

Book Review: *Theatre Censorship in Contemporary Europe – Silence and Protest*, edited by Anne Etienne and Chris Megson, University of Exeter Press, 2024.

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Starting with a broad definition of censorship as “any attempt to modify the integrity of the artistic work and its reception” (7), the book covers a wide range of practices that have effectively partially or completely silenced artists in various countries of Europe, from 1989 to the present. The fall of the Berlin Wall was taken as a starting point as it profoundly affected the distribution of power, nationally as well as internationally. Academic publications usually tend to explore the distant past but Etienne and Mergson’s work, a collection of very varied and precise case studies, makes the choice of focusing on the contemporary period and covering a wide range of geographical and social realities, which produces a unique and valuable addition to the field of censorship studies.

Censorship, the editors of the volume argue, may originate in the political, social or financial powers in place, and may take many forms, both direct, when play-texts are cut and performances forbidden, and indirect, when performances do not happen, for a series of reasons. Indeed, the book also considers self-censorship – which seems to be almost more effective than external censorship –, social censorship through protests against particular performances, and various more or less subtle cases of indirect censorship through political and financial pressure. If the example of director Kirill Serebrennikov, who was arrested and tried in Russia in 2017, springs to mind when thinking of political and state censorship, silencing can also operate more subtly, through lack or withdrawal of funding as is often the case in Slovenia, or through omission of sensitive subjects by fearful artists and theatre managements (we may think of Oliver Frlijić in Poland but also of the

culture wars currently being waged in Western democracies). Silencing can also be the result of a decision to stop producing controversial shows such as corridas in Spain or Shibari performances, or through protests organised by activists against productions which are deemed unacceptable, as exemplified by Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, which was canceled in the UK in 2010.

The book is structured in three parts. Part 1 ("Forms and Sources of Censorship") centers on the way censorship operates, from what source it originates and who it targets. Part 2 ("Ghosts of the Past") offers a historical perspective on censorship practices and part 3 ("Staging Taboos") considers particular instances of subjects that are deemed too sensitive and are therefore more regularly censored.

The book also alternates between longer chapters which offer a more expansive scope on topics, and shorter interventions which concentrate on single case studies or go through fields of investigation more thoroughly. This alternation is very effective in enlightening broader considerations thanks to very particular and precise analyses.

The book opens on one of those interventions, by Vicky Ann Cremona and Marco Galea who focus on the terrible fate of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was killed in 2017 after a bomb was placed under her car seat. Her assassination gave rise to protests and debates which ironically put under the spotlight the very causes which she defended and which her censors wanted to silence. The theatrical reappropriation of public space, public buildings and public debate by protesters, effectively preventing, that is to say censoring, the politicians who would have much rather had gone on exercising power through corruption in the wings, highlights how versatile and powerful, but also how spectacular censorship is.

In the first chapter, Milena Dragičević Sesić and Aleksandra Jovićević describe the recent developments of censorship in the countries of former Yugoslavia and the wider region of Central Europe. After observing a wide variety of censorial acts over the years, showing how the fall of the Berlin Wall which prevented censors, at least for a time,

from operating directly and openly, led to ever more inventive ways of meddling indirectly with productions, the chapter concludes: “All public performances are potentially political acts echoing variations of representative democracy, which, according to Jacques Rancière, generate and reformulate public life” (48).

In chapter two, Alex Trustrum-Thomas draws a terrifying picture of censorship in Putin’s Russia, centering on the telling itinerary of Serebrennikov, whose case highlights the sheer absurdity of the accusations against him (which did not prevent his being sentenced) and the hypocrisy of his accusers who are also his devoted spectators. Referring to the story of the Emperor’s new clothes, Trustrum-Thomas counterbalances the conclusion of the previous chapter: with an authoritarian regime, there is actually no need for subtle or indirect censorship, as keeping up appearances is not even at stake anymore.

In chapter three, Anne Etienne and Lisa Fitzpatrick concentrate on the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the silencing of women’s voices on Irish stages. A “semi-conscious or even unconscious censorship” (74) explains that women are much less represented not only as playwrights, theatre directors and stage directors, but even as fully-fledged characters, because “male characters are understood to interest everyone, while female characters are only of interest to women” (76). The authors conclude: “The operation of a largely unconscious ‘concealed agenda’ and its impact on women theatre-makers is an example of the workings of implicit censorship which marginalizes voices and creative works that disrupt settled assumptions and metanarratives” (85).

The second part opens on an intervention: Andrea Tompa explores censorship in Hungary, offering a historical perspective. In spite of the disappearance of official censorship in 1867 and the absence of visible regulation during the socialist era, the 2010 election was the start of a new period of indirect state interference and intimidation that effectually countered any attempt at fighting homophobia and violence against women in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

In chapter four, Denis Poniz explores the situation in Slovenia, going back to the 1980s thanks to artists' testimonies. For instance, Czech dissident and political prisoner Václav Havel, whose plays and books were banned in his own country, still saw his plays being produced in prominent Slovenian theatres, including the National Theatre in Ljubljana. This case exemplifies the very complex tensions at stake in the exercise of censorship, when a government uses restriction, cancellation but also leniency to show its power. Though Slovenia became an independent country in 1991, not much seems to have changed as private entities took over the role of censor from the state, skillfully hiding behind concepts of ownership and editorial policy to curtail free speech.

In chapter five, Agnieszka Jakimiak focuses on a case of self-censorship in Poland in 2013. Commissioned to produce the classic play written by Romantic poet Kaziński, *Un-Divine Comedy* in 1835, Oliver Frlijić wanted his adaptation to acknowledge the guilt and complicity of Poland in promoting antisemitic discourse. But faced with dissension in his own company and a breach with the management of the theatre which put the production on hold, Frlijić had no other option but to cancel the performance, effectively self-censoring his own work.

Chapter six is the occasion for Andrew Holden to contemplate opera censorship in the transnational context of Europe at large. To counter threats of censorship of sexual, moral and political content, major institutions have worked at diversifying their sources of income and their audiences, but in response, potential sites of censorship have also expanded to include casting, marketing, social media and audience engagement. Challenging blackface in Italy, trying colour-blind casting in Hungary, fighting against the silencing of Black voices in global opera, countering this silencing by proposing colour-conscious casting to better tackle the historic exclusion of artists of colour, opera productions have constantly fought against a multi-faceted censorship throughout Europe.

Part two ends with the intervention of Lonneke Van Heugten who analyses another case of blackface, this time in the Netherlands: the Black Pete controversy started in 2011 but the racist and reactionary show represents a tradition that lives on, as protests against it have stagnated. The surveys of the population are telling here: though a vast majority of people recognize that the character is racist, they are also inclined to protect a tradition that appears immutable.

Another intervention opens part three, in which Roaa Ali explores culture wars, also known more controversially as cancel culture, in the UK. Ali's argument is that "while cancel culture is a tool employed to redraw ideological fault lines, there is a danger that a more nefarious version could be sanctioned by the state to censor racialized and marginalized voices" (169). Exploring this very topical debate leads Ali to recognize that state censorship has now been replaced by commercial, economic and social interference.

In chapter seven, Chris Megson analyses the complex links between religion and censorship through several case studies, among which the cancellation of *Homegrown* in 2015 in the UK, which illustrates how sensitive the issue of Islam and Muslim citizens has become. In contrast, Rodrigo Garcia's *Golgota Picnic* also elicited protests in France, Poland or Malta because it was deemed blasphemous. As a conclusion, Megson reflects on the role of sacred images as a locus of faith for religious believers, and sees it as an explanation for those plays being targeted by censorious audiences.

In chapter eight, Olga Kolokytha, Yulia Belinskaya and Matina Magkou also explore the role of religious institutions in silencing theatrical productions in Greece where, though censorship committees were officially abolished in 1986, censorship practices have continued for political and religious (rather than artistic) reasons, thus showcasing the "instrumentalization of theatre for political purposes" (196). If further proof were needed, the very fact that the writers could not conduct more than five interviews for that chapter also shows how sensitive censorship and self-censorship still are, in an ever-more polarized and religious society.

Chapter nine centers on Spain, as Duncan Wheeler explores another kind of spectacle, corridas, which have been for some time the target of audience protest, despite audiences being twice as large for bullfighting as for theatrical productions. Once more, this particular case study shows how analysing any kind of theatrical performance through the lens of censorship uncovers very complex tensions between the freedom of creation, the freedom of audiences and the questioning of traditional forms of spectacle which seem to be no longer permissible in today's society. This is best exemplified by a few facts which highlight the very contradictions which work at the heart of censorship practices: attending a bullring is more and more considered as an exercise of democratic right in Spain; playwrights Federico García Lorca and Angelica Liddell both envisage the bullring as "a sacred place in which values cast aside by the (post-) modern world are embodied and enacted" (214); in Catalonia, though it is theoretically again allowed to stage corridas since 2016, no one has dared do so; in 2021, two bulls killed in a bullring in Gijón were named 'Nigeriano' (Nigerian) and 'Feminista' (Feminist).

The book ends on the intervention of Hannah Probst who recounts her experience as a spectator of a Shibari performance in Berlin and reflects on intra-community cultural censorship. Her conclusion that "acts are censored because we know about the constitutive power that acts can have" (237) may serve indeed as a general conclusion to the book as a whole: the long list of censored plays and the length to which censors go to find ways of silencing artists, as evidenced by the wide variety of case studies explored, in terms of geographical origins, historical and cultural contexts as well as form, certainly bears witness to the ability of theatre to resist, subvert and challenge oppression.