

IN THE FRAME OF MIND TO TAKE CONTROL: POLITICS SURROUNDING THE BANNING OF APICHA TPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S *SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY* (SANG SATTAWAT, 2006)

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In Thailand early in 2008 the authorities took their scissors and literally snipped out sections of the 35mm print of internationally acclaimed Thai film *Syndromes and a Century* (*Sang Sattawat*, 2006). The job of censoring done, the mutilated film was handed back in pieces to its director Apichatpong Weerasethakul. This was Apichatpong's second attempt to secure the film's local release and, rather than smoothing over the cuts, he highlighted them by inserting sections of black to make a statement about censorship when the film finally premiered locally at Bangkok's upmarket Paragon Cineplex in April. (1) Worldwide, there had been a vastly different response to the film and its director. Thai and international film publications voted *Syndromes and a Century* among the best films in 2006-2007 and the film, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival (the first Thai film to do so), gained a number of awards in 2007. (2) The artistic merit of

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Apichatpong, an innovative, experimental filmmaker, is well acknowledged on the international scene, where he is viewed as being among the top in the experimental field.

(3) It has been a different story in Thailand where many have noted the disappointing treatment of Apichatpong and his work, particularly in relation to the controversy surrounding the screening of *Syndromes and a Century*.

In April 2007 censors demanded four cuts be made. The cuts concerned shots of a monk playing a guitar; two monks playing with a remote control UFO toy; doctors drinking whisky in the basement of a hospital; and a doctor kissing his girlfriend in an empty locker room. Apichatpong refused to make the cuts and the film was not released locally, although it did screen privately (at Alliance Francaise) in Bangkok, and the ‘offensive’ cuts quickly found their way to YouTube. The censorship sparked outrage among members of the local film industry and resulted in the formation of the Free Thai Cinema movement and a campaign for change. (4)

People, particularly those in the film industry and the director, were surprised, infuriated and puzzled by the censorship demands to cut seemingly innocuous scenes, when other films with far more outrageous images had been allowed to screen in cinemas. In order to shed light on the harsh treatment and censorship of the film, there is a need to consider the complexities of Thai culture and bureaucracy and particularly the political scene with its developing democracy, in addition to the director’s determination to forge his own way and defend his freedom of expression.

Irony and contradiction abound in Thailand. Culture is viewed as a means to a political end. Official representations of Thai-ness, which prescribe Thai culture and what it means to be Thai, are used as tools for maintaining social order and nation building. (5) This manufactured Thai-ness is at odds with reality. Three areas have long been considered sacrosanct – the nation, the monarchy, and Buddhism. Freedom and independence are valued, but it is a hierarchical, bureaucratic nation. Political turmoil and military coups are common, yet harmony and smooth relations are highly valued and citizens are expected to play by the rules to maintain harmony. Apichatpong does not

play by the rules, either with the structure and nature of his films, nor with the way he goes about ensuring that he can work without compromising his artistic endeavours. He is prepared to stand up to officialdom. Manufactured Thai-ness has no place in his world and his work is deeply personal and encourages reflection. All this runs counter to bureaucratic aims of controlling minds and memories and, it will be argued, helps to explain the seemingly arbitrary response to his work.

Despite obstacles to freedom of expression in Thailand, *Syndromes and a Century* is a strong example of the possibilities for development of freedom of expression and paves the way for the portrayal of individual notions of identity as opposed to those created by the state.

Friction – Film and Politics

Friction between film and politics is nothing new in Thailand. An official censorship board established a Film Act in 1930 under police authority. Filmmakers have been waiting ever since for change to the vaguely worded Film Act. A student uprising in October 1973 led to a brief period of freedom of expression. Films included critical commentary on social and political issues. But freedom was curtailed and films were banned, following a military coup and bloodshed in 1976. (6) In the 1990s Thailand seemed to be moving towards more respect for rights and freedoms (7) and a New Wave of Thai filmmakers emerged after the Asian Crisis of 1997, creating international interest.

However, freedom of expression was soon under attack again during the Thaksin era (8) and then with the military takeover in 2006. The takeover provoked many who saw it as power grabbing which benefited the military, the palace and the upper class. The strength of feeling against the takeover was illustrated by the breaking of the long-standing taboo on references to the King. (9)

Elections were held in December 2007, but just days beforehand the military managed to rush through a new constitution (replacing the relatively popular 1997 constitution which

followed the May 1992 democracy uprising). The military's version of the constitution included a film ratings system in addition to bans and censorship. Still there was no financial support for filmmakers. The censorship was to apply to all moving images, along with the possibility that it might apply to overseas screening of Thai films. (10) The crack-down dashed hopes for reform of the out-of-date Film Act. As changes to the constitution were being finalised, rumours of another coup already had begun circulating. (11)

So, while Apichatpong is exploring a style of his own, Thailand is searching for its own style of democracy. In the process, the choppy introduction of democracy continues to create obstacles for freedom of expression.

Complexity – Culture, Bureaucracy and Politics

The situation is as complex as the structure of *Syndromes and a Century*. The film and the bureaucratic cultural and political landscape are worlds apart, but with much in common. Both present stories in two parts – the rural-urban divide; and memories of the past in a world of rapid modernization. Thailand is traditionally hierarchical and bureaucratic, but tolerates a certain amount of individuality and values freedom, while also hampering freedom of expression. It is a country that has long welcomed new ideas, but has continued to fear losing 'traditional values'. The official portrayal of perfect, moral citizens ignores the reality of aspects such as the lively sex trade.

Thailand, the only Southeast Asian nation to escape colonization, is a primarily Buddhist nation with a constitutional monarchy. There have long been dealings and exchanges with the West. A diplomatic mission was sent to Europe as early as 1608. In 1855 King Mongkut signed an agreement with the British, which led to Western trade and was followed by bureaucratic and legal reform, Western education overseas and the appointment of European heads of departments. (12) An overseas Western education continues to be seen as advantageous and the recent group of Thai filmmakers, including Apichatpong, who have been creating such interest, are among the first to have studied at

overseas film schools. In the 1990s public intellectuals commented on social and political events; later, Thaksin clamped down on freedom of expression. (13) In Thailand, particularly since the late 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in Western-style shopping centres, cinemas and convenience stores; introduction of the international music video show, MTV; and young people (particularly in Bangkok) wearing skimpy Western fashions and following the latest overseas trends in music. This has been greeted with expressions of fear of the development of a ‘degenerate society’ and much talk of restoring Thai-ness. (14)

Over the years, Western dress has been promoted to demonstrate that Thais were civilized, for example when trade was being encouraged with Europeans; to show progressiveness following the military coup ending the absolute monarchy in 1932 (15); or to distinguish the Thais from the Japanese during the Second World War to show that Thais were more like Westerners. (16) While modern skimpy tops, or ‘spaghetti straps’, are blamed for causing immoral behaviour, no such blame seems to rest on the revealing dress – bare arms and shoulders – of the women of old, as depicted in Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* (1999). This film, which is a remake of a popular Thai ghost legend, is seen to be establishing an example of national cinema. (17)

Culture and the idea of Thai-ness are considered tools or weapons to achieve political aims and to protect the nation. Despite diversity within Thailand and a degree of “plasticity” in applying Thai-ness, it still has the ability to “shape and limit public discourse”. As Connors notes, even the Ministry of Culture (established by the Thaksin government in 2002) is influenced by many factors. (18)

In Thailand, Buddhism is considered inviolable, but since the 1990s there has been an increase in the diversity of movements and cults related to Buddhism and an increasing number of scandals concerning monks, along with concern related to the perceived decline in standards. (19) In October 2007, a group of monks filed a criminal lawsuit over two paintings which they claimed were unflattering depictions of monks and defamed Buddhism. The paintings had been awarded Silpakorn University’s National Art

Competition gold prize. Silpakorn is Thailand's oldest art academy. (20) Despite some undermining of the authority of Buddhism, as Peter Jackson points out, "...judicious and timely recourse to Buddhist ritual and doctrine can still bolster governments and the careers of politicians." (21)

Apichatpong – Doing It His Way

Apichatpong Weerasethakul was born in 1970, the son of doctors, and grew up in the north-eastern town of Khon Kaen, where he studied architecture and watched Thai films. From there he went on to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. He is fiercely independent and works outside the studio system in Thailand, one of few to do this. Even large distributors/producers struggle against the big cinema complexes' preference for imports. (22) In addition to working in the little-known field of experimental film, Apichatpong, also a media artist, actively promotes and supports experimental filmmaking through his production company, Kick the Machine, and involvement in the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival (BEFF). Recently, when fighting for changes to the Film Act, Apichatpong was the only film industry representative to stand his ground and refuse to support the right of the state to ban films – film producers and theatre owners gave in on this point, agreeing to avoid sensitive issues. (23)

While many directors agree to censorship cuts, Apichatpong steadfastly refuses. With the second, and unsuccessful attempt to gain a local theatrical release for *Syndromes and a Century* Apichatpong decided to turn the censor's cuts, what he called a "decree of amputation", into "dissident art" (24), staging a protest, and drawing attention to the fact that films were being censored, by inserting sections of black, rather than smoothing over the cuts.

The Film – *Syndromes and a Century*

Syndromes and a Century, is a Thai-French-Austrian co-production, which was commissioned by Peter Sellars for the New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna to

celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. It has a very Thai sensibility alongside universal qualities such as memories and love (falling in love, love of life, country and people) and a deep spiritual element that carries it across boundaries. Although there is no obvious homage to Mozart, it is a beautiful, gentle, respectful, humorous, lyrical work that touches the heart in the manner of a symphony. The Thai title, *Sang Sattawat*, means "Light of the Century" and conveys a more positive feeling than the English title. Apichatpong sees century as meaning a lifetime, or conveying a sense of moving forward and, through the film, pays a tribute to those who have helped create this century. (25)

The film is in two parts, inspired by his mother (first part) and father (second part). The earlier part is set in rural Thailand, with the sun as the source of light, and captures feelings of Apichatpong's early years growing up. The second part takes place in a more modern world, with its artificial light, connecting with his recent years spent working in Bangkok. Interestingly, the rural-urban divide is, in political terms, at the centre of many of Thailand's problems. (26) Throughout the film, the influence of Buddhism is apparent in aspects such as sheer delight in the moment and references to merit-making. Buddhists believe gaining merit will reduce suffering. Merit can be gained through generosity, morality and mental development. (27)

The Cuts – *Syndromes and a Century*

A view long held by the elite and those in power in Thailand is that they know what is best for the people. (28) In the case of *Syndromes and a Century* officials claimed people were not ready for something like this; they said that what people wanted was comedy. (29) The film has plenty of humour, subtle humour, rather than slapstick. After the first approach to the censors in 2006, these were the scenes they wanted cut on the grounds of being damaging to the reputation of monks and doctors: a monk playing a guitar; monks (tiny figures in the distance) playing with a remote control UFO toy; doctors drinking whisky in a hospital basement (reserved for military patients and their relatives); and a doctor kissing his girlfriend in a deserted locker room, with a gently humorous close-up shot of his trousers covering a growing erection.

Monk playing a guitar. This is a brief scene, which is preceded by a scene showing the monk in the dentist chair for the first time. The monk is receiving free treatment, which according to Buddhist belief will gain merit for the dentist. The monk questions the gaining of merit, saying that he is just like anyone else and would like to leave the monkhood, but ‘a mysterious force’ has a hold of him. (In Thailand many young men become monks for a brief period of time, sometimes only several days. It is possible for monks to leave and return.) The monk used to dream of being a DJ and the dentist is a singer, as a hobby. There are humorous exchanges relating to music and this thread flows through to the contentious scene of the monk quietly strumming a guitar for his own benefit, and later the dentist singing on stage and presenting a CD to the monk. Monks are not supposed to play musical instruments, but Apichatpong recalls seeing things like this as a child. The scene is low-key; cutting it would break the thread, disturb the harmony and flow, and detract from the film.

Monks playing with remote control UFO toy. These fleeting, long-distance images of monks are barely perceptible.

Doctors drinking whisky in a hospital basement. The doctor who instigates the whisky drinking makes a point of saying that she is not an alcoholic and does not drink much. But, she has to appear as a weekly guest speaker on public TV and can never quite get used to the cameras, so a little helps. She also has to prepare her own wardrobe “because public TV doesn’t have enough money”. There is more of Apichatpong’s subtle humour when the doctor produces the whisky bottle from inside a prosthetic leg (an earlier scene shows patients learning to walk using prosthetic limbs).

Doctor kissing girlfriend in deserted locker room. This is a private moment, with a gentle, Western style kiss on the lips (although camera positioning keeps the lips demurely hidden). The censors clearly found no humour in the erection shot.

The final straw, after the second approach to censors early 2008, was for a further demand for two cuts of shots of statues of royalty. The purpose of the statues was to pay

respect to “important figures in the development of modern Thai medicine”. (30) How could this be anything but a slap on the wrist from the censors?

Conclusion

Syndromes and a Century encourages reflection and links the past, present and future. It presents the possibility of imagination set free and the capturing of individual memories. While not overtly political, the director’s astute observations present social commentary throughout. Such an example of freedom of expression is undoubtedly a threat to bureaucratic control. Ironically, the very attempt to restrict this freedom via censorship also raised awareness of such restrictions. On the face of it, the censored scenes appear harmless; the issue is more about what the film and the director represent. As the search for a Thai-style democracy continues, it seems to be those in positions of power, rather than the ordinary people, who are not yet ready for a film like *Sang Sattawat*.

Notes

1. Media coverage included the following overview: Kong Ritthdee, "The Long Road Home," *Bangkok Post*, 4 April 2008. Available on-line at <http://www.thailandqa.com/forum/showthread.php?p=131780>. Accessed 18 April 2008.
2. Awards for *Syndromes and a Century* in 2007 included: Best Film Award, 9th Deauville Asian Film Festival, France; Best Editor Award, Asian Film Awards, Hong Kong; Special Mention, Fribourg International Film Festival, Switzerland; and Honourable Mention, Adelaide Film Festival, Australia. These and additional details about *Syndromes and a Century* available on-line at <http://www.kickthemachine.com/works/Syndromes.html>. Accessed 15 May 2008.
3. See Adrian Martin, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul, The Immaterial," in *What is Modern Cinema?* Adrian Martin (Chile: Uqbar, 2008).
4. The Free Thai Cinema Movement was co-founded by the Thai Film Foundation, Thai Directors Association and Bioscope magazine. See Kong Ritthdee, "Thai Directors Lob Protest. New Film Act Gives Hope to Wary Industry," in *Variety*, 4 May 2007. Available on-line at <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117964305.html?categoryid=2523&cs=1>. Accessed 18 April 2008. There was a free Thai Cinema link on Apichatpong's website (www.kickthemachine.com) and an on-line petition appeared in a number of locations, including the Apichatpong Weerasethakul International Fan Club at <http://community.livejournal.com/weerasethakul/>. Accessed 2 November 2007; and the Free Thai Cinema Movement at <http://www.petitiononline.com/nocut/petition.html>. Accessed 2 November 2007. Also see (for discussions and interviews with activists and representatives from academia, the media and the film industry) Lynette Lee Corporal, "Thailand: Media Landscape Worries Activists," *Asia Media Forum*, 3 May 2007. Available on-line at <http://www.theasiamediaforum.org/node/659>. Accessed 23 August 2007.
5. On defining national identity see Michael K. Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 128-53; on culture policy and identity production see Michael K. Connors, "Ministering Culture: Hegemony and the Politics of Culture and Identity in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 37:4 (Routledge, 2005), 523-51; on social order and Thai culture see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 167-9; on the formation of Thai-ness and cultural nationalism and authenticity see Craig J. Reynolds, "Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand," in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 134-7.
6. For detail about Thai cinema of this period see Anchalee Chaiworaporn, "Thai Cinema Since 1970," in *Film in South East Asia: Views From the Region: Essays on Film in 10 South East Asia-Pacific Countries*, ed. David Hanan (Hanoi:

- SEAPAVAA in association with the Vietnam Film Institute and the National Screen and Sound Archive of Australia, 2001), 141-62.
7. Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, 18-19.
 8. Ibid, 149-54.
 9. May Adadol Ingawanij, "Beyond the Frame: Disreputable Behaviour. The Hidden Politics of the Thai Film Act," *Vertigo Magazine* 3, no. 8, Winter-Spring 2008. Available on-line at www.vertigomagazine.co.uk/showarticle.php?sel=bac&siz=1&id=927. Accessed 13 April 2008.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "A Tale of Two Charters," *Bangkok Post*, 15 May 2008. Available on-line at http://www.bangkokpost.com/150508_News/15May2008_news22.php. Accessed 15 May 2008.
 12. John Funston, "Thailand: Reform Politics," in *Government and Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. John Funston (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), 328-9.
 13. Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, 155-6.
 14. Onnucha Huttasingh, "Country Has Become a 'Degenerate Society'," *Bangkok Post*, 11 November 2004: 5; Karnjariya Sukrung, "Let's Talk About (Teen) Sex," *The Sunday Bangkok Post*, 24 October 2004: 3; Connors, *Critical Asian Studies*, 535.
 15. Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 40-5.
 16. Penny van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (New York: Berg, 2000), 101-3.
 17. May Adadol Ingawanij, "Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema," in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2007) 8: no. 2, 180-93.
 18. Connors, *Critical Asian Studies*, 531-3.
 19. Peter A. Jackson, "Withering Centre, Flourishing Margins: Buddhism's Changing Political Roles," in *Political Change in Thailand*, ed. Kevin Hewison (New York: Routledge, 1997), 75-85.
 20. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "Thailand. Influence: Today and Tomorrow," *Art Asia Pacific Almanac 2008*, 3: 269.
 21. Jackson, *Political Change in Thailand*, 85.
 22. Bam Amnatcharoen, "Distrib Boycotting Exhib," *Variety* 395.7 (28 June 2004): 9.
 23. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "The Folly and Future of Thai Cinema Under Military Dictatorship," 8 November 2007. Available on-line at http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail_en.asp?id=106. Accessed 18 April 2008.
 24. Rithdee, *Bangkok Post*.
 25. Tony Rayns, Memories, Mysteries: from an interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Bangkok, July 2006), on-line at www.kickthemachine.com/works/Syndromes.html. Accessed 15 May 2008.
 26. John Girling, "Conclusion: Economics, Politics and Civil Society," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2002), 265.
 27. Merit-making is complex. For explanations, see Ajahn Chah, *Food for the Heart: The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002),

- 64-5; Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Denmark, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007), 140-3; and Sunthorn Plamintr, *Getting to Know Buddhism* (Thailand: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994), 109-13; 202-4.
28. Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, 40-5.
 29. Rithdee, *Bangkok Post*.
 30. Rayns interview on-line, Bangkok, 2006.