

## CENSORSHIP AND OBSCENITY

Censorship is the official prohibition, whether by civil or ecclesiastical authorities, of the publication and circulation of printed and visual materials.

*Basic Features.* While in former times the activity of censors focused primarily on the written word as the vehicle of subversive or sexually arousing discourse, in recent decades emphasis has largely shifted to visual expression. This change in emphasis is not a tribute to the power of art as such, but a recognition that in the age of film and television a large portion of the population derives its information and entertainment almost exclusively from these sources. In the case of written materials, many regimes, as in the Soviet Union today, have permitted the circulation of nonprinted (handwritten or typewritten) copies of otherwise unacceptable texts (*samizdat*). In North America in the past, some sexually explicit writings have been issued in this fashion. It has also been common to print materials abroad (*tamizdat*) and import them clandestinely—or to feign foreign issue through a false indication of place of publication.

The practice of tolerating certain hand-produced materials clearly shows that censorship is concerned not simply with the prohibition of materials, but with the size of the audience. A small elite, prepared to go to unusual trouble and to pay high prices, can be allowed materials that are denied to the masses. It is for this reason that medical and other books dealing with sexual matters formerly had the crucial details in Latin. This antidemocratic tendency, reserving sexually explicit materials to the few who can pay the monetary or linguistic entry fee, was a factor in the United States court decisions of the 1960s overturning censorship.

*Historical Perspectives.* The urge to censor is probably ultimately rooted in fear of blasphemy, the apprehension that if utterances offensive to the gods are toler-

ated their wrath will fall on the whole society. It was impiety toward the gods for which Socrates was tried and condemned in 399 B.C. The Roman erotic poet Ovid was banished by the puritanical emperor Augustus in A.D. 8.

On the whole neither classical antiquity nor the Middle Ages had an adequate system of surveillance that would permit prior restraint, a characteristic feature of censorship of the modern type. It is true that on a number of occasions, as Peter Abelard's *Introductio ad Theologiam* in 1120, works were condemned by medieval synods to be burned. However, no centralized machinery existed for the control of books. Since the monasteries had a monopoly on producing manuscripts, it was assumed that such oversight was not necessary. In fact the abbey scriptoria not only copied erotic materials from Greco-Roman times, but created their own new genres of this type. In any event, the medieval authorities were concerned more with doctrinal deviation than with obscenity.

The introduction of printing by Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century changed the whole picture. There was a much greater incidence of the issuing and circulation of heretical broadsides and brochures; without printing, the Reformation, beginning in 1517, might never have taken place. Yet, in the view of the authorities, it was not too late to lock the barn door. The centralization of printing in the hands of a relatively few firms made it possible to scrutinize their intended productions before publication; only those that had passed the test and bore the imprimatur could be printed. It was then only necessary to make sure that heretical materials were not smuggled in from abroad. In Catholic countries this system was put in place by the establishment, under the Inquisition, with the Index of Prohibited Books in 1557. In countries where the Reformation took hold the control of books was generally assumed by

the government. In England the requirement that books should be licenced for printing by the privy council or other agents of the crown was introduced in 1538. These origins explain why the activity of censors was for long chiefly concerned with the printed word. Revealingly, this system is still in force in Communist countries today.

One other area in which censorship was widely practiced was the theatre, where plays generally had to be licenced before being produced. In a few instances, as in England from 1642 to 1660, the theatres could be entirely shut down. Even where they were not, an antitheatrical prejudice lingered in many countries, which had the effect of limiting the range of subjects that could be safely presented lest the ax fall on all performers.

In the visual arts a similar broad attack was aimed at certain types of material. In the seventh and eighth centuries all religious imagery was banned by the iconoclastic rulers of the Byzantine Empire; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries similar attacks took place in Protestant countries of northwest Europe. Here, however, the prohibition was sacral in origin; images were said to contravene the Second Commandment.

The operation of censorship with regard to sexually explicit material may be seen in two seventeenth-century examples. The *Alcibiade Fanciullo*, a pederastic classic, was apparently written by the Venetian Antonio Rocco and published anonymously and clandestinely in 1652. Initials on the title page slyly suggested that it was written by Aretino, who was long since dead and safely beyond the reach of the Inquisition. The French author Nicolas Chorier contrived an even more ambitious ruse for his pansexual dialogues of *Aloisia Sigea* (1658?), which purported to be a translation into Latin by a Dutch author (Jan de Meurs) working from a Spanish original by a learned woman. As the censorship tightened in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, recourse to apparent—and increasingly real—

foreign presses was ever more necessary. Many French books, unwelcome to throne and altar, were published in Geneva, in Amsterdam, and in Germany. With the coming of the French revolution, however, all restraints were off. Thus the large works which the Marquis de Sade had composed in prison were published, as well as two fascinating homosexual pamphlets *Les enfans de Sodome* and *Les petits bougres au manège*. Although controls were eventually tightened again, Paris gained the reputation (which lasted until about 1960) among English and American travelers as the place where "dirty books" could be obtained.

*Anglo-American Censorship.* England itself entered an era in which respectability at all costs was the watchword. Through his prudish editions of Shakespeare, Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825) gave rise to the term "bowdlerize." At the ports an efficient customs service kept all but a trickle of works deemed to be obscene from coming in. In the United States, the morals crusader Anthony Comstock (1844–1915) not only fought successfully for stringent new legislation, but as head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice he claimed responsibility for the destruction of 160 tons of literature and pictures. The restrictions on mailability proved to be particularly hard on publishers of homosexual material, and this problem was not overcome until the ONE, Inc. case in 1954. A landmark in freedom to read books in the United States was the 1931 *Ulysses* case. Shortly thereafter, however, Hollywood instituted a system of self-censorship known as the "Hays Office." This device effectively prevented any direct representation of homosexual love on the silver screen for decades, the only exceptions being a very few foreign films shown at art houses. During this period book publishers practiced their own form of self-censorship by insisting that novels featuring homosexual characters must doom them to an unhappy end.

*Dismantling of Censorship.* Only after World War II did the walls begin to come tumbling down in English-speaking countries. In Britain the publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence were acquitted after a spectacular trial in 1960. In America Grove Press had obtained a favorable court decision on the mailability of *Lady Chatterley* in 1959; three years later the firm went on to publish Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* without difficulty. The travails of a book containing explicit homosexual passages, William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, were more extended. In 1958 authorities at the University of Chicago refused to permit publication of excerpts in a campus literary review. This led to the founding of a new journal, largely to publish the Burroughs text; once this had been done, a lengthy court battle ensued. Only in 1964 was the way clear for the whole novel to be issued by Grove Press. (The book had been published in Paris in 1959.)

Subsequently, a series of United States Supreme Court decisions made censorship impractical, and for all intents and purposes it has ceased nationally, though local option is sometimes exercised. This cessation permitted the appearance and sale of a mass of sexually explicit books, films, and magazines. The only restriction that is ubiquitously enforced is the ban on "kiddy porn," photographs and films of children engaging in sexual acts. In an unlikely de facto alliance, two groups emerged at the end of the 1970s in America to reestablish some form of censorship: one consisting of fundamentalists and other religious conservatives; the other of feminist groups.

A new type of censorship has arisen in cases where public institutions become fearful of losing government funds. In June 1989 the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, canceled a retrospective exhibition of the work of the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe containing explicit homoerotic images because of concern that Congress might slash the

funds of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the sponsoring body. The cancellation was, however, vigorously protested, and as a result Mapplethorpe's work became better known than it had been previously.

*See also Pornography; Private Presses.*

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### CERNUDA, LUIS (1902-1963)

Spanish poet. Cernuda was an unhappy man; his only major and enduring pleasure, the writing of poetry, was the focus of his intellectual life. He scorned careers, and supported himself by working in a bookstore and by commissioned translations. During the Spanish Civil War Cernuda moved to England, later to the United States, in both of which countries he held university teaching posts, which were for him nothing more than a source of income. His last years were spent in Mexico, where he died.

Cernuda was a twentieth-century Romantic; he admired and wrote on the English and German romantic poets, and translated Hölderlin into Spanish. Timid, introspective, misogynistic, easily offended, in an isolation at least somewhat self-imposed, he permitted few to be his friends, and never had an enduring love relationship. He was obsessed with the loss of his youth and with the fugacity of sexual pleasure. His anger was expressed in withdrawal and in poetry, rather than activity in support of social change; Cernuda felt the world unworthy of efforts on its behalf.