

Silence is Profane

BY SASHA HAN

A silence emanates from Thailand's cinemas, and it is not that of an empty theatre. Instead, the striking totality of the silence lies in the growing number of audiences who refuse to respond to the call to rise at the royal anthem, "Sansoen Phra Barami" (English: Glorify His Prestige) and the accompanying larger than life portraits of the King. To speak directly against the crown is to risk severe persecution under *lese-majeste* and seditions laws. But, since 2010, when the courts repealed a legal provision which made it illegal to sit during the royal anthem, cinema has emerged as a site of resistance where dissent can be expressed without prosecution. Yet, the act of looking at the King's portrait displayed on the giant screen is already an act of looking up at the King "enthroned in a position of revered worship". It is through these images intended for veneration that Prapat Jiwangsan's abstract short film *Parasite Family* (2022) enacts its defacement.

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Composed of photographic material found in an out-of-business film lab, Jiwangsan cuts, layers, and consolidates portraits of affluent individuals and families in military uniforms, harkening affiliations to an institution that has enjoyed long-lasting ties with the royal family. The collages are then animated with an artificial intelligence (AI) art generator, bringing to life the parasitic monsters that reside beneath the formal make-up of studio portraiture. Though accompanied by camera shutters and the sound of film rewinding, the short film descends to a deafening silence devoid of human sounds.

If the profane is associated with verbalisation of obscenities to draw attention to the act of blasphemy, Jiwangsan departs from such conventions out of necessity to avoid prosecution in the same way that audiences in Thailand do. At the closing ceremony of the 33rd Singapore International Film Festival, Jiwangsan and his producer Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn confirm this, telling me that speaking out must be done indirectly in Thailand. In place of stifled suppression, the convergence of silent Thai audiences is so stark it takes on a density not unlike an anechoic chamber to absorb and contain the influence of the monarchy. No insignificant fact, given the prodigious success of its consolidation of

power.¹ The effect is multitudinous: a presentation of decentralised resistance, one centred on the obfuscation of a singular source in favour of raucous visual entanglement. At the same time, it illuminates the fragility of the monarchy who must hide behind proxies and adjacents – aristocrats comprised of military personnel with ties to the royal family – to protect its image.

Black Box

Though AI art generators and the ethics of its use in art production has ignited ferocious debate over the lack of infrastructure to properly credit creators of the original work, Jiwarangsan embraces this instability to obscure the original vandal of the images, crediting both himself and AI in the closing credits. We know nothing about the AI used or its algorithms, making his chosen collaborative tool somewhat of a black box he can easily deflect blame on should the occasion arise. Further, AI art generators generally require text prompts or filter selection to produce an effect, the initial choice here withheld from the audience. In short, the incantations of profanities are conducted in silence; the legibility of the source is several times removed.

If, like the film processing lab where their images were abandoned, the aristocrats were momentarily forgotten and remained silent for their complicity in creating economic disparities, Jiwarangsan hauls them from the past into the present. He distorts the purpose of portraits – to assert identity and present an ideal image of oneself to the world – by combining, rearranging and literally carving into the photograph several cut-outs and outlines of profiles across gender, age and attire splicing to form a new type of face complete with eyes. In so doing, he robs them of any singular assertion of identity. Instead of any one particular image being assigned blame for absorbing the wealth of a nation, the multi-layered faces and their many eyes “blink” back at the audience as a reminder that there is an ecosystem of parasites in place that allow for the aberration. The mechanical shutters clicking and its film rewinding lend weight to the idea of a machine that ensures the efficiency of such a system. As the film crescendos with an overwhelming cacophony of machines at work, its sudden descent into complete silence forces a confrontation with the silence, drawing attention to the absence of the human voice.

Frankenstein's Monster

Machines meet their inevitable end for reasons ranging from wear and tear to the gradual phasing out of a particular technology. What Jiwarangsan does when he overhauls the trove of abandoned material is address the problem of sustainability by recycling discarded material and repurposing it as feed for the AI art generator. This is particularly resonant in a series of sequences in the middle that involve an increasing frenzy of images in varying degrees of colour inversion being streaked across the screen, bleeding and warping into other faces. On one level, the sheer amount of material ingested and consequently churned out by the AI generator seems more in line with contemporary proliferation of images than the scarcity associated with expensive film processes accessible only to a certain class. More importantly, the excesses of our times reduce the value of the images from a position of the sacred to simple churn, neutralising the prestige of certain images over others.

In the closing sequence of *Parasite Family*, a single face takes centre stage. But the figure convulses, eyes bulging, and any possibility of recognition is quickly disrupted. Its image recedes into its hairline and the orifice of the eye to momentarily take on the image of a monk in meditation then to a figure sporting a short cut, then seems to fade to negative space. The face resets and the features of a baby's face quickly appears to disintegrate into a wrinkly interface whose ghoulish gaze rapidly breaks into a smile so wide its eyes disappear. The final silhouette resembles a face bearing physical features characteristic of royal intermarriage and premature death; an end to lineage and dynasty.

The face is more than animated. Its unrelenting contortion threatens to emerge from the flat silver screen to deeply unsettling effect, the anticipation of what might finally be revealed sustaining the rubbernecking of the spectacle unfolding. Looking up at it in the silence of the cinema, one asks: When the face of the monarchy finally shows itself, what would it look like?

ENDNOTES

- 1 According to reports published in Reuters, in the course of his reign, the King seized control of the Crown Property Bureau, a sovereign wealth fund, to become the richest monarch in the world. He also ordered the release of two army units to his control. See “Assets registered to Thai Crown Property Bureau to be held under king's name” (2018), “Thailand's king takes personal control of two key army units” (2019).