

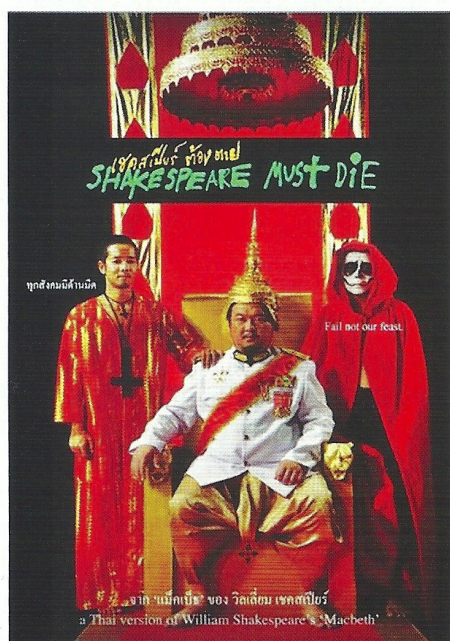
Thai Movie Censorship

By Matthew Hunt

A provocative Thai adaptation of Macbeth. A melodrama about a transvestite's dysfunctional family. A documentary exploring the persecution of Thai Muslims. The connection? Over the past few years, they have all been banned by Thai film censors.

Despite a thriving movie industry, and an ever-increasing indie film scene, censorship still looms large over Thai cinema. Sexual content is the number one cinematic no-no, though politically-sensitive material can also result in a ban.

In the most notorious case of Thai film censorship, Apichatpong Weerasethakul was forced to cut his poetic drama *Syndromes & A Century*. Apichatpong's film received international acclaim at the Venice and Cannes film festivals in 2007, though the Thai Ministry of Culture insisted that four scenes be removed before it could be theatrically released.



Their verdict was astonishing, because the 'contentious' scenes were completely innocuous: what could possibly be 'offensive' about a monk playing with a toy, or a doctor drinking whiskey? The Ministry's patronising attitude was surely more offensive than anything in Apichatpong's film: according to Ladda Tangsupachai, director of the Orwellian Cultural Surveillance Department, "Nobody goes to see films by Apichatpong. Thai people want to see comedy. We like a laugh".

Apichatpong appealed against the Ministry's decision, though he was then told to cut out two additional scenes! In response, he replaced the cut sequences with strips of black film, highlighting the censorship rather than hiding it. Audience-members were each given a postcard containing photos of the cut scenes, and links to view them on YouTube.

Syndromes & Century was shown uncut in Thailand only once, when Apichatpong introduced a screening at Alliance Française in 2007. Similarly, his earlier film *Blissfully Yours* also had only a single uncut screening in Thailand, at the 2002 International Film Festival; a sex scene was cut from its theatrical release.

Apichatpong launched the Free Thai Cinema Movement in 2007, with the slogan 'No cut, no ban', and called for the introduction of a film ratings board. Film classification was officially approved later that year, by the Film & Video Act, which replaced the 1930 Film Act. The ratings range from 'P' ('Promotional', for films that promote Thai culture) to '20' (films suitable only for people aged 20 or over). As director

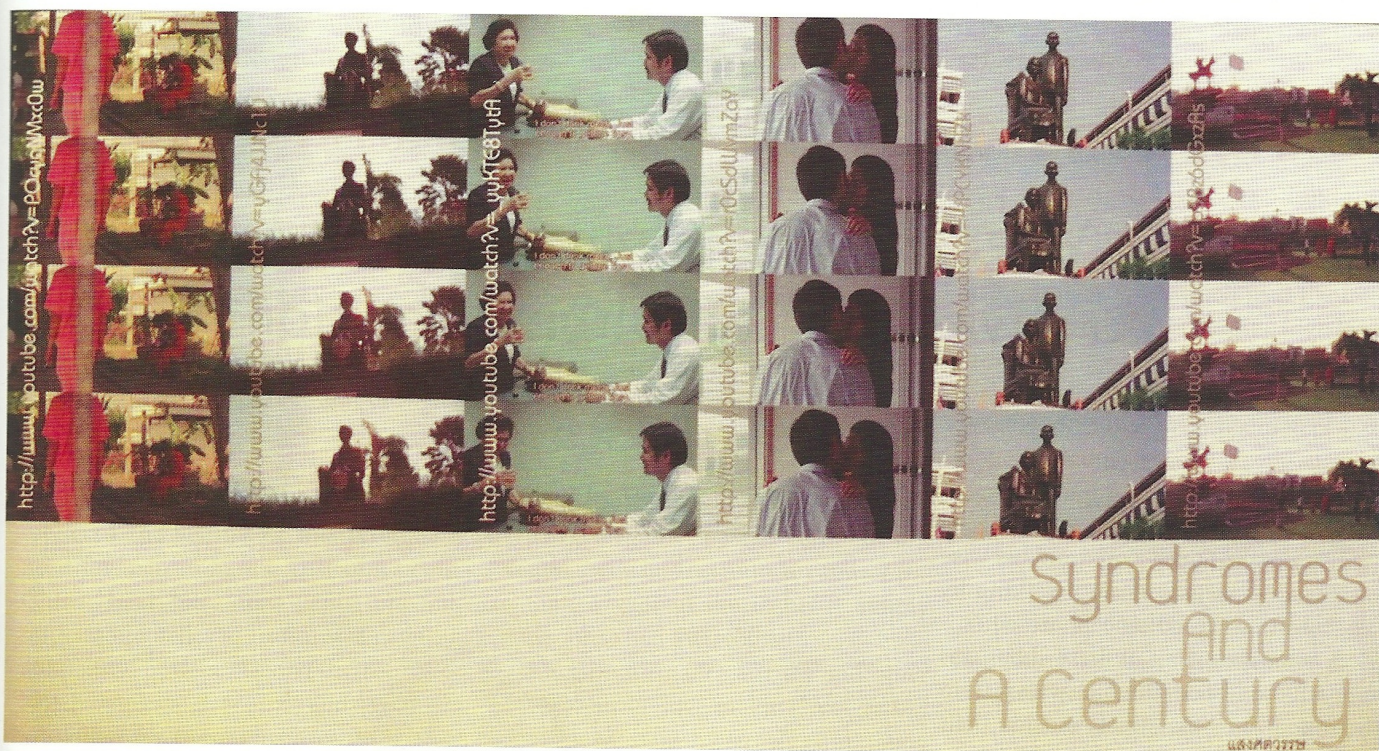
Thunskas Pansittivorakul told me in an interview: "The most embarrassing rating is 'P' for promotion. It aims to advertise movies that spread misleading information to audiences. Some of these films are even funded by our taxes!"

But unfortunately the ratings board still reserves, and exercises, the right to ban films it considers unacceptable. As Thunskas discovered when he submitted his independent documentary *This Area Is Under Quarantine* in 2009.

Thunskas has been making short films for over a decade (and he had a retrospective at Gallery Ver in 2008). His shorts are highly personal, and they often include hardcore imagery. *Unseen Bangkok* (2004), an interview with a nude rent boy, was particularly graphic. When he won the Silpatorn Award in 2007, he released the tender *Middle-Earth* as a subversive response, as if to confirm that he wasn't interested in government recognition.

With his more recent feature-length documentaries, Thunskas's work has become more political though no less explicit. *This Area Is Under Quarantine* stars two gay men, who are interviewed about their love lives. When one of the men mentions that he is a Muslim, the film changes tack and cuts to footage of the 2004 Tak Bai incident, in which a group of Muslim protesters suffocated to death while held captive by the Thai military.

It was shown at Makhampong Studio in 2008, though it was banned from the 2009 World Film Festival when the ratings board refused to classify it. Thunskas's subsequent features - the Apichatpong-influenced *Reincarnate* (2009) and the politically-charged *The Terrorists* (2011) weren't submitted for



classification, and were screened here only covertly.

Thunskat tells me that he despairs of the censorship system: "Nothing we say will make any difference about the censorship system in this country. We can't change it for the better. Others struggle against censorship, but I don't any more. I choose not to fight. That doesn't mean that I've given up. It's that I chose to keep making films and to ignore the country's censorship system."

In *The Terrorists*, I told what the country tries to conceal. That will now be my method of fighting the censors, not only in relation to this film but all my films after this."

Insects In The Backyard, Tanwarin Sukkhapisit's melodramatic tale of a transvestite (played by the director) who raises two teenagers, was banned in 2010, after a World Film Festival screening. The film has its fair share of unconventional sex scenes, and the ratings board declared that it "goes against public order or morality".

Tanwarin appealed, and the verdict was rephrased to "contrary to morality". The director appealed again, to the National Film Board, which upheld the ban, justifying the decision with bizarrely circular logic: "If [people] have an opportunity to watch the movie, they

would understand why it was banned". Well, yes, except that people don't have an opportunity watch it, because it's banned!

Shakespeare Must Die, directed this year by Ing K, uses Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as the basis for a satire on a contemporary politician's rise and fall. It was banned on the spurious grounds that its political content is too sensitive at a time when the country is polarised between the yellow- and red-shirts.

The film's production design emphasises the colour red - symbolising the violence of Shakespeare's tragic play, though also a thinly-veiled reference to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (whose supporters wear red shirts). The movie even features documentary footage of Siam Theatre after it was burnt down during the red-shirt demonstration in May 2010.

Ing's work has been censored before: a Bangkok Film Festival screening of her underground film *My Teacher Eats Biscuits*, an exaggerated comic satire of organised religion, was raided by police in 1997. Ing has appealed against the banning of *Shakespeare Must Die*, and a verdict is still pending. Watch this space, but don't hold your breath. **E**



THAI MOVIE CENSORSHIP

Encounter Thailand (October 2012)
volume 1, number 7 (pages 38-39)

© 2012 Matthew Hunt