

Censorship and Restitution at the Limits of Shakespearean Adaptation: Reimagining Ing K.'s *Censor Must Die* as Thailand's *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Thai director Ing K.'s *Censor Must Die* (2014), a documentary that portrays her efforts to overturn the Thai government's banning of her film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, titled *Shakespeare Must Die* (2012). Though the latter work remains banned as of 2023, this article demonstrates that *Censor Must Die* may be "read" and interpreted as a Shakespeare film as well, specifically as a dystopian *Hamlet* and sequel to Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet 2000*. While *Hamlet 2000* depicts the struggles of individual artists against postmodern entities such as "the System" or "the State" through the figure of Prince Hamlet, *Censor Must Die* dials this concern to its extreme by documenting censorship against artists not in the realm of fiction but in the "real world" of current events that can influence the production and distribution of art in the first place. In this way, *Censor Must Die* may be said to have a place in the tradition of Shakespearean adaptations, yet it also suggests the potential end or logical terminus of this tradition due to state-sanctioned assaults on artistic freedom. In offering such a reading, this article attempts to restore a semblance of Shakespeare in Ing K.'s work against the grain of Thai government censors and implicitly raises the question of to what extent Shakespeare's corpus intersects with and may help to frame, reimagine, and bear witness to international current events.



When a character is born, he acquires at once such an independence, even of his own author, that he can be imagined by everybody even in many other situations where the author never dreamed of placing him; and so he acquires for himself a meaning which the author never thought of giving him. —Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)

I

This essay's primary focus is Thai director and writer Ing Kanjanavanit's (Ing K.'s) documentary, *Censor Must Die* (2014; hereafter *Censor*), which was produced after then Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's administration banned Ing K.'s adaptation of *Macbeth*, entitled *Shakespeare Must Die* (2012). *Censor* documents Ing K., the film's producer, Manit Sriwanichpoom, members of the cast and crew, and their allies as they protest and attempt to appeal by way of legal avenues what they believe to be the politically motivated censorship of their adaptation. According to the Thai government, *Shakespeare Must Die* had the potential to sow national disunity, harm the government's goal of Thai reconciliation, portray the Thai state in a negative light, and for these reasons posed a national security risk. Furthermore, because the film necessarily depicted scenes of regicide given its faithful adaptation of *Macbeth*, the government claimed it violated Thailand's *lèse-majesté* (to do wrong to majesty) law under Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code. While the Thai government's "official" reasons for the ban are subject to debate—Ing K. convincingly rebuts many of them in a comprehensive 2013 interview with Colleen Kennedy—what remains immutably true is that the film was never released to the public (apart from a few viewings abroad) and a Thai Shakespeare film (the first of its kind) remains, as of 2023, only a phantom specter of what could have been.

Though *Censor* was produced as "the most sustained opposition to the censors' verdict" to ban *Shakespeare Must Die* and was never intended to be a cinematic adaptation of a Shakespeare play, it can be viewed and interpreted as much more than a documentary (Burnett 2018, 290). In other words, *Censor* may be "read" and understood as a Shakespeare film and adaptation in its own right, especially when one considers Ing K.'s comments during a post-screening discussion of *Shakespeare Must Die* at the 2014 Southeast Asian Film Festival held at the Singapore Art Museum. Interestingly, members of the audience asked as many questions about specific scenes in the film as questions about the ban and legal efforts to overturn it, as if the censorship of *Shakespeare Must Die* had created its own film apart from the one then being shown to festival attendees, one playing out in the streets of Thailand, in the halls of Thai government agencies, legal offices, and art museums, one whose conclusion remains undetermined and whose end credits have yet to roll.

On several occasions during the postscreening discussion, Ing K. frets how Thai politics has drowned out Shakespeare despite her efforts to bring his work closer to Thai people, who, historically, have had very little exposure to his work.¹ As Kathy Foley (2011, 9) notes, "Shakespeare, while presented, is far from a staple of Southeast Asian contemporary production." Indeed, just prior to the actual screening, she tells the audience, "please enjoy this film as a Shakespearean film," as opposed to, one may infer, a purely political film viewed

1 This is quite a contrast with countries in Northeast Asia such as Japan and South Korea that have had numerous Shakespeare adaptations—Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985), Han Tae-Sook's *Lady Macbeth* (1999), and Lee Joon-Ik's *The King and the Clown* (2005). For a sample of astute sources on these adaptations, see Erin Suzuki, 2006, "Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34 (2): 93–103; Yeeyon Im, 2016, "Beyond the Gender Divide: Looking for Shakespeare in Han Tae-Sook's *Lady Macbeth*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 32 (1): 19–30; Adele Lee, 2018, "The Player King and Kingly Players: Inverting *Hamlet* in Lee Joon-ik's *King and the Clown* in *Borrowers and Lenders* 12 (1): n.p.

through the prism of propaganda to evaluate whether it adheres to or problematically diverges from a political ideology—a perspective that would only reify the gaze of the censors who banned the film in the first place. Accordingly, I have followed Ing K.’s suggestion. Though I am unable to watch *Shakespeare Must Die* in the United States (only its trailer is available online and, in this regard, the Thai government’s censorship remains successful), I watched *Censor* as if it were a Shakespearean film and adaptation. More specifically, while Ing K., Manit, and others initially set out to produce an adaptation of *Macbeth*, which was subsequently “erased” by state censors, one can nevertheless view *Censor*—for it was never banned—as an adaptation of *Hamlet*, that emerges in “ghostly” echoes and shadows, not unlike the ghost of King Hamlet “that usurp’st this time of night,” and “bodes some strange eruption to [their] state” while the kingdom’s sentinels stumble around, caught unawares (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.1.54, 1.1.80).

In this essay, I read *Censor* as a version of *Hamlet* that portrays the very limits and potential end of the adaptive tradition of which I claim it is also a part. In other words, I place *Censor* in conversation with Shakespeare’s play and with Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet 2000*, but its place in this tradition is that of a dystopian sequel to both. If, as Marvin Carlson notes, “one of the universals of performance” — assuming here adaptations are a subset of performance — “is its ghostliness, its sense of return, the uncanny but inescapable impression imposed on its spectators that ‘we are seeing what we saw before’” (2001, 1), *Censor* takes this assumption underlying appropriative art to its logical extreme and asks: what if a work conjures in the mind not its artistic predecessors but the unpleasant affairs of a State that will protect its authority by any means necessary (including the suppression of art)?² *Censor* portrays and proposes such a world in which the very enterprise of Shakespearean adaptation by artist-directors is targeted and arguably quashed by what we may colloquially term “the State” or “the System.” While Ing K.’s remarks above imply a distinction between a political viewing of the film and a more universal, artistically attuned viewing of the film, the core drama of both *Censor* and *Hamlet 2000* is the conflict that emerges when the interests (and views) of a “higher,” more powerful institution (commercial or political) and those of independent artists are at cross-purposes, collide, and compete for primacy on the battlefield that is the minds of those that compose their shared audience. I argue that while Almereyda ultimately presents a pessimistic vision of Hamlet-as-artist in this postmodern, twenty-first-century landscape, it is also Almereyda’s accentuating Hamlet’s struggles as an aspiring independent artist-director that allows for a reading that restores a semblance of Shakespeare’s art in Ing K.’s *Censor*, thus offering a sliver of restitution—in this essay’s own humble way—that stands in contrast to the banning of *Censor*’s ghostly predecessor, *Shakespeare Must Die*.

II

A discussion of *Hamlet 2000* may clarify how it serves as an apt intermediary that bridges the wide gulf that readers, not without reason, may imagine lies between *Hamlet* and *Censor*. While I considered numerous *Hamlet* adaptations that could be employed as a critical stepping-stone toward my approach to Ing K.’s docu-

2 For an in-depth review of ghosts, ghosting, and theatre, see Kevin Riordan, 2014, “Ghosts—in Theory—in Theater,” *Intertexts* 18 (2): 165–80.

mentary—including those by Laurence Olivier (1948), Grigori Kozintsev (1964), Tony Richardson, (1969), Franco Zeffirelli (1990), and Kenneth Branagh (1996)—it is Almercyda’s presentation of Hamlet that is most applicable here, for two primary reasons.³

Almercyda’s *Hamlet* takes full advantage of where—or rather when—it is situated in the long line of *Hamlet* adaptations, that is, in the “new millennium” or at the advent of the twenty-first century, along with its attendant technologies and conflicts (the two are codependent, as the film makes clear). In other words, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is not only afforded a contemporary, postmodern makeover precisely because of when *Hamlet 2000* was produced and released, but the latter also makes this very fact an indelible part of its subject matter. As Carolyn Jess (2004, 95) notes, “Almercyda finds particularly innovative and pertinent methods to enable Shakespeare’s most famous play to visualize the concerns and issues of the twenty-first century.” Corporations are kingdoms, CEOs are kings, high-rise company headquarters and hotels are akin to castles, secret machinations are overheard by hidden mics, and ghosts appear in surveillance footage. Furthermore, Almercyda, more than any other director of a *Hamlet* adaptation, accentuates Prince Hamlet’s origins as a type of artist, an aspiring playwright. Almercyda seems keenly aware of this fact: the “original” Prince Hamlet is the titular character of *Hamlet*, yet also aspires to be a type of Shakespeare who writes and directs a work (the “play-within-the-play”) that “adapts” or “appropriates” events from the play in which he and his work are depicted to shape, if not master, the direction (and outcome) of this same overarching narrative. (In this sense, Hamlet is the first “director” in the long line of *Hamlet* adaptations.) It is this specific aspect of Hamlet’s character—as a proto-postmodernist artist-director figure “reborn” as a twenty-first-century videographer—that invites readers to consider a postmodern *Hamlet* that makes part of its subject the fact of its own artifice and paves the way for a restorative reading of *Censor*.

Accordingly, *Hamlet 2000*’s drama kicks off when the CEO of Denmark Corporation, King Hamlet (Sam Shephard), dies. His widow, Gertrude (Diane Venora), hastily marries King Hamlet’s younger brother, Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan). Meanwhile, the young Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) “returns from school, suspecting foul play” and is instructed by his father’s ghost to take revenge against those who have wronged him, namely Claudius, the primary benefactor of King Hamlet’s passing (he is Denmark Corporation’s new CEO) and Gertrude (Almercyda 2000, 0:0:51).

While Almercyda’s adaptation, with its layers of details, opens numerous avenues for discussion—a testament to Shakespeare’s and Almercyda’s artistic abilities—an important thread that winds its way from the film’s beginning to its end is the question of whether it is possible for one to narrativize his/her own identity apart from the plethora of “official” narratives disseminated by, say, corporate media sources and powerful commercial entities that meld the postmodern society the film depicts. The film’s beginning proper commences in a press briefing room where Claudius and Gertrude hold a press conference and provide an “official” statement

3 For comprehensive close readings of several *Hamlet* adaptations, see Patrick J. Cook, 2011, *Cinematic Hamlet: The Films of Olivier, Zeffirelli, Branagh, and Almercyda* (Athens: Ohio University Press).

on Hamlet’s passing, Claudius’s succession, and where next Denmark Corporation is headed amid these sudden developments (though of course these “developments” were carefully manufactured, behind the scenes, so to speak). The room is filled with members of the media, diligently filming, taking photographs and notes (presumably for public dissemination). Hamlet, the film student and “independent” videographer, appears in their midst, and yet it is obvious he stands apart from them, that they do not consider him as one of their own. As Hamlet meanders through the crowd, filming members of the media as they work, they look at him quizzically and distastefully perhaps because they are not accustomed to having the camera turned back at them for scrutiny, a role ostensibly reserved for them only (Almeryda 2000, 0:02:46). Neither is Hamlet a part of the “in-crowd.” While the media and Denmark Corporation’s supporters embrace Claudius’s statement with applause and cheers, Hamlet remains off to the side, turns his head away, and scoffs at the “staged” spectacle.



Figure 1: Claudius speaks to the media and Denmark Corporation members at a press conference. This frame, in particular, casts Claudius as a type of preacher ministering his version of “truth” to the masses.



Figure 2: Hamlet turns his camera onto members of the press much to their consternation.

Yet the extent to which Hamlet is truly “independent” is questionable. Following the press conference, Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet, trailed by a security detail, walk the streets of New York City. Despite the expanse of the city available to the camera, the scene is filmed in such a way as to make the viewer claustrophobic—the

group, as they walk and commiserate, appear hemmed in by towering skyscrapers. While critics have noted that the high-rises represent a surveillance apparatus or Michel Foucault's notion of the Panopticon, at a more fundamental level, the skyscrapers symbolize the extent to which they are constructed by people for people, out of the human penchant for world-building and the desire to reach new and ever higher creative heights by means of continual innovation.⁴ While in the literal sense, the skyscrapers are constructed out of steel and glass, in the larger thematic landscape presented in the film, they resemble a community of Towers of Babel, so to speak, constructions (or narratives) that brush up against one another, overlap, conceal, and compete to outdo one another. Such is the cinematic world through which Hamlet, quite literally, walks. If, however, Hamlet is the "disaffected heir to the media empire of Denmark Corporation" who "struggles to carve out a cultural room of his own, some way of using the medium of the moving image [. . .] to express his own independent sensibility and create an artistic alternative to the engulfing corporate ideology of Claudius and his ilk," it is questionable if the former ever sets himself apart from the latter, even in death, even beyond the film's conclusion (Lanier 2016, 455).

The film ends just as it began, that is, with the portrayal of an "official" statement, this time delivered by a news anchor as part of a nightly news report for wide public consumption (Almeryda 2000, 1:44:44). Though Claudius and Gertrude are dead by this point in the film, another "version" of their enterprise at the beginning of the film continues unabated, by way of a different source and a different narrative. Two "official" narratives are thus delivered by socially sanctioned, "reliable" sources and bind together the film's beginning, middle, and end in a type of repetitive loop. Caught in this loop is Hamlet who, in his last moments, instructs Horatio, "I am dead. Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied. And if thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, absent thee from felicity awhile in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain to tell my story" (Almeryda 2000, 1:43:09 to 1:43:32). These are Hamlet's final words in the film, but they are not the film's final words. Hamlet's "story" is arguably erased by a teleprompter—who controls the teleprompter is unknown—and it has the final say. Yet even what the teleprompter claims is rendered dubious by the film's thematic concerns. "Our thoughts are ours," it says, but the film's final shot forces us to ask the following: how true is this really (Almeryda 2000, 1:45:20)? Whoever controls the teleprompter, Almeryda suggests, controls "[o]ur thoughts," whether it be a corporation (such as Denmark Corporation), a media outlet, or in Ing K.'s case, an increasingly authoritarian government.

4 For discussions of Almeryda's *Hamlet*, surveillance, and Michel Foucault's Panopticon, see Elizabeth Klett, 2013, "The Heart of the Mystery: Surveillance in Michael Almeryda's and Gregory Doran's *Hamlet*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 41 (2): 102–15; Mark Thornton Burnett, 2003, "'To Hear and See the Matter': Communicating Technology in Michael Almeryda's *Hamlet* (2000)," *Cinema Journal* 42 (3): 48–69.

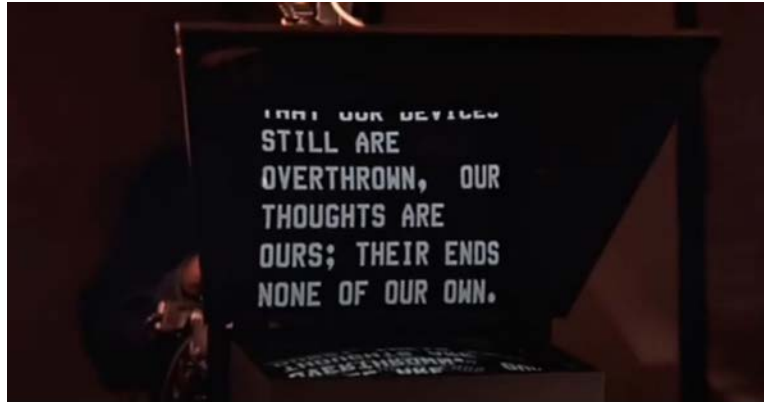


Figure 3: A mysterious man behind the teleprompter, a sort of “man behind the curtain” figure, undermines the claim that “our thoughts are ours.”

III

If the world of Almereyda’s *Hamlet* and Hamlet is situated at the advent of the “new millennium” when newscasters, journalists, cameramen, “independent” videographers, and CEOs compete for authorial dominance, for their “master narrative” to be disseminated to and consumed by the public, we see in *Censor*, over a decade later, that not much has changed or that circumstances are even more dire. In Ing K.’s case, and in *Censor*, we see that a film by an independent filmmaker is not merely disadvantaged by powerful competitors but completely banned by an entity even more powerful arguably than corporations or media outlets: the increasingly authoritarian government of Thailand. Moreover, if Almereyda’s *Hamlet* is confined to the realms of “fiction” and the screen, Ing K.’s *Censor* takes place in the perpetually unfolding arena of international affairs and current events, in a “global theatre” of the real from which there is no logical escape and which threatens to entangle kings and princes, artists and spectators alike. Indeed, one can imagine scenes of the 2006 or the 2014 Thai military coup, the often violent 2020–21 demonstrations against the Thai government amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the protests Ing. K and her allies led against government censorship playing alongside the footage of airstrikes, missile launches, and other “slices” of current events Almereyda’s *Hamlet* compiles and plays in his room.

Essentially, Almereyda’s *Hamlet* and Ing K. and Mani Sriwanichpoom are allegorical counterparts. The individualistic Mani and Ing K. repeat several times in the documentary that they, like Almereyda’s *Hamlet*, are independent filmmakers without the backing of a large, big-name studio. In this way, they may be best understood and approached as “Hamlets” in the postmodern sense who struggle so that they are precisely *not* co-opted into a state-run narrative perpetuated by the “powers on high” within the Thai government. As Timothy Parrish (1999, 696) puts it, one’s “assertion that he writes in opposition to the culture he depicts raises a critical conundrum [. . .] endemic to postmodern fiction generally: is it possible for a writer to produce fictions that are not in turn absorbed by the cultural forces out of which they are made?” Though Ing K. and Mani

are not writers of novels but rather a film director and producer, Parrish's point above sheds light on the fundamental "conflict" (if a plot requires one) depicted in this documentary: that between the individual and the ideological apparatus that is the Thai state. Unlike Hamlet, who instructs Horatio, "in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story," Ing K. and Mani have taken it upon themselves to tell their "true" story (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.2.383–84). Their "film-documentary" is living proof of this mission as much as they are "living" Hamlets. It is this relationship and the thematic resonances between these three artists that serve as the underlying seam for the reading of *Censor* below.

Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, often alone, pensive, and ruminative, *Censor* opens with a lone individual, Mr. Mani (though Ing K. films him and occasionally asks him questions). He is encased in a tight space, at the steering wheel of a car, presented in a grainy black-and-white, and the documentary's opening line is not "[w]ho's there?" but rather "where are you heading, Mr. Mani?" (1.1.1; Kanjanavanit 2014, 00:10). Ing K.'s question to Mani is apt in that it captures the various questions surrounding the trajectory of not only the fate of *Shakespeare Must Die*—will it finally be approved or banned by censors?—but also the direction of Thai democracy (or perhaps already lack thereof—this is arguably the underlying premise of the documentary) and questions surrounding Thai artists' ability to sustain themselves and remain independent from state propaganda. Indeed, "where are you heading" (or where are we headed?) (:10).



Figure 4: The opening sequence of *Censor Must Die*.

We soon learn that Mani is driving to the Office of Inspection of Film and Video within the Thailand Cultural Centre, which, in turn, is within Thailand's Department of Cultural Promotion. In essence, the film frames these various institutions as a collective state-run, bureaucratic hall of mirrors in which Mani, Ing K, and *Shakespeare Must Die* are refracted, then scattered into pieces at the hands of mysterious censor board members who hold meetings behind closed doors. As the scene continues in grainy black-and-white footage, Mani walks toward the Office of Inspection of Film and Video between a set of colonnades (he is surrounded by identical columns on both sides) and on a checkered tile floor that resembles a chess board (not unlike the palace floor depicted in Branagh's *Hamlet*). Notably, the producer of *Shakespeare Must Die* holds in his hands

not a script of the film (the work of art itself) but, rather, legal documents mandated by the Thai government to be filled out and approved so that the selfsame work of art can be released to the public in the first place. If Shakespeare’s Hamlet gets to stage his own performance with members of the acting troupe when he asks the “First Player,” “You could, for a / need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen / lines, which I would set down and insert in ‘t, / could you not?” and Almercyda’s Hamlet stages a premiere of his film (albeit one that is cut short), titled *The Mousetrap*, to “catch the conscience of the King,” this is denied to Ing K. and Manit’s *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.566–69, 2.2.634). More accurately, their *Macbeth* is not necessarily denied production—in fact, the budget for the film was provided by a Thai ministry—but rather denied circulation amongst Thai people. Only a “ghost” of the film emerges—the official trailer, which censors approved—and like the ghost of King Hamlet that appears at the beginning of the play and arguably sets it in motion, it is this arbitrary “ghosting” of *Macbeth* which suggests (or confirms) to not only Ing K. and Manit but also to the audience that “[s]omething is rotten in the state of [Thailand]” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.4.100). In fact, the only individuals who get to watch *Shakespeare Must Die* in its entirety are the censorship board members, the same people who ban the film for others. (Incidentally, as Manit leaves the Office, there is a sequence in which he walks down a set of stairs, disappointed by the ban, while the trailer, like a ghost, is played on top of the main shot and can now be viewed ad infinitum on various online platforms in place of the film itself.)

A particularly poignant scene comes about an hour into the film. After another board upholds the ban on *Shakespeare Must Die*, Manit and the 2010 Chairman of the Film Funding Committee (that distributed about 6.7 million USD or 200 million Thai Baht from the Creative Thailand Fund) are interviewed by reporters (0:57:09). Though it is called an interview, it is rather like a press conference comparable to the one we see at the beginning of Almercyda’s *Hamlet*. Just as Claudius gives his “official” statement on the death of King Hamlet and on the future of Denmark Corporation, standing side by side, Manit and the Film Funding Committee Chairman both provide their official statements. Essentially, two different histories and thus rivaling narratives are revealed, one by the Chairman as a representative of the Thai government and the other by Manit as the film’s producer.



Figure 5: Manit and the Chairman of the Film Funding Committee present their dueling narratives.

Although the Chairman provides a brief summary of the board's ruling while acknowledging the "beauty of the film," Manit says, with the Chairman standing right next to him, that he does not accept the verdict, that "since this country still lacks democracy, Thai filmmakers still have no rights and freedom" (0:57:29, 01:04:36). The Chairman looks on uncomfortably as Ing K. zooms up on his face, as if she is Hamlet watching for signs of Claudius's culpability. Manit continues, "I don't know the fate of Thai cinema. We can't see its future, only darkness . . . [the censors'] rationale is not logical . . . This is hard to accept. It's unforgivably contemptuous of the people . . . The film [*Shakespeare Must Die*] teaches morality. Basic morality. A man's greed and ambition that bring destruction to himself and his society" (01:04:37–01:08:36). Shortly after Manit begins to speak of Thai society at-large and the consequences it may face in the future due to censorship, the Chairman quickly leaves to "answer" a phone call and never returns, like a Claudius who has been found out. Indeed, what Ing K. captures here echoes Hamlet's mousetrap for Claudius. From Ing K.'s (and our perspective), the banning of *Shakespeare Must Die* and *Censor*'s efforts to "catch" on film the culpability of Thai state officials are mousetraps that have ensnared the Thai government. Especially in this scene, we see that what was meant to be a Thai production of *Macbeth* has become a contemporary Thai version of *Hamlet* whose plot continues to unravel unabated and which no censorship board can stop. (This point is especially salient given the mass demonstrations that were held by protesters in 2020–21 in response to the Thai government's increasing authoritarianism and the perception that the government is increasingly disconnected from the concerns of the general population.)

Unlike Shakespeare's and Almereyda's *Hamlet*, which depicts an individual enacting his personal vendetta within the confines of the royal court or the leadership of a corporation, near the end of *Censor*, we see that what first prompted its production—the banning of *Shakespeare Must Die*—is eclipsed by issues of human rights and democracy for Thai people, away from palaces, castles, and other centers of power. As Manit says, "[w]hat kind of country is this? I say to you, I'm not only fighting for—this is more than the film now. It's about rights and freedom. . . . It's infringement, undemocratic, unconstitutional" (02:10:04–15). Manit's remarks here, along with many foreign journalists' disapproval of the ban, confirms Garber's (2004, 696) assertion that "[a]ny idea the audience may have had, that events onstage would act as a safety valve, a buffer, or a social astringent, drawing out the poison, making things happen onstage so that they do not happen offstage" is denied "in the Shakespearean context." In other words, if Ing K.'s *Macbeth* was meant to be a film promoting reconciliation and a moral society by depicting a Thai Macbeth who, in his lust for power, does more harm than good to his society, what was filmed to eventually be presented onscreen was denied but by way of its denial exposed the "safety valve," or "buffer" the Thai government imposes on art in order to regulate their population's thoughts. The production and subsequent banning of *Shakespeare Must Die*, followed by the production and subsequent release of *Censor Must Die* reveals, in Claudius's words, "this warlike state" (1.2.9). If Claudius, however, spoke of the "state" to mean the states of Denmark and Norway and a potential conflict between the two, Ing K. and Manit too are in "a warlike state" not between two countries (the entire documentary takes place in Thailand and does not depict military conflict) but between the Thai government, individual artists, and the general public (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.9).

Depicted in *Censor* is not a battle of swords and shields, of cavalry and infantrymen. Rather, it is a seemingly never-ending cold war of attrition between varying narratives, perceptions, visions, and ideals that are constantly colliding with, and contradicting, one another. As a Thai journalist, Kong Rithee, says to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand while seated next to Ing K., "Frankly, I'm so tired of this [government censorship]. It's exhausting. I've been talking about the same thing for five, six years. I've been writing the same column over and over again. And I feel ashamed of myself. But nothing has changed" (Kanjanavanit 2014, 1:57:13–26). It is a "state" in which "what seems" ("actions that a man might play") and "what is" ("that . . . which passes show," Hamlet would say) constantly trade places (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.79–88). What "seems" to be the "true" stance of the various Thai censorship boards? What are the various methods employed by both Ing K. and Mani, and Thai government officials to convince Thai artists, the public, foreign journalists, etcetera that what they perceive to be "seemingly" true is instilled in others to be true too? These questions haunt *Censor* until—and arguably beyond—its "end."



Figure 6: Mani lost in the hall of mirrors that is the Thai state and its various institutions.

Whether *Censor* "ends" on a hopeful or a pessimistic note is ambiguous. Clearly, the documentary was approved by censors and is now widely available. Through it, we see snippets of the trailer, meet several of the film's actors in their costumes, and even hear a kind of course lecture on Shakespeare and Thailand, from professor Sakul Bunyatat, who plays Ross, Shakespeare's "proxy," in *Shakespeare Must Die* (1:10:19). The final scene, however, which takes place at the Administrative Court on August 9, 2012, precedes the Court's eventual upholding of the ban on *Shakespeare Must Die*. Looking at *Censor* in this way, it seems some things have changed while, at the same time, nothing has changed. In an exchange which reminds us of Hamlet's musings on Alexander the Great, that he "died . . . was buried . . . returneth to dust," and encapsulates the "ghostly" nature of adaptation itself, a woman at the Court tells Ing K., "I think our country's events repeat themselves at intervals. More violent, but similar. History doesn't repeat exactly, but similarly. . . . Everything stays the same all the years I've covered the news. Like, here we go again" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.216–17; Kanjanavanit 2014, 02:24:30–47). *Shakespeare Must Die* remains banned as of October 2023 and political turmoil persists in Thailand following a global pandemic, and amid a faltering economy, a global supply chain crisis, and grow-

ing disapproval of the handling of state affairs. But, if the way in which I have read *Censor* is any indication, echoes of Shakespeare also persist in Thailand despite the banning of a Thai *Macbeth*. In interpreting *Censor* as a “ghostly” version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Almereyda’s *Hamlet 2000*, I have attempted to go against the grain of censorship board members who, according to Mani, watched *Shakespeare Must Die* not for its art but for its offenses and, I have striven to revive Shakespeare in one of Ing K.’s works. After all, as she says near the documentary’s conclusion: “[i]t’s weird as if the film we made is living its own script” (02:24:27).

IV

It would be apt to conclude this essay in a way that allows Ing K. and her allies to get the last word, so to speak. The closest thing to a creative performance in *Censor* occurs when professor Sakul Bunyatat (briefly mentioned above) enters the boardroom after Mani and the 2010 Chairman of the Film Funding Committee deliver their dueling narratives of the ban. Appearing at times breathless and in tears, he offers an entirely improvised monologue that lasts nearly eight minutes and ebbs and flows in outrage and emotion. He comments not only on the ban but also on the general decline of creative freedom and intellectual thought in Thailand that he perceives from his vantage point as an actor, scholar, and teacher of Shakespeare, and a filmmaker in his own right. Captured in Sakul’s remarks is a rebuttal—as powerful as any monologue delivered by a Hamlet, a Macbeth, a Shylock, or a Mark Antony—of the censorship apparatus that has become the Thai state, delivered by a lone artist for those willing to listen and take heed:

We’ve the right to suspect foul play that some VIP has ordained from on high that our film must not pass, no matter what. . . . What a shame. I’m a filmmaker too. It’s so regrettable that an art film of this quality doesn’t have the chance to be shown to Thai people. . . . I’m on film juries. I’m fully aware the worth and quality of Thai cinema now is low. I don’t blame filmmakers. They have to make a living. But they’re forced to follow the dictates of people who want this country’s films to stupefy and erode life, to lower the Thai people’s intellect. . . . I must talk about this. I teach at the Fine Arts University. I work for the Cultural Ministry. Frankly, I’ve lost my faith. . . . Our country’s art is laid down within the framework of propaganda. But the most essential condition in the life of a working artist is the chance to make art of beauty, and meaning, of worth to the people. . . . If you’ve ever taken your art to its extremity, you’d know. The tears of artists don’t easily flow. They flow when we feel our work has worth. They flow even more when that work of worth is stepped on as worthless. . . . I live with a film that’s been banned and sneered at by the people who have power over culture, over this land. (01:10:10–01:18:00)



Figure 7: Professor Sakul Bunyatat lambasts state-sponsored censorship and control of art in Thailand.

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