

# Literature and Censorship, Truth and Fear

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The topic chosen for this year's special issue of *Comparative Literature* is by no means a random choice. At first, it may seem to be a response to recent Slovenian debates on media censorship,<sup>1</sup> but actually the reasons behind the choice are broader and more complex. Moreover, in our setting of the problem literature is equivalent to censorship, and the questioning subtitle of the issue – “Who is Afraid of the Truth of Literature?” – does not necessarily aim to reveal an utterly concrete censorial subject that would threaten the autonomy of literature from the outside, but (quietly) also questions the assumption that the emancipative, ethical potential that is usually evoked by the notion of “truth” can be ascribed to literature without reserve. This is why both the title and the subtitle require further explanation. We shall try to approach them with the help of two basic motifs that guided this choice.

Both of these have local flavour but, as we shall see, they also have broader implications. The first is the recognition that we are deeply marked by a *censored past*. Recent findings about Slovenian (or Yugoslav) cultural history in the second half of the 20th century show that we have been living in a carefully purified environment with measured doses of freedom, regulated by mechanisms of the ruling communist ideology, and that numerous facts were systematically suppressed. We have been living in a censored culture without official censorship where – despite apparent liberalizations – inhuman executions of tens of thousands, show trials, the cruel island prison on Goli Otok, repression of dissidents, and other crimes of the authorities were kept secret and *unarticulable* for decades. The ethical dimension of this *suppression* of course remains important, but we may find ourselves even more intrigued by the mechanisms that enabled it. How is such a thing possible? Ruptures were first to emerge in literature when the regime began losing strength. Substantial analyses by younger historians followed in the next decades. Aleš Gabrič's valuable findings on communist cultural politics or the anthology *Temna stran meseca* (The Dark Side of the Moon) – even if they are debatable in particular interpretations

or evaluations – are the necessary foundation; that is, the *missing foundation* that is needed in order to construct a credible reflection of the period. Only careful consideration of the censorial mechanisms can lead us away from essential errors that would lead our thoughts in the *pre-planned direction*; the ossified thesis of the Yugoslav “soft” version of communism therefore must be among the first to be deconstructed.<sup>2</sup>

Of course it would be naive to suppose that censorship is only a totalitarian idea. The variety of censorial modalities developed by 20th-century totalitarianisms – from brutal repression and profiled strategies incorporated into the social network (i.e., a society of spies), and from informal “chats” to paranoid self-censorship – all this represents an ideal historical training ground for developing theoretical concepts. The levers of totalitarian censorships seem to be surprisingly similar, irrespective of their ideological orientations. In fact, if we understand it as powerful interest groups’ control of the circulation of ideas in society, censorship is a *constant* of every culture.<sup>3</sup> When we become aware of this, unpleasant questions arise: what happened to censorship in post-totalitarian eras, in democratic societies? Did it really disappear – which is the first impression – or it is only concealed and camouflaged? Has it perhaps radically changed its nature?

The other motif that stimulated the present discussion is profoundly linked to the present, to one of the problematic areas of literary censorship in democracy. The transition to the new social order altered many relationships and, after the initial euphoria, caused a wave of disillusionment. Relevant censorial problems shifted away from their traditional locus, the relationship between the authorities and intellectuals. The trials of the Slovenian writers Matjaž Pikalo and Breda Smolnikar for supposed literary defamation have opened up many interesting questions about literature and its autonomy, freedom of expression, and differences between fictional and non-fictional texts. The collision of two social systems, literature and law, proved to be a complex theoretical issue: it cannot be dismissed with apriorisms or simple slogans.

Our initial research interest therefore appears to be twofold: on the one hand there, is a need for theoretical reflection, and on the other the need for analysing actual historical instances of censorship up to the present time. So far, however – except for the fact that comparative literature obviously has to deal with literature – we have not sufficiently justified our focus on literature. We have said even less about the subtitle, which might sound pretentious because it suggests an actual subject: an agent with a specific fear of the truth of literature that is supposedly a threat. Here we may think of a historically specific situation in the cultures that shared

(enforced) communist rule in the second half of the 20th century. If we observe the disintegration of the regimes and the transition to political democracy and capitalism in these countries – especially those that grappled with the concept of Central Europe at some stage<sup>4</sup> – we may easily justify the titular binding of literature and censorship. In a society that attempts to conceal its totalitarian nature, literature becomes a privileged space for playful and lucid utterance of the latent “truth” of this nature. The very same ethical potential that turned writers into opinion leaders and dissidents, whose symbolic capital grew during the censorial clashes, has simultaneously enthroned literature as a privileged space for articulating the truth. In this constellation, the question *Who is afraid of the truth of literature?* seemed to be unproblematic: literature is a herald of the actual truth, and it is suppressed by communist censors because it reveals their actual (Machiavellian) nature.

However, this question is only relevant in the context mentioned, and only if we retain this emotionally loaded concept of literature. To do so simply becomes impossible in circumstances under which literature is transformed into a capitalistic production division. This is why censorship – if we want to find out whether it exists and, if it exists, what its ontological status is – requires more thorough reflection. Defamation trials and certain calls by intellectuals to limit “poetic license” in the name of ethics, political correctness, and protection of marginal groups indicate that the situation in democracies has changed dramatically. Literature is no longer considered to be a herald of any special, privileged truth – in the sense of Aristotle’s polemics with Plato, which substantially defined the course of later autonomization of artistic fields. Instead, the special status of literature, the extravagant aura of its autonomy, seems to allow it to become an asylum for incorrectness, offensiveness, and untruth. Therefore the question of the fear of the truth of literature must be *reversed*. We must ponder the question of what this truth is, exactly. What is it like and how it is represented? Moreover: is there anyone that should still be afraid of literature and its ever-diminishing truths in the era of capitalist domination?

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As attempts to answer these questions in one way or another, the papers in this bilingual issue are divided into three sections; the first predominantly focuses on theoretical aspects of censorship, and the other two on actual censorship cases. My paper outlines the conceptual framework for theoretical reflection on the relationship between totalitarian and post-totalitarian

censorships and their relation to literature. From this predominantly sociological perspective, *Stephan Packard's* paper then leads us to the core of the problem of censorship at the level of communication. Packard introduces convincing terminology (e.g., the discourse of censorship, censorial/censored discourse) and a distinction between explicit and implicit censorship that meaningfully complements the more common usage. At the level of discourse, implicitness turns out to be censorship's ability to displace, bypass, and suppress the problematic content. Packard explains the logic of these displacements with a complex scheme of censorial strategies – a scheme that turns out to be instantly applicable to many of the cases elaborated by other contributors. With the problem of transforming jurisprudential discourse to literary theory in the court case against Maxim Biller's novel, Packard's reflection intersects *Rok Svetlič's* discussion of essential problems of the relationship between two autonomous social systems, law and literature. Svetlič shows the unbridgeable gap between them by presenting the effects of legal positivism in the legal practice, and without discussing the particular Slovenian cases, he touches one of the kernels of their issues.

In the second section, devoted to analyses of totalitarian censorship, *Guido Bonsaver* starts off with an intriguing tour of the hidden turns of censorship in fascist Italy that Mussolini organized and improved under the influence of Goebbels' Nazi model. The role that the regime ascribed to censorship is reflected in the extraordinary engagement of the dictator, who literally went over the contestable literary products with a red pen in his hand. Mussolini was inclined to semi-legal methods and improvisation – especially in his dynamic relationship with the Vatican, which was tempted to help create the censorial policy – while in public he tried to avoid the image of a harsh censor. *Salab Salam Ali* leads us to distant Iraq and its two phases of censorship, monarchic and revolutionary. Even in a radically different cultural context, it becomes strikingly evident that similar methods of repression lead to similar strategies of literary defence (e.g., metaphors, displacements, expressing the “truth” through madmen, etc.). In addition, these methods also lead to increases in the significance that is ascribed to literature, its language, and its means. The radical nature of fundamentalist censorship in Iraq – compared to which the fascist dictator bent over the problematic dramatic fragments seems almost like a kind-hearted uncle – the great rewriting of history, book purges, and total break with the West; all of this is reminiscent of European communist practices: in both cases, censorship is not only a means to preserve power, but also to systematically train a new, uniform individual.

This is also what we experienced in Slovenia after the Second World War, as *Aleš Gabrič's* paper, based on archival research, clearly demon-

strates. After meticulous library and bookstore purges and total preventive control of the “agitprop” apparatus, the new rulers were later content with (less obvious) control over the nationalized cultural institutions, in which a communist majority had been installed. The system, based on non-transparent interventions that thus created an atmosphere of dread and self-censorship, functioned almost perfectly: the retroactive (suppressive) measures only had to be applied in exceptional cases. It is exactly this image of censorship with a “human face” that the regime was trying to display, as *Aleksandra Jovičević* points out in her paper about Yugoslav theatre, and in fact it was more oppressive than it seems. Idealizing the past is a dangerous mystification, she claims; and, even if it was apparently softer, the informal (implicit) communist censorship was no less efficient.

*Gasper Troha's* paper, which opens up the final section on “post-totalitarian” censorship, deals with theatre as well. Comparing two stagings of the notorious Slovenian avant-garde play *Pupilija*, he sketches out some discrepancies between communist and democratic censorship, and questions the limits of freedom of artistic expression under two different regimes. In democracy it is impossible to point a finger at the censor, but how is it that the new, contemporary staging seems to be censored and mutilated at the end? Fear of an extremely high penalty is the mechanism of this subjectless censorship – if we shall stick to this term at all – while the legislation reflects new values (protection of animals), which in the shadow of mechanized slaughterhouses seem close to grotesque. *Andrej Zavrl* also follows modern transformations of censorship. He gives a short account of how the strategies of appropriating literature containing same-sex desire have developed – from explicit censorship to more far-reaching censorship through interpretation. If the explicit interventions are easily comprehensible, the discursive censorial manoeuvres (e.g., leaving out, diminishing, neglecting, or suppressing the same-sex desire) are brilliantly explained by Packard's scheme. In this case, it is not hard to recognize actual *fear* in the background – homophobia and heterosexism, which are not always fully conscious.

The final three contributions, each dealing with different aspects of (post)totalitarian censorship and self-censorship, also problematize the “truth” of literature and the concept of censorship in different ways. Dealing with Camus' unfinished novel *The First Man*, *Peter Dunwoodie* poses the question of literature's partiality, caused by initial thematic selection and investment of emotions. Here we enter the field of primary, internal constraints. Even if Camus understands the situation of post-colonial Algeria thoroughly, his autobiographical depiction of the community of Europeans evades the problem of collective historical responsibility and

focuses on nostalgic preservation from oblivion – of a community destined for decline. The “guilt” – which Camus in principle is well aware of – remains unspoken. This strategy of self-censorship has deeper roots in his philosophy and the utopian humanist project that through (selective) memory would only enable peaceful future coexistence.

In her analysis of the “Handke Affair”, *Louise Lambrichs* poses an important question: was it censorship when the director of Comedie Française removed Handke’s play from the programme after his notorious speech at Milošević’s funeral? The “censorious” act was clear and explicit, and its background was ethical; intervention in the arts was justified by the “immorality” in the political sphere. Nevertheless, it was radically *individualized*, and the shift away from the systemic regulation may be a state-of-the-art symptom. Lambrichs’ text might not show so evidently how “denial of reality” is manifest in (Handke’s) literature, but she definitely manages to point to the problem of defining censorship and to the strained relationship between ethics and the arts. *Simona Škrabec* opens up similar ethical dilemmas in her paper on poetic license. Literature is not necessary a herald of privileged truth, she claims; it can also be a means of manipulation. As contemporary Catalan cases show, freedom of speech is often understood as a freedom to say things that would be inadmissible outside of literature. We are confronted with the question of the autonomy of literature regarding ethics: is freedom without any limits the very freedom Europe has been striving for from the age of Enlightenment on?

At this point, when space for further reflection on post-totalitarian censorship has been well opened – even though ultimate answers could not have been offered – the final word is given to its seeming “objects,” the convicted Slovenian writers *Matjaž Pikalo* and *Breda Smolnikar*. They have rationalized their painful judicial experiences in very different ways, and their answers demonstrate that an interdisciplinary analysis of both cases would be a highly intriguing task. At the same time, this appears to be the area that shows most unequivocally that the present publication has only marked the *beginning* of a possible voyage. I would be very pleased if it also demonstrated that this voyage is also one that is *worth* setting out on.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These fierce polemics were treated most consistently in last year’s special edition of *Dialogi* (Dialogues), edited by philosopher Boris Vežjak. The journalists were critical of the censorial interventions in the media (e.g., new legislation, changes in editorial boards, etc.) and pleaded for freedom of speech, while the media owners defended their interference as legitimate, internal, and therefore non-censorial.

<sup>2</sup> See more in Jovičević and Gabrič's contributions in this issue, and also in Neubauer's introduction to publishing and censorship under communism (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer III, 37, 57).

<sup>3</sup> For an outline of the problem of defining censorship, see both Packard's contribution and mine.

<sup>4</sup> The term was launched by Friedrich Naumann's book *Mitteleuropa* in 1915 and re-introduced by intellectuals and writers (e.g., Kundera, Konrád, and Milosz) towards the end of the communist period as a motto of rebellion against communism and Russian dominance.

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