



The Screen Censorship Companion: Critical Explorations in the Control of Film and Screen Media

Edited by Daniel Biltereyst and Ernest Mathijs

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The word “censorship” comes from the Latin verb *censeo*, meaning “I examine, I evaluate”: in Ancient Rome, beginning around 443 BC, the word “censorship” defined the function of an elected magistrate—the censor—who, in addition to overseeing the census of the population, was appointed to scrutinize the moral conduct of his fellow Roman citizens, and to publicly denounce and punish the dissolute (for instance, by depriving them of the privileges connected to a certain social status, and even of political rights). Therefore, from the very beginning, the interplay of politics and public morality lies at the heart of the institution of censorship. Cut to the mid-twentieth century and zoom in on mass-medium cinema, the word ‘censor’ had become generally associated with the image of some anonymous State bureaucrat diligently taking notes during private film screenings to modify or remove images and sounds that his superiors find harmful to the population’s morality and, most importantly, to their own grip on political power. Edited by Daniel Biltereyst and Ernest Mathijs with the “aim to make recent innovative studies on film and media censorship available to an international English-speaking audience” (2), *The Screen Censorship Companion. Critical Explorations in the Control of Film and Screen Media* has the great merit of making censorship a less

“predictable” topic, broadening the horizons of censorship studies beyond the “coercive, repressive and top-down control mechanisms” used all over the world by the dictatorships of yesterday and today “to restrict freedom of speech or undermine free artistic expression” (1).

First, *The Screen Censorship Companion* broadens the horizons in a spatial and temporal sense, enriching the existing literature on censorship enacted by the usual suspects Fascist Italy-Portugal-Spain, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union and Maoist China with a wide range of case studies from different continents and historical periods. For instance, the edited collection encompasses the debate on film censorship from post-World-War-One Weimar Republic to today’s geo-political and business relations between US media conglomerates and the Chinese Communist Party, including essays on the situation in post-1923 Turkey, post-World-War-II Italy and France, and Chile, Argentina and Colombia from the 1970s to the 1990s, to name just a few notable case studies.

Second, and strictly related to the aforementioned broadening of spatial and temporal horizons, *The Screen Censorship Companion* doesn’t only focus on cinema as a film-theatre-based experience, but also takes into account film censorship across “a wide range of distribution and

access formats", from "video and digital media (VHS and DVD) to online streaming platforms", even including archives and libraries in the book's scope, "as their holdings, in whatever state of accessibility, form part of the collective history and memory of screen media" (8). Indeed, as the essays of the edited collection brilliantly show, when studying film censorship, analysing the film materials isn't enough, because more often than not film censorship is a matter of cutting, deleting, eliminating, i.e. making pieces of film disappear. In most cases, then, in order to "determine who censors, how and why" (15), it is necessary to rely upon paper materials—not only the news items and interviews published in the press, but also the written documents produced by the censors themselves to record their work and justify it to their superiors.

Third, *The Screen Censorship Companion* doesn't fall into the trap of the "hard censorship" model, equating film censorship with direct interventions by a given authority "through bans, cuts and alterations" imposed just before the finished film's release: censors had, and have, "a much broader repertoire of censorship strategies such as infrastructural and technological censorship, control over film production, distribution, exhibition and criticism, as well as tactics to influence public discourse around (and through) films" (1). In other words, "censorship can be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit, visible or more subtle [...] in terms of structural control, internalized censorship or self-censorship" (3): while the *Bücherverbrennungen*-like burning of films and the mobbing/jailing/torturing/murdering of film directors make headlines in countries that care about these sort of things, denying production funds or shooting permissions is just as effective a tool for restricting freedom of expression (perhaps even more effective, since it is much more discreet).

Fourth, by studying film censorship practices in a wide variety of countries throughout the twentieth century and in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, *The Screen Censor-*

ship Companion does a good job of showing that "authoritarian regimes did and do not have a monopoly on censorship" (2). In fact, as several essays of the edited collection demonstrate with in-depth and carefully documented case studies, "depending on the country and its specific political and cultural context, some forms of censorship also existed and exist in countries [...] with political pluralism, competitive elections and civil liberties, and countries with constitutions that proclaim high principles of media freedom and freedom of expression" (2-3).

Naturally, totalitarian regimes all over the world may use a great scholarly contribution like *The Screen Censorship Companion* as a tool to legitimize themselves by saying that democracies should look within first before criticizing other systems; that democracy didn't, doesn't and will never exist since all governments are fundamentally authoritarian; and so on. It is the usual rhetoric deployed by dictatorships in their internal and external propaganda to demoralize people into political indifference and apathy. In the end, it is a matter left to the intelligence of the reader to discern between countries where people are free to research and discuss past and present issues no matter how damning and dishonourable for the State, and countries in which the most obvious historical facts are denied via a mix of State-sanctioned disinformation, forced indoctrination, and psychological and physical intimidation. A good academic book—i.e. one that is truthful, well-written and seeks to contribute to the improvement of human knowledge and humanity as a whole—can't be written assuming that its readers are stupid or malicious. Trusting the intelligence and good faith of their readers, the essays collected in *The Screen Censorship Companion* provide careful and detailed studies of acts of censorship to establish a culture of accountability for each and every attempt to restrict freedom of expression, and not to let "the fog of generalization obfuscate the precise actions that make up censorship" (15). I can't but join the editors in hoping that *The Screen Censorship Com-*

panion may encourage more and more people around the globe to pursue the task of studying censorship throughout the ages as a way to better understand the contradictions of our present day, one in which the countries ranked 178/180 and 57/180 in Reporters Without Borders's 2025 Press Freedom Index present themselves as champions of freedom on the world stage.

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