processes that facilitate upward mobility. Pro-poor growth strategies consequently must incorporate a strong focus on providing protection and assistance (Shepherd, 2007). Social welfare involves three main areas (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 67): social service on healthcare, education, career, housing, protection of rights and properties; social insurance which covers benefits for work-related sickness, disability and death, retirement, maternity, unemployment and child benefit; and social assistance for the vulnerable such as the elderly, the homeless and those affected by disasters. In other words, social welfare can be argued to involve work that focus on intervention and safety nets (cf.Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007). Intervention refers to measures addressing market mechanisms in order to curb shortcomings of economic liberalism which cannot solve income inequality problem. The state can fill this gap

through constructive fiscal policy as well as interventions in areas where the market fails, such as the provision of sufficient education to escape poverty and the provision of risk insurance to those unable to afford sensible risk coping mechanisms. Safety nets aim to help people deal with various economic risks that have consequences to fluctuate income or shock expenditure (ibid.). It can be argued that a welfare state is a concept that emerged in the wake of industrialized society (Narong Petchprasert in Editorial Department, 2010a, p. 24), when the informal safety nets provided by family and community assistance, which used to help people mitigate the negative consequences of risks, were in decline. The transformation to an industrialised economy and a trend towards smaller family made such informal safety nets less reliable. Thus formal safety nets must step in (ibid.).

Despite its significance in ensuring equality in industrialized societies, specific poverty and income redistribution policies were largely non-existent in the past four decades of Thailand's neo-liberal economy (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007). The Thai state was convinced that economic growth would have trickle down effects and result in increased standards of living without the need for welfare intervention (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, pp. 206, 210) or the need to tackle structural inequality (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 254). Redistribution issues such as land and tax reform, and protective measures and public expenditure favouring the poor such as health, education, rural infrastructure did not receive sufficient attention. 'State welfare or public welfare', not the welfare state, can be used to characterise Thailand's welfare system, in which the latter does not provide full

coverage and is not provided as rights for all (Narong Petchprasert in Editorial Department, 2010a, p. 24). Started during the second national economic development plan (1967-1971), Thailand's welfare system was classified as 'an emergency relief and charity for those in need' (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 207). An example is the poor people health card scheme introduced in 1976 when the commitment to address structural equality was in doubt (ibid.). A contemporary attempt was the village fund scheme in 2001. Although claiming to provide credit to the rural sector, it was criticized (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, pp. 207-208) as a short-term attempt, sidelining the long underlying issues of the status quo and unfair market relations. It was further criticized (Bawornphan Adshakul & Worawan Chanduaywit, 2007) for its limited impact on longer term income level and wellbeing in rural areas. This can be part of populist policies which are critiqued on the basis of their aiming to mobilize popular support from voters through excessive use of money to intervene in market mechanisms, but without any significant structural change in parallel (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007). Populist policies may benefit the poor, especially the chronic poor such as people with disabilities, refugees, the marginalized, but only on a short term basis when there is no significant structural improvement taken place (ibid.).[77]

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[77] Thailand has been caught in a dilemma regarding welfare and hence populist policies have been used as a quick solution (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007; Viroj Na Ranong, 2007). The contributory welfare system will discriminate and exclude informal labourers which form the majority of labourers in the country, because they are not likely to be able to contribute. The means-tested welfare provision will likely experience difficulties of efficiently locating the recipients. The welfare-for-all, as rights for everyone, will need a massive fund to start up and to keep commitments and it will be possible mainly through collecting more taxes. These taxes however must not affect the poor even more. Unless the majority in the society finds a consensus in sharing their access to enable the whole society to share happiness and pain and from womb to tomb, Thailand will still be caught in series of populist policies from one government to another (ibid.).

Apart from insufficient focus from the state, there is often a lack of consensus and political support especially from the upper and middle classes who would be taxed more and gain less from change such as property and inheritance tax collection (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007). A call for a tax reform that would demand more from the well-off in terms of sharing more of their excess to the rest of the society was ill-received. Moreover, most Thai people do not trust state welfare schemes and prefer to save money and buy health and education services of their choice, especially the middle and upper classes (Viroj Na Ranong, 2007).

In terms of law enforcement and implementation, Thailand's welfare law is a law without means of coercion and punishment to ensure its enforcement (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 281). One example is that the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security Act B.E. 2548 (2005) requires that all government buildings, starting with those most visited (i.e. provincial halls, district offices, local government offices, hospitals, schools and police stations), *must* have disability access and facilities such as ramps, disabled toilets and parking spaces by 2011 (National Office For Empowerment Of Persons With Disability). Nevertheless, punishment is not specified and it is not surprising that there are still no disability facilities in these premises. In addition, the provision of welfare is subject to the individual discretion of staff members and local governments (Rapeephan Kamhom,

2011, p. 282). There are numerous rights reserved for people with disabilities according to the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment Act, B.E. 2550 (2007). These benefits include a monthly benefit of five-hundred baht; access to occupational and educational loans; legal advice; grants for sign language translators for use in accessing public services, in occupation-related communication, and in court; house adaptation grants and support on the construction; grants for personal assistants; the right to be provided with disabled access and facilities when visiting public places; concession fares for public transportation; disability medical services with access to all state hospitals nationwide without the need of a referral card; free education for a bachelor degree, and an access to assistance at occupational skills centres. Benefits for carers include advice and training on how to take care of people with disabilities, career support, apprenticeship, access to occupational loans, and tax reductions. Moreover, the Act specifies the role of the private sector and government agencies alike regarding employment of people with disabilities; it is required by the Act that a company or a government agency employs a certain proportion of disabled members of staff. Alternatively they can contribute to a disability fund, or provide marketing assistance for goods and service produced by people with disabilities, or provide apprenticeship (National Office For Empowerment Of Persons With Disability). Implementation of these rights, however, depends on the discretion of individual local governments. Some local governments make it their mission to realise these laws and regulations (see Saerhung Sub-district Administration Organisation). Others may only carry out the minimum task of paying monthly disabled and elderly benefit (Rapeephan Kamhom, 2011, p. 283). Although in 2013 the government claimed the

achievement of universal coverage of the payment of disability and elderly benefit, that is, given to all registered disabled and the elderly regardless of their income status[78] (see Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, pp. 28-29), the impact of the amount of five-hundred baht per month for people with disabilities and of six-hundred to one-thousand baht per month for the elderly are questionable on the grounds of whether it is enough to enhance a person's life (Editorial Department, 2010a).

Fundamentally important is the push for the provision of welfare as rights. Viriya Namsiripongpan, a visually impaired intellectual, comments that in order to actualize disability rights on paper, Thailand needs to adopt a right-based approach (Editorial Department, 2010c). Therefore, welfare needs to be perceived more as a basic right of the people. The charity approach represents compassion which is important but will only result in piecemeal welfare as compassion is only appropriate for person-to-person interaction. The rights-based approach on the other hand makes it a responsibility of the government to provide welfare for all disabled (ibid.). However, 'luck', 'compassion' and 'charity' are much better descriptions of the country's welfare provision. Although Thailand has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability in 2008 which has as a basic tenet a ban on disability discrimination, Montien Boontan, a disabled senator, believes that a move away from emotional and arbitrary responses to disability and a move towards a right-based

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[78] Individuals can choose not to register and not to receive the elderly and disability benefit. In this case, the amount will be distributed to other recipients who will thus receive more than the minimum rate depending on the number of people not turning up to claim this right (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 29).

approach will take the country time to achieve (Editorial Department, 2008a). As an example, in the current charity-based welfare model, only five percent of buses fitted with a low floor access feature were planned (Editorial Department, 2009). This is to be compared to the rights-based model which requires every bus to have easy access to allow all people to benefit from the service equally. Suporntham Mongkolsawat, former principal of The Redemptorist Vocational School for People with Disabilities comments on the current discretionary transportation service as follows.

> The Bangkok Mass Transit Authority said they would provide, of all four thousand new buses, five per cent that have a low floor access. Now if there is one bus every fifteen minutes, there will be one low-floored bus coming every five hours. If you are lucky, you will get to use the bus service then (Editorial Department, 2009, p. 24).

After discussing insufficient welfare, we now look at some of its effects. The focus here is on inequalities in social services. In terms of educational provision, although there was an average increase in the number of years spent in schools, from 6.6 years in 2004 to 9.1 years in 2011, there was a gap across income groups and regions when we look closely. In 2012, only fifty-six per cent of people living below the poverty line had secondary education, compared to eighty-three per cent of those above the poverty line. Seventy-two per cent of rural people had attended secondary school compared to almost ninety per cent in urban areas. The gap widened at the university level (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 12). This is partly because higher education institutions are concentrated in urban areas (ibid.). It costs rural households more to support their children to study far from home (op.cit. , p. 16). In addition, an average score in

four main subjects of Thai, English, Maths and Science was different between urban and rural areas due to issues such as lack of teachers, limited resources and facilities in rural areas (op.cit. , p. 17).

Human capital in relation to education and health effect income ability by enabling individuals to participate in the non-farm economy or to access more sophisticated agricultural markets. They thus enhance or limit the degree of social mobility (Shepherd, 2007, p. 16). The disabled poor such as Som-O, Makud and Pornchai have no education and as a consequence have limited income opportunities. Makud only knows how to read through asking friends and her parents to help in her self-learning. The deprivation of educational opportunities of some of the subjects of *Kon Kon Kon* films (Mankong, Boonlai, Ake, Makud and Yale) are made explicit as due to the nature of their impairment. This is coupled with the way mainstream schools in Thailand are not equipped to accommodate students with special needs and schools for disabled people are only available in big cities. Boonlai expressed his frustration when, as a young boy starting school for less than a week, he was told by the principal to quit because he 'could not stay still and that disrupted the whole class' (Pongtham Suthisakorn, 2008a, p. 33). His mother ended up teaching him basic maths to be used later in his small business. Ake faced a similar rejection from a local school. However, his father who was a deputy village chief, asked to discuss the issue with the educational provincial chief. Finally, the local school was told to accept him (Pongtham Suthisakorn, 2008b, p. 348). This demonstrates that apart from barriers to education for people with disabilities, the social positions and relations of an

individual and her/his household play a significant role in accessing resources and services.

In terms of health, in 2011 Thailand achieved 99.95 per cent coverage through three healthcare schemes: the Universal Health Care Scheme which covers 75.3 per cent of the whole population; social security schemes (15.9 per cent); and the Civil Servant Medical Benefits Schemes (CSMBS) (7.8 per cent) (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 22). The quality of each scheme however varies. The social security schemes[79] and the Universal Health Care[80] operate on capitation[81] while the CSMBS operates on a fee-for-service basis (ibid.). Moreover, people from different income groups have different choices for medical services. Almost eighty per cent of the highest income group use private hospitals, general hospitals and regional hospitals, while only thirty per cent of the poorest group can afford such facilities. Most of these go to local health stations and community hospitals which have limited capability for critical and specialty care (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, pp. 24-25). In addition, the ratio of doctor, medical staff, medical supplies differ across regions. In the Northeast, the ratio of doctor to patients is 1: 4,947 while the ratio in Bangkok is 1: 1,052 (op.cit. , p. 25). The Northeast likewise has the lowest numbers of medical devices such as CT scan, MRI, Ultrasound, Extracoporeal Shock Wave Lithotripsy,

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[79] It covers employees in private and state enterprises. Please see chapter two.

[80] It covers people who are not included in any schemes. Please see chapter two.

[81] Capitation is a payment arrangement for health care in which providers are paid a lump sum per patient regardless of how many services the patient receives. In fee-for-service reimbursement, on the other hand, service providers are paid for each service rendered to a patient.

Dialysis and ambulances; the ratio of one unit of medical devices per patients is highest in the Northeast compared to other regions. Only big hospitals have advance medical devices (ibid.). Thongchan Boonsaeng, Boonlai's mother from *Boonlai the Great Trader of Leung Nok Tha*, revealed how she had to travel throughout the country to seek treatment for her young son. Incomes from waged labour in other farms and from selling charcoal was not enough to pay the medical expenses for her son. Many times she had to borrow from other people in order to pay for both modern medicine and mystical treatment:

> Back then, when people told me that there was a good doctor there, or there they had powerful holy spirits, I always brought him. Even if it meant travelling across districts and provinces, I went... It cost me a lot and I had 20,000-30,000 baht of debt. We were poor and our house was made from banana leaves. But when his conditions were not improving, I was very sad and cried a lot (Pongtham Suthisakorn, 2008a, p. 33).

Access to information and communication technology such as computer and internet, which will lead to advantages in opportunities for income and other livelihood activities, varies across regions. In 2011, the percentage of the population aged over six who have access to computers, internet and mobiles were thirty-two, twenty-three and sixty-six respectively. In Bangkok, the numbers of computer and internet users were 1.7 times and two times, respectively, higher than in the northeastern regions (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013, p. 37). In terms of infrastructure, the quality of road in rural areas is low compared to urban areas. About four per cent of all villages in the country face the problem of seasonal inaccessibility by road, most of which are in the Northeast.

Gravel roads raise the cost of living, compared to concrete or asphalt roads; transporting agricultural products on gravel roads costs rural households more money and time. Exposure to income opportunities from tourism and access to emergency medical service are likewise much reduced. Moreover, dust from gravel roads cause respiratory health problems (op.cit. , p. 39).

We have discussed how structural factors such as national and international economic development and welfare approaches can influence both intrinsic endowment and the everyday terrain of action of individuals. Structural factors do not confine themselves to material structures but span to include ideational ones. The unequal development and insufficient social services, insurance and assistance are attributable to a set of beliefs on welfare intervention and self-responsibility.

5.3.2.3   Welfare ideologies and individualism

The basic tenets of neoliberalism are the primacy of the free market as the key organising principle of society, the elevation of the individual as a free autonomous agent and the winding back of the welfare state (see chapter two). The belief in the unfettered workings of the market and the role of the state to ensure that the market was given free reign from all social constraints means neoliberalism wages an attack on democracy, public goods and non-commodified values (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012, p. 196). Individuals are elevated to market agents pursuing advantage in competition with others. The emphasis on individual responsibility has

become endemic; states have tried to normalize this discourse and to promote the virtues of performing competitive individualism as a daily practice (ibid.).

These ideologies were transferred to Thailand at the beginning of its phase of economic liberalism. A report issued by a general survey mission of the World Bank in 1959 aimed to advice the Thai state on economic and social development (Ammar Siamwalla & Somchai Jitsuchon, 2007). Major suggestions included the withdrawal of state influences from the industrial sector and the promotion of investment from private entrepreneurs, the use of budget and foreign loans to provide basic infrastructure such as irrigation, electricity, and roads and to invest on education, healthcare, housing and social insurance. The report however failed to mention poverty. Investment in the social sector was only aimed at facilitating economic development and not to directly tackle poverty (ibid.).

The Thai state has been adopting conservative, neo-liberal charity-oriented approaches to the issue of poverty. Welfare is left largely to the responsibility of individuals, family and community. Welfare as rights in the United States was commented on by King Bhumipol as creating disincentives to work and thus disincentives to become 'useful' in the society.

> The...individual on welfare will be a useless person for the community and even for himself. Furthermore, he will be a ponderous burden on society (King Bhumibol Adulyadej 1992 cited in Hewison, 1997, p. 67).

If the welfare system is allowed to be developed in Thailand,

> We would be squandering our national budget by giving charity from the money earned by hard-working people…to those who make it a point not to work. Thailand is not like that. Everyone works, some more, some less, but everybody works ibid.).

Everyone has the responsibility to work. However, the nature of work and access to means of production can be vastly different among people. The paternalism or benevolent authority assumes that the minority with higher skills and better judgments are legitimate protectors and rulers of the majority of poor who need supervision (Taylor, 2007, p. 37). Thus, it is vital to maintain the status quo, the patriarchal family structure and the character and tempo of the society and to cooperate for the common good. King Vajiravudh theorized that humans who came together in society chose a king to overcome their mutual disagreements. From that point forward, the king was the brain. The other parts should not question the orders of the brain, but obey them (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 106).

> We are all in one boat. The duty of all is to help paddle. If we don't paddle and only sit back all the time, the dead weight in the boat will slow us down. Each person must decide whether to paddle and not argue with the helmsman (Vajiravudh, 1955 cited in Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 106).

The Thai ruling class perceives society as a big family in which a leader is the wise father figure who gives whatever he sees fit to his subjects (Nidhi Eoseewong, 2007). However, this handout at one's discretion is not a guarantee of basic rights. Moreover, the view of society as a big family echoes a distorted view that among the Thais there is no conflict and that Thailand is a nation with exceptional solidarity and unity (ibid.).

> The issue is the way of thinking that society is a family and that the children of the family do not deserve any rights except pity from the patron father who will give alms at his discretion. This way of thinking supports benevolent and populist policies; populist policies go in line with Thai people's thought that father should give what he sees appropriate (Nidhi Eoseewong, 2007).

The inherent unequal nature of Thai society and the old-age patronage system have adapted to modern trading. Business interests seek protection and support from those in power (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, pp. 167-171). McCargo (2002, p. 7), describes the corruption in politics appropriately. Politicians owed their loyalties to faction bosses and the business interests that had financed their very expensive election campaigns, rather than to the voters themselves. To serve as a minister, one had either to participate in corrupt practices, or at least collude in – or passively condone – the corruption practiced both by fellow politicians and by bureaucrats. Hence, the electoral system had become a massive exercise in benefit sharing, the slicing up of a cake. Most of the eating, however, was done by elites; the process was an essentially exclusionary one (ibid.). This forms part of the country's large scale political failures that led, at least, to economic crisis in the 1990s: a lack of political leadership, lack of effective representative structures, electoral and structural corruption, the decline of bureaucratic competence and colossal over-centralisation (op.cit. , p. 3). The patronage system and the concentration of power obstruct fair and just competition. According to the Thai disabled senator, Montien Boontan, Thailand has jumped right from feudalism to capitalism; thus there is little foundation to develop into a strong democratic society (Editorial Department, 2008a, p. 41).

Thai folk belief in the continuity of one's life and the baggage of karma may lend support to the acceptance of hierarchical arrangements. The natural law of conditionality or causality as a moral standard states that if one behaves immorally, one suffers a negative consequence, and if one behaves morally, one will enjoy appropriate pleasant consequences (King, 2002, p. 280). The law of conditionality is that the results of actions have their own natural justice; in Buddhist culture, these fruits of action have their genesis in the mind and then extend out to a person's character and lifestyle – be it in this life or the next (Payutto cited in King, 2002, p. 280). This can be interpreted as suggesting that current conditions are dependent upon other things that may not be present to the eyes. It is not very surprising if the Thai accept and make decisions to act in harmony and cooperation with the nature of the cosmos or as things are given, as the law of nature intends. These are those kinds of behaviour that are 'harmonious, cooperative and fit in with the nature of reality… non-egocentric, and mutually beneficial' (King, 2002, p. 281) without selfish desire or greed and the subsequent envy, paranoia, anxiety, fear, feelings of vengeance, laziness, all fit into the behaviour of flowing with nature (ibid.). This can be argued as behaviour that conforms to the external conditions which are regarded as 'given' and appropriate to one's baggage of karma from the unrecognizable past.

This is supported by an emphasis in Buddhist culture to locate the origin of a problem within man and his unwholesome action based on self-centred motives or tendencies: selfish desire, egoistical lust and clinging to view, faith or ideology (Phra

Rajavaramuni (Prayudh Payutto), 1987, p. 16). According to this view, man should aim

to achieve happiness from within. Happiness is a state that he should not hope to

realise sometime in the future, but it is here and now, without help from external

material conditions.

> In sum, the failure of man to secure peace and happiness lies in
> that, being unhappy and not developing himself to be happy, man
> struggles in vain to realise peace and happiness… He seeks to make
> himself happy with pleasure from outside and in this way covers up
> or plasters over his unhappiness with extraneous pleasures. (Phra
> Rajavaramuni (Prayudh Payutto), 1987, p. 19)

This attitude is echoed in the views of disabled people who choose to focus

on gaining self-knowledge and peace within themselves. A disabled activist-

philanthropist, Thongthien Hongladarom, reemphasises to her readers how life is too

short not to commit good deeds to oneself and others, 'to give to others in order to

get rid of one's selfhood', 'to be grateful and not feeling vengeance' (Thongthien

Hongladarom, 2002, pp. 12-13) and to keep a watchful eye on one's physical,

intellectual, and verbal acts as they all have consequences later on.

> There is no use in demanding and getting disappointed with
> things and people around you. It only takes your mind, to face
> the conditions, to persevere with them with delight, and not to
> commit any more unwholesome deeds (Thongthien
> Hongladarom, 2002, p. 13).

Locating problems and solutions at the individual level can likewise be found

in Thongthien's reflection on the issue that many elderly people keep changing their

place to live and are never truly satisfied with either living with their children or in a

care home. After proposing that the government provide more care home facilities

for the elderly and people with disabilities, she concludes with a suggestion for individuals to pay attention to the conditions within oneself, not those outside.

> Humans are always dissatisfied and often never realise that suffering does not lie at the physical level. Suffering is indeed within your mind. A mangy dog sleeps in front of the house, it feels itchy. It moves to sleep by the road, it still complains that this is not comfortable enough. Instead of keeping changing a place to sleep, it should stop and think that the itchiness does not come from a place where it sleeps but from its own disease, it is a restless mind that keeps blaming all things but never stops to look at itself (Thongthien Hongladarom, 2002, p. 44).

In the Thai cultural context, it is common to attribute disability and the hardship associated with it to karma, a fairly individualistic approach to disability. A study of families of the mentally impaired suggests that family members and people with disabilities think their hard living conditions, a combination of economic hardship, lack of attention from government, lack of education and rehabilitation for the mentally impaired, are consequences of karma or God's will (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 55). In *A Countdown to Death: Lives of Kan and Kee*, Kan and his family pin their hope on making merits and being committed to wholesome behaviours for a better life after this one; wrong deeds in the past life are believed by them to account for his illness from metabolic syndrome. The mother says that Kan became more accepting and calm about his illness and pain after having attended a talk by a monk who taught him that '[w]e cannot choose our physical body but we can all choose to be good'. This is followed by an interview sequence in which Kan locates the source of his suffering in his past life, saying, 'I used to wonder why me, why this illness. Now I know it has to do with my past

karma. I used to harm other lives in the past life.' The commentary stresses the point again by saying, 'Every minute on the bed for Kan is not useless. He spends it on reflecting on and accepting life'. A few scenes later, the mother reveals that Kan wants to go to the temple every Buddhist day to make merits.

Apart from the conservative social hierarchy or the caste-like distinction, values of self-help and responsibility receive support from neoliberal meritocracy and the popular culture that comes with it. In Thailand, starting from the early nineteenth century, the growth of the market economy, the emergence of new social groups such as Chinese nobles and entrepreneurs who were once poor immigrants, and the defiance of absolutism has resulted in new ideas and mentalities. Consequently a new genre of media and literature has emerged (see more in Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, pp. 36, 107-111). In the new popular literature, heroes were not so constricted by high birth and fate, but had the ability to make their own lives and new heroes included ordinary people, not just princes and gods. Moreover, money was made to be widely known as a means of mobility; routes to glory were no longer exclusive to those of high birth, rather talent formed the basis of reward (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, pp. 36, 108). In addition, the political movement to defy the 'duty of passive acceptance' insisted upon by the ruler during the nationalism movement saw Thai audiences attracted to recurrent themes of the ability of people to make their lives and to contribute to the nation's progress which had long been claimed to be made possible by kings alone. A novel by Kulap Saipradit '*Luk phu chai*' or '*A real man*' (1928) was a story of a carpenter's son who rose through his own talent to

become a leading judge (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 108). *'Songkram Chiwit'* or *'The war of life'* (1932) contained a tirade against inequalities of wealth and privilege (ibid.). Moreover, the same author popularized a term, *manutsayatham*, as humanitarianism or a belief in people. It summed up the sentiments of the new commoner writers and readers (ibid.).

Arguably there are two themes that can be identified from the above new movement in literature in Thailand in the early nineteenth century: 1) the ability and possibility of individuals to make their own lives; and 2) criticism about the inequalities, absolute power, corruption and unfairness in society. Nevertheless, the two themes have been transformed since the 1980s. With the coming of mass society and printing, the second theme –social realism – experienced a bleaker atmosphere and both themes gave way to melodramas, light-heartedness and easy entertainment (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 220). There is a similarity here with Bauman's reflection about media in late modern societies. Bauman argues that the media as public space is increasingly empty of public issues and instead becomes a site of private worries, confessions and experience (Bauman, 2000) (see chapter four). The rapid growth of middlebrow readership influenced the expansion of the melodramas by writers such as Tomayanti and Krisna Asokesin. These are family dramas and historical romances that acted as a mirror for the broadening urban middle class to form an identity (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 220). Moreover, a popular genre of magazine emerged in the form of 'real life' magazines. They included sensationalist titles like *'Chiwit tong su'* (*'Life's struggle'*), which featured tales of

crime, love, mystery and personal tragedy, and '*Khu sang khu som'* (*'Perfect couples'*), which featured tales of success, happiness, and the overcoming of hardship. Drama serials likewise grew, adapting popular melodramatic novels and serving as a mirror for the formation of the new middle class. Favourite themes included the individual achieving success against adversity, the family achieving new prosperity without losing its moral compass, and the struggles against old habits of nepotism, violence and corruption (ibid.). It is noteworthy here that *Kon Kon Kon* films fit perfectly in this new melodrama genre. Another media genre is the genre of self-help or how-to manuals. Since the 1980s there has been an increase in manuals on many subjects especially business success, health, and social conduct, providing a new urban society with a guidance that neither formal education nor parents could, for example Chinese texts such as *The Art of War*, Paobunjin, Sam Kok (Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 221). The consumption of self-help motivational books which contain empowering rhetoric of self-change is associated with the quest narrative becoming a culturally available motif (Berger, 2008, pp. 328, 314). Quest narrative tells a story about a person's rise to the occasion to realise an imagined possibility that s/he can turn fate and contingency into confidence (ibid.). The narrative can shape the way individuals view their lives and can become a social rule about a specific manner one is supposed to perceive illness and disability. It can become a requirement for people with disabilities and the frail to encounter their epiphany in a rather specific manner; i.e., as a possible and much expected opportunity for growth (ibid.). This however can act as a punishment or condemnation for those who fail to face illness and disability as such (Bury, 2001).

It can be argued that the quest narrative in popular culture, together with values placed on self-help and self-responsibility, have contributed to the state's slack attention to poverty and welfare issues. The quest narrative requires the individual exercise of agency to 'say no' to material constraints, such as those resulting from a person's impaired body and from other economic and social structures. One should see the positive side of life. For people with disabilities this can be supportive family and community. We now turn to a sphere that provides the most significant resource for people with disabilities to survive: family, friends and community.

There is a strong informal network of care from family and community in Thai culture. Although the primary care of the family and community was affected since the intense expansion of industrialization in the 1960s, the system has been reactivated due to the impacts of the economic crash in 1997 (Decha Sungkawan, 2002). While services from the public sector alone are less likely to be sufficient as discussed above, the family and culture-based welfare system have potentials to add to individuals' wellbeing. Moreover, community-based initiatives and the informal sector can be more flexible and responsive to local subtleties, possessing the level of knowledge and cultural sensitivity that is difficult for the central government to achieve, and help mitigate the risk of the failed state or economic crisis, or when the level of benefits are cut which can send shocks to households (Niramol Nirathorn, 2007). In the films we get a glimpse of community welfare [82] manifest in strong

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[82] Community welfare refers to an organized effort in response to needs and urgencies of the community in improved standard of living, debt relief, income opportunities and other security issues,

reciprocities among community members and among people of a same occupation such as traders in the market. Mankong exchanges his vegetables for other kinds of food from other vendors so that they all have different items to bring back home. Boonlai usually hangs out at a bus depot and often buys snacks to give to taxi motorcyclists and people working around the depot or helps them out with little tasks; this is in exchange for the help he receives on various occasions. Regarding family care, in all ten films, we can see strong commitment from the family in taking care of people with disabilities. Nong Song's mother says, 'I take care of Nong Song every day, as a task that I stop questioning for a long time now'. By discussing the characteristically strong family/community-based welfare provision, this chapter aims to highlight the cultural structural conditions regarding welfare provision in Thailand: the strong informal care networks amid weak government commitments. The weak state welfare drives disabled subjects in the films to adopt survival strategies relying on family, kin and community. The dependence on the family and the community is explicit in the perspective argument[83] in the ten films. Villagers were interviewed in the film and expressed why they kept aside old papers and boxes to sell exclusively to Makud. They all said this is because of the sympathy they have towards people with disability who try to make an honest living. For them, disability and poverty is almost

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with the goal of enabling members to have secured sources of income, access to productive assets and other securities in life such as healthcare, education, contingencies such as death, marriage, impairment, natural disaster and old age (Narong Petchprasert cited Niramol Nirathorn, 2007). Example of community-based welfare schemes are community's saving groups, occupational-based groups, village funeral funds.

[83] 'Perspective argument' is the way in which a documentary text offers a particular point of view tacitly through its choice and organization of evidence. However, the role of family and community is mostly muted in the 'argument commentary'. See chapter three.

a double karma. If the Thai government is turning blind eyes towards poverty and welfare in people with disabilities, at least among the poor themselves they see this double disadvantage and try to help as much as they can out of their kind spirit.

Villager 1: I try to keep some (boxes and bottles) for her. I also sell stuff to other recycle businesses but I will always keep some for her. I sympathise with her. She was born disabled and is struggling.

Villager 2: I help her out of my natural sympathy; I would feel the same to all Isan[84] fellows. How can I say? I look at her and I feel sympathy. Life is hard already for us all, even with all two hands and feet. For her, it would be even harder.

Villager 3: Earning from morning to evening everyday gives hardly enough for us. So I thought about them and that if they were just left to get on with whatever there was left for them, would they get anything at all at the end of the day? I sympathise with them.

Another positive side of life despite weak state welfare is the transmission of positive aspiration from parents which can contribute to the sense of self-esteem and resilience in the children (Shepherd, 2007). Values of self-help, acceptance, adaptability, patience and morality have been inculcated in the disabled subjects of the films since childhood. Boonlai's mother recalls what she told her young son about running a business:

> He should not expect to make a big profit. He should instead sell cheap goods, about two times cheaper than others, and aim to make a large volume of sale instead. Customers like to buy cheap stuff. Let's say, it is about gaining a little but longer (Pongtham Suthisakorn, 2008a, p. 38).

Joy relates her mother's encouragement as:

> My mother always taught me to be positive, to never think of my body as a disadvantage, and to never think that I am worthless (Pongsathorn Pribwai & Kridsakorn Wongkorawut, 2011, p. 33).

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[84] Isan refers to the northeastern part of Thailand. It can be used to identify the people from that region as well.

Intimation that the only insurance and safety net one should aspire to is a self-acquired one can be widely found in the ten films. For example, Ake remembers what his parents told him:

> My parents would always say they could not stay with me forever.
> This means I have to learn how to rely on myself (Pongtham Suthisakorn, 2008b, p. 347).

We have been looking at position-practice relations of the poor that are emergent from being located amid material and ideational forces of different levels, be these family, community, government and intergovernmental levels. We can now turn to the specific position-practice relations of the disabled poor.

5.3.2.4 Disability experience in Thailand: evidence of impairment on top of poverty

The above demonstrates intrinsic causal powers or potentials of a deprived individual and their households which are constituted by composition of assets – land, capital, human capital, access to social networks and government services. The state is thus inevitably involved in shaping the assets and vulnerability of poor households. The case for disabled poor such as Som-O and other subjects of the films can be harsher in many respects. This is because the above factors interact with physical limitations of the body. This means it is usually more difficult for people with disabilities to participate in and benefit from health, education and income

promotion services. The structural positions and relations of the disabled poor and their families in terms of education, health and income security will be discussed here.

The level of education among people with disabilities in Thailand remains low especially in relation to higher level education which would allow an escape from labour-intensive jobs with low payment and high health hazards, as Som-O faced. According to the National Statistics Office, in Thailand in 2007 there were 1,871,860 people with disability (2.9 percent of the total population) (Editorial Department, 2010b, p. 53). Among those aged five to thirty years (230,000 in total), 18.3 per cent had received some education, while 81.7 per cent had no education. Among those with education, 59.5 per cent have attended primary education (grade one to six), 6.4 per cent secondary education (grade seven to twelve), while only one per cent had attained a university degree (ibid.) A study in 2003 (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003) revealed that the number of disabled people finishing grade twelve was two-times lower than the non-disabled, with the proportion increased to four times lower at the university level. These percentages show the lower educational opportunity available to people with disabilities at a higher level of education. This may be a result of the limited number of schools for people with disabilities that were only situated in regional cities. In the film *Three Small Friends with Big Hearts*, Yale's parents were afraid to send him to his first school for students with special needs in another province. They showed concern for Yale's wellbeing, particularly that the attitudes and physical conditions of the outside world could be

dangerous to a disabled child. The cost of education is another issue that acts as a constraint to people with disabilities and their families. When Joy told her mother that she has passed an exam and received a place in a university, her mother recounted the difficulty as:

> I told this to our relatives. They all asked me where I would get the money to send Joy to university. It would take many hundred thousand baht. No one in the family agreed, they discouraged me to do this. Finally my husband and I made a decision that we would support her as long as possible. She would stay in university as long as we could finance her (Pongsathorn Pribwai & Kridsakorn Wongkorawut, 2011, p. 40).

With limited formal education and limited skills people with disabilities often get low-paid jobs or have no job at all. In 2003, more than half (sixty-eight per cent) of people with disabilities aged over fifteen were unemployed, with 51.8 per cent being physically unable to work, while 10.2 per cent wanting to work but could not find work. Those who work earn half an income of the non-disabled (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 45). With income poverty, people with disabilities find it difficult to organize into a political group. This emphasises the importance of larger cash transfer, to exceed the current monthly benefit of five-hundred baht, which could help release people with disabilities to participate more in politics. Kittipong Suthi, Director of the Research and Development Institute for the Blind, commented that organizations of people with disabilities need to tackle income and earning first, or in parallel with the rights movement, 'the main point is when our stomach is full, then we are more able to spend time to talk about rights' (Editorial Department, 2008b, p. 13).

In terms of health, parents of children with autism note the late diagnosis, the lack of support at the earlier stage and the lack of doctors. In Khonkaen, where the north-eastern regional hospital is located, there were only two doctors providing service to more than four-hundred parents with mental disability in 2002 (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 57). Moreover, emergency services that could save life and prevent severe injuries and disability are not well developed in Thailand, as well as the rehabilitation services for people with disabilities and their families (op.cit 52-55).

It is important to note here the ever important role of family care for people with disabilities, especially while state welfare fails them. Parents, very likely the mother, provide a primary source of support for disabled, in terms of healthcare, education and moral support. If the family is struggling, the level of support they can give to people with disabilities will be inevitably affected and the whole family will fall further into multi-dimensional deprivation: income poverty, deprivation of rights and dignity; and powerlessness (Narong Petchprasert, 2003, p. 249). A study of parents of children with autism suggests the need for more support for the family as a carer. Parents need more flexible working time and mental support as well. Moreover, there should be more facilities for people with disabilities to develop their potentials.

> The difficulty is to take care of a child with autism around the
> clock, from sleeping, eating, getting dressed. When an autistic child
> is upset, she will hurt herself, such as banging her head on the
> floor, or hit herself. Thus parents have to take a close care and
> have to be absent from work very often, which makes the boss and

colleagues unhappy. Thus parents eventually have to resign and to be a full-time carer. While income decreases, care expenses do not and the family does not get any support from the government. They have to pay for the hospital, for speech therapy and other expenses such as transportation to hospital... To handle these difficulties, parents of people with disabilities are powerless, having no negotiating power because they do not have access to information and they have poor education. Some never demand any rights because they think the government does not pay attention to disabled people anyway. Some do feel empowered when joining a group with other parents with autistic children. But the group is small and group members engage in many tasks for their own families and so they cannot devote time to the group. Just to earn income and to take care of one's own family hardly leaves any time left to do something else for the group (Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, p. 58).

As the film does not highlight the structural conditions faced by Som-O, we can get a glimpse of constraints and enablements faced by some of the blind people working in Bangkok from a study by Jeeraporn Paewking and Sopa Ohn-o-pat (cited in Khattiya Kannasut & Chaturong Bunyarattanasunthorn, 2003, pp. 46-48). The study illustrates the impact of structures of economic, social, and political conditions on the formation and the activation of the causal powers of the poor and blind. All eight informants are blind, live in Bangkok and come from poor rural peasant families. They become blind due to a childhood illness that was not properly cured. None have formal education because there was no school for the blind in their areas. They found mainstream schools unsuitable as they were afraid of being bullied. As migrants living in Bangkok, each of them rents a small room to live with their family. The room usually has poor conditions of light, ventilation and hygiene. They work as street singers and/or lottery sellers. Some of the money is sent back to parents in the village, and some is spent on consumer goods such as a television set and a DVD

player which are bought on loan. A typical day for those working as a street singer starts at five in the morning and the first half of the job ends at ten. Then they rest before starting again during the further peak hours of four pm to three am the next day. Sometimes they form into a band but this rarely happens as it obstructs the footpath and they risk being arrested by municipal police, and their musical instruments confiscated. For those selling lotteries, they need enough cash to buy tickets from the Government Lottery Office. Many experience so limited a quota from the office that they need to seek to buy from middlemen and risk getting fake tickets. Moreover, a stall rent for lottery selling is usually expensive for most of the blind and thus they have to peddle. There is a daily risk of accidents as there is no safety facility such as pedestrian crossings and public buses are not well equipped to accommodate people with disabilities. The informants mention barriers to accessing interest-free loans from government agencies due to the requirement of a guarantor. They do not usually know anyone who could act as their guarantor because they have migrated to Bangkok and the level of social connections and informal support is limited. Thus they rely on loan sharks. However, as a member of an association for the blind, they receive an annual benefit of three-thousand baht and two-thousand baht per year as educational support for their children, as well as a quota for buying lottery tickets from the Government Lottery Office. The study concludes with a set of general obstacles faced by the blind. First, there is a very limited choice of jobs available and most of these are labour-intensive, temporary and so insecure that if the blind do not work for a day, they do not have money to buy food. Second, they fear being put into emergency houses or institutions for people with disabilities. They always have to

avoid being arrested by municipal police for using public space and footpaths without permission. The blind express a strong sense of inferiority in not being supported by the government at all in order to make an honest living despite being disabled and having low education.

The potential powers of a disabled poor person are configured by interaction among structural properties of economic, social and cultural systems and with the nature of bodily impairment. This interaction means that an individual has various institutionalized identities, obligations, prerogatives, relations with others, and practices. An individual is situated within a multitude of rules and resources, a selection of raw materials for their agency to exploit, no matter how limited the choices are. Many disabled in the films face constraints due to past generations' poverty, discriminatory and inefficient government administration, resulting in deprived health, education, economic infrastructures and protection of rights and properties in the rural areas. Having said this, the disabled poor exploit systems of interpersonal help within family and community. Moreover, although the social economic and cultural structures constrain the disabled poor in participating in occupations that would enable upward mobility, there are usually small-scale family agricultural businesses or artisan enterprises in which the disabled poor can participate (cf. Roulstone, 2012, p. 219).

5.3.3 Position-practice relations 2: Som-O's reflexive enactment of patterns and regularities

After outlining the intrinsic causal powers of a disabled poor person, this section addresses the enactment of those causal powers and regularities in a specific situation, using the case of Som-O. Positional identities, structured practices and relations that he is embedded in result in his intrinsic causal powers, or sets of liabilities and susceptibilities. These are numerous but so far we have covered those configured by the comingling of social structures of uneven growth, the structure and politics of limited state welfare and undemocratic belief systems. The interweaving of these networks provide relevant agents with the practical awareness of practices, relations and spatio-temporal settings (Cohen, 1989, pp. 200-201), norms, negative and positive sanctions they require in order to participate in social life. At the same time, these networks position themselves as objective physical aspects of settings, as material and structural constraints. These are manifested in low level and usability/compatibility of assets such as cash, land, livestock, tools and skills, access to natural livelihood resources, and political participation. Enablements manifest themselves as sets of positive aspirations contributing towards resilience and systems of interpersonal reciprocities and care within the household, among friends, villagers and people of a similar occupation to compliment large scale deficiencies. With an exercise of agency, the style and pace of each relevant agent, plus contingencies in each specific social encounter in an open system, the reproduction of the above regularities unfolds in a less than definite manner.

The intrinsic, regularized causal powers or position-practice relations of Som-O interact with the context of a specific intercourse to produce an unfolding

outcome. The intrinsic powers of Som-O are constituted by, among many others, his impairment – an almost total blindness but strong motor skills – and by intergenerational poverty. These intrinsic position-practice relations include having an impaired body, limited skills and education, limited capital and loans for investment, and access to a network of reciprocities with other poor in the village. These intrinsic position-practice relations interact with the urgency of the context: household income poverty, lack of welfare services, and having a vulnerable dependent – his blind grandmother while he is the only breadwinner. The result of the interaction between intrinsic factors and extrinsic context is a struggle to survive by working in a dangerous job such as driving. This action, although portrayed in *Kon Kon Kon* human interest stories as self-reliant and resourceful heroic conduct, should be seen by critical audiences as a result of Som-O being 'positioned' to do so, as a result of various factors. Not being able to read and write, Som-O is capable of earning only as wage labourer. However, when we look at Makud, the difference in their impairment and upbringing makes, firstly, the composition of Makud's intrinsic liabilities different from Som-O's. Furthermore, this makes her respond to the context of poverty differently from Som-O. She has good eyesight; her father lovingly taught her to value herself and to have self-confidence, conducive to the development of positive aspiration and social skills. She learned at home, on her own, how to read and calculate. She has contacts with people and is capable of relying on social capital to find income opportunities. She has developed managing and planning skills. However, she does not have a motor ability and without help can only work from home. Having highlighted all the differences, similar to Som-O, Makud is positioned

by the poverty in her family to earn income to secure a future for herself and her mother, and thus she will take all the trouble to earn an income. Hence, indeterminate as it should be, we see how the outcome of disability experience is hugely impacted by structural issues such as the quality of welfare and social justice intervention.

The way Som-O enacts the regularized, intrinsic causal powers within the contingent context of poverty, lack of welfare and social exclusion, yet flourishing culture of local reciprocities can be analysed as follows. In such context, his impairment and intrinsic factors and those of Makud and Pornchai complement each other and result in a unique outcome. Pornchai assists Makud by transporting her to places. He can afford, due to his family situation, to move and stay with Makud to help her. His good eyesight is helpful to Som-O when they sort and weigh recycled items together. Som-O has unimpaired body strength to complement his loss of vision; he can fully control a vehicle and tow a trolley and can lift heavy objects while Pornchai is unable to do so. Makud, who cannot move, has skills that the other two lack, which are literacy, numeracy planning and management skills. When a new income opportunity emerges for Som-O, that is, when a massage training course is given in town, Som-O exploits his identity and prerogative as a blind person to gain access to a massage training course organized in the province by the Thailand Association of the Blind and the local office of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Thus, his identity as a blind entitles him, not always merely constraining. This is comparable to what Whittington (1992, pp. 705-706) observes in

the agency of managers who utilize resources from other systems. His nature of impairment allows him to engage in another occupation. He finally left the team. His sympathy and mutual help with his disabled peers has to be negotiated when new opportunity arises and when Makud finally says that the business would be able to run even without him. Som-O's causal powers and motives of self-reliance are kept functioning throughout this social intercourse, while his potential to help out others to strengthen social capital stops being activated in this new context.

5.4   Conclusion

The concept of position-practice relations is used in this chapter to provide an explanation for a social phenomenon in a non-reductionist way. The concept incorporates the interaction between different causal forces/entities. In this chapter, the event to be explained is the act of self-reliance of Som-O from the film *Makud: A Mighty Heart in an Undersized Body*. The chapter discusses how his decision, speech and actions centring on self-reliance and self-responsibility are constituted by a number of forces/entities that are configured in distant spaces and times. These forces include the poverty and vulnerability in his family in rural Thailand. His poverty is co-configured by the nature of the country's uneven growth since the 1960s; the slack attention to social and human development by the Thai state; neoliberal ideologies spread at a global level; unfair international trade agreements; Thailand's over-hierarchical, over-individualistic social arrangements, to name just a few. All these interact with his impairment. The result is his intrinsic endowments or intrinsic causal powers which are formulated as concepts, or as potentials, ready to be tested

in real life social intercourse. These intrinsic endowments or potentials include the low level and quality of household and personal assets (land, cash, material, human capitals of health and education, labour power, land, skills, public services, access to lucrative labour market); and just as to compensate, an access to interpersonal reciprocities within the community.

We then look at a real social interaction: Som-O quits his role in the business with his disabled friends. This is to show that some of Som-O's intrinsic causal powers are activated, while others are left dormant. This activation (or not) and the outcome of causal powers is what we cannot predict, unlike the generalisation we made in the above paragraph. The individual enactment of regularities is imbued with contingent relations with a multitude of other agents and entities, all of which have their own intrinsic causal powers.

There are two arguments in this chapter. First, in order to improve the conditions of the poor disabled, we need to know more than just what happens at the level of individual enactment – the level of surface event captured by the camera. The ability to identify relevant causal forces and how they are formed out of institutionalized regularities, or the realms of the real and the actual in critical realism respectively, is very important in understanding an experience as disability without reducing the explanation to only what are available for the perceptions at the surface event, or the realm of 'the empirical'. In order to transcend severe moral judgment on individuals, we can see an event as constituted by the interaction of various

entities. Second, having said this, the level of real enactment at a particular moment is crucial as well. This is because it highlights the role of agents in perceiving, reflecting, reproducing or transforming institutionalised context and conduct. This is to assign significance to humans, and not only to systems, in contributing to a social practice. This side of the story is however preferred by the *Kon Kon Kon* narrative. The narrative should therefore be complemented by the understanding that structures do place a weight on people's life. This knowledge of structural impact will help enhance the audience's critical ability.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis analyses ten films from the television documentary series *Kon Kon Kon* which were produced and broadcasted in Thailand between 2007 and 2011. It is found that the films present disabled individuals as self-motivated, resilient, resourceful and capable of overcoming harsh living conditions due to impairment and poverty. The thesis then shows how social theories can be used to supplement the films by highlighting the social dimensions which are indistinct in the films in order to help enhance audience critical ability. Chapter two provides a background for the understanding of the subsequent chapters. It covers critical realism and strong structuration theory as ways in which the complexity of social phenomena can be approached and presented. The frameworks match with non-reductionist approaches to studying disability; all recognise social phenomena, including disability, as outcomes of interplay between factors at different levels, avoid assigning priority on either individual or structural factors. The chapter also focuses on Durkheim's concept of moral individualism which links individuals and community. The concept specifies how individuals are intrinsically shaped by collective rules and are made aware of common goods. Having said that it allows equal space for individuals to reflect, criticise and improve those social conventions. The concept thus can serve as a guideline for active citizens and for overcoming the dualism of individualism and collectivism. The chapter then explores certain aspects of Thailand's conservative and neoliberal welfare ideologies. The ideologies underpin the country's limited state welfare provision and the reliance of the people on themselves, their families and community. This is a characteristic of welfare pluralism in Thailand in which several

pillars are promoted to support the whole system of well-being, instead of the state being a major provider of welfare. The section on the media representation of people with disabilities demonstrates the reduction of reality of real experience living with disability and the imposition of disability stereotypes, as villains or as compensated and overcoming heroes, ultimately as a way to sustain the concept of normalcy formulated by able-bodied people. Chapter three opens the analysis by exploring the extent and characteristic of individualistic thinking in ten *Kon Kon Kon* documentary films about disabled people and finds that themes locating responsibility and autonomy on individuals are in abundance. The themes include: resilience, self-reliance, self-responsibility, fortitude and autonomy to choose to make a decent living and overcome poverty. The films' linear narratives and fairy-tale versions of reality empower audiences, encouraging them to gain control and not to be subsumed by external circumstances. However, it achieves this at the price of depriving its subjects of a life portrait constituted by collective components. These components actually weave and shape lives and obstacles and opportunities that people living with disabilities really face.

Chapter four locates an overly individualistic point of view extracted from the previous chapter in the context of late modern societies, a world-wide phenomenon where there is a heightened form of individualism. This is the expectation that individuals take responsibility of life choices and identities in a period when former meta narratives have been dissolved and when 'man' and her/his autonomy has taken the central stage. However, this trend has found itself in conflict

with the reality of social life. Life is and will continue to be circumscribed to a great extent by social structures. Thus, the autonomy presented by media texts as not situated in the enablements and constraints of society is rather illusory. Consequently, by featuring only sensational stories about individual struggles or triumphs of self-assertion, we can recognise that the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy widens in media.

Chapter five supplements the films' voluntaristic account of disability and poverty. The films imply that actions to overcome hardships are born out of the free will of individuals and are thus unconditioned and unconstrained by any other influences. The chapter adds to such empowering human interest stories the institutionalized positions (and their attached relations and obligations) that an individual as a social being is actually endowed with. These social patterns or regularities shape so much of what a social being aspires to, decides and acts on, so much that her/his actions should not be seen as stemming entirely from 'a pure goodness of the heart'. These positions of the disabled poor, and the attached relations and obligations, as shown in the chapter are: low level and quality of household and personal assets (land, cash, material, human capitals of health and education, labour power, skills, public welfare services, access to lucrative labour market); and, to compensate, an access to interpersonal reciprocities within family and community. Social structures – in the forms of neo-liberal ideologies, national economic and social development policies, welfare system, and cultural beliefs in karma – supply agents with resources and conditions to act, as latent enablements or

constraints. Agency then filters or sifts through these resources and conditions in order to compose individual responses to a particular encounter or situation. This interaction between structure and agency is a major contribution from position-practice relations, structuration and critical realism to a better understanding of social life. Strong structuration, in particular, offers an ontological explanation of the four parts of action: external structures, internal structures, agency/ agent's practices and outcomes. Strong structuration by Stones and the concept of position-practice relations by Cohen are developed from the early work of Giddens. The concepts expanded from Gidden's early work on structuration which focuses almost exclusively on general ontology of structure and agency and little on the application to concrete, situated entities in the world. Hence the concepts explicate in more details both the ontological distinctiveness and thus distinct causal powers of each part of the action. This works to answer criticisms that Giddens's structuration conflates structure and agency together (Archer, 1995) while maintaining the core of structuration about the interplay between structure and agency. The two concepts guide us away from over-individualistic, victim blaming or hero praising mentalities and see the two parts of social life: social positions and individual incumbents, who can add a few lines of their own to those positions. Each individual disabled incumbent adds her/his unique nature of physical impairments, idiosyncrasies and other genetic makeup to the performance of social roles/positions. This forms part of the tenet of the interactional model of disability, a step away from both social and medical models. It sees experience of disability as an interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Thus the experience is varied and context specific and so is the intervention. These

concepts can help reintroduce social structures into agency-empowering human interest stories.

One of the main points is that the general public should understand more the interplay between structure and agency. This will enhance a more sophisticated, and beyond emotional, response to fellow human being's suffering and collective issues. The origin of agency and its functions is far beyond the focus of the thesis. However, the thesis argues that some major parts of the social agency of an individual - can be identified as her/his ability to maintain a critical distance from the demand of the social regularities/patterns and her/his ability to acknowledge and choose among different sets of social resources to best suit a situation at hand - is dependent upon the social conditions surrounding that individual. First, agency is tied to the *habitus* that an individual is imbued with. Second, the ability to change may depend on the position and resources of that individual. It likewise depends on the malleability of the structure or at least the possibility of it to be understood. Hence, the ability of an agent to be creative or to have strategic forbearance can be explained in relation to society, and not merely as an up-rooted phenomenon and out of free will. Disabled subjects of the films can afford to live meaningfully, despite unforgiving structural regularities of poverty and inequality in Thailand, due mainly to their positions within family and community. These are, for example, transfer of positive attitudes and survival strategies and skills. The positions and relations a disabled individual has with her/his family and community provide constructive and positive compensatory inputs for her/his agency. *Kon Kon Kon* films are too ready to

downplay this part of a disabled subject due to their focus on worshipping lone heroes.

The understanding of intricate ways structure and agency are connected is crucial in trying to understand disability. The thesis is critical of the practice of reducing explanations of social events as causing purely by one of the exclusive camps: individuals or structures. The thesis offers an application of the theoretical frameworks from strong structuration theory and position-practice relations. They clearly distinguish structure and agency and then identify interplay between these two autonomous strata in accounting for social events. In terms of an experience of living with disability, it is thus a journey beyond both the medicalised, individualistic model and the social constructionist model of disability, towards a more comprehensive approach. The frameworks allow us to acknowledge effects that structures have on agency, be this structures manifesting as bodily or mental limitations, the legal, social, political, economic and cultural enablements and constraints. The agency, the internal process within the agent, is made up of her/his knowledgeability of this context s/he is facing, an ability to be reflexive and adjust action according to such knowledge, and taking into account her/his own desires. Understanding the characteristics of each of the two components and how they interact helps to see living with disability as an ongoing communication between structure and agency. For one thing, inspirational disabled people do not take place in a vacuum. Rather the act is constituted by the structural properties such as cultural perceptions and expectations of people with disabilities, which are tied to ideologies

of normalcy and self-help and the structure of welfare and capitalism. These structures, to name just a few, affect worldview, economic, political and social status of disabled individuals and of people surrounding them. The thesis believes that it is more worthwhile to appreciate the hard work of poor disadvantaged people in greater depth, through seeing how the society has conditioned such hard work and how things can be otherwise. In Thailand, the voluntarist view about disabilities has meant that social rights of people with disabilities have been slow to take root. The cultural legacy means poverty and disabilities are interpreted as individual's own making and karma and nothing much can be done by others in the society to redress it. This predominantly individualistic perspective is shown to be the central thesis of the studied films. It is time to put the issue of poverty and disabilities in a more comprehensive perspective and theoretical frameworks applied in this thesis show potentials.

Additionally, the non-reductionist approach means that impairment and physical differences should no more be overlooked. Human interest stories trivialize impairment in order to inspire the equal greatness across humanity, deeming it mere difference which we can all overlook and overcome as part of the belief in equal strength of human beings. It is important to understand that impairment is not mere 'difference', compared to sexual orientation and ethnicity (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 84). Rather impairment is more real and more problematic as it is difficulty, limitation and pain and having impairment is not like being gay or coming from a different culture. Each individual has distinct conditions and these cannot be overlooked just in order

to push forward an umbrella requirement that 'all can overcome all obstacles in all the same way'. Here there is a strong need to talk about medical condition and to understand how to incorporate this into a meaningful harmonious social life. It is worth pondering if we should impose one same rule for all people regardless of physical and mental limitations. Medical explanation, although should never act as restrictions of what one can become, can serve as a basis to understand the kind of challenges an individual has to face in order to achieve certain goals. Understanding characteristics of symptoms, traits, tendencies helps to plan an appropriate path for each individual, making their life challenges more approachable and realistic. This can never mean that impairment is all defining and the end of the world. Shakespeare offers a succinct description that disability is a decrement in health, but not in moral value and disabled people are not less in terms of moral worth, political equality or human rights and the suffering and happiness of disabled people matter just as much as that of non-disabled people (ibid.).

One important point is about the objective of the series *Kon Kon Kon* to promote tolerance and understanding about disability. The programme, literary meaning 'finding out about humanity', prides itself on addressing such a grand and compelling theme as universal human value. However, the episodes on people with disabilities may fail to address humanity at two levels, firstly at the level of pre-social humans and secondly at the level of social beings. At the first level, they ignore the body which serves as a reference point in 'basic human needs' and which thus allows us to judge whether social conditions are dehumanizing or not (Archer, 1995, p. 287).

Moreover, by elevating some humans (those who are responsible and hard-working) and negating some (those who are deemed 'lazy'), *Kon Kon Kon* films about people with disability modify or withhold the title of human being, making it dependent upon the acquisition of social skills and status. It is argued in the thesis that the concept of human being, according to Durkheim's concept of the religion of humanity, should be viewed as inherent in all humans and regardless of their social circumstances, that is, a human acquires a kind of dignity which places her/him 'above her/himself and above society' (Durkheim, 1951 quoted in Emirbayer, 2003, p. 264). At the level of social being, the films about disability arrive at the discussion of agency without references to the social process of how a person becomes a social agent. In other words, audience are not provided with references or hints about life chances, or the fact that one's place within collectivities greatly influences one's agency. This reduced thesis of a self-made and up-rooted individual is, however, not evident in *Kon Kon Kon* films about non-disabled individuals; non-disabled subjects of the programme include a large span of individuals from all walks of life and all kinds of experiences including those with a notorious past, without value judgement by the filmmakers. This demonstrates the programme's special attention to people with disabilities: that disabled people can only be portrayed as having positive traits of character (being hard-working and having a successful, happy and well-integrated life). The films' thesis on a disabled individual's capability to overcome all hardship can be viewed as an attempt to combat negative exploitative portrayals in which disabled people are presented as villainous characters and the other to the rest of the society (cf.Longmore, 2001, p. 5). The films' attempt, however, can be categorized as

'portrayals of adjustment' which views disabled people who cope and responsibly deal with their affliction as being compensated with spiritual, moral, mental, emotional capability such as gumption and the goodness of the heart (op.cit. , p. 11). This representation suggests that impairment does not inherently prevent people with disabilities from living meaningful lives but rather their mindset. It thus represents a call for a self-exploration and a redemption (cf. Longmore, 2001, p. 9). This style, apart from ignoring problems of prejudice and access, is criticized as portraying disabled individuals as larger than life and placing the burden of overcoming solely on their shoulders (Norden, 2001, p. 20). Thus, by proposing positive stereotypes, the programme may undermine the basic category of 'humanity' which should apply regardless of social acquisition. The programme may in the end, through the new positive stereotype, reproduce a social stratification: the undeserving feckless.

Different genres serve different purposes. Human interest stories remind audiences of the potentials of the human mind to transcend physical limitation. To feel calm, capable, inspired and courageous has never been more crucial than in this period of late modernity when all life choices are made to seem feasible and at one's command. Individuals are given a chance to build her/his own self and have to persevere with this task as exclusive meta structures to define oneself are diminishing. The genre serves this empowering purpose. Nevertheless, the 'mind over matter' genre can provide hints of the sort of matters that the mind has gone or will have to go through. The audience should still be reminded of the other missing part

of the agency-oriented human interest story: the social structural dimension to life. One possible way is to incorporate the connection between the intrinsic causal powers of a disabled individual and her/his social circumstances. In some circumstances, some of those causal powers will be activated and enhanced while in some they are left dormant or undermined. This is one possible way to connect an agent's action and structures and avoid both types of reduction, either voluntaristic or structuralist accounts of social life. Moreover, subjects of the programme should include those disabled who fail to work and those severely disabled. The programme could then explore their decisions and life chances using a lens guided by social theories, rather than moral ones alone.

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