

- Call for papers -

## SYMPOSIUM

### CENSORING ARTS, FRAMING BODIES

Paris, on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Call open from May 3<sup>rd</sup> to and including July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

If censorship of bodies in art has been examined before, studies on this topic have not yet truly achieved to comprehend the whole of artistic practises<sup>1</sup> in order to question the ways and means of framing bodies<sup>2</sup> over a long period of time<sup>3</sup>. This symposium wishes to be the opportunity to actively link together both the long-running interest in studies about bodies in art and the vast reflexions on censorship, in an interdisciplinary approach and through a social, historical, and political prism.

Whether it is institutional or less official, censorship is the doing of a group or an individual to which belongs either power or a moral upper hand. In a narrow sense, it is distinguishable from scandal, exclusion, erasure, or taboo. It applies to productions considered detrimental to the ideas and/or the dominant customs of a given society. Processes that might diverge from this strict definition and have to do with control over bodies must however be taken into account as well.

Given their reach and their ability to shape imagination, artistic productions have been targeted by censorship in its broad sense. Human bodies are both subjects of works of art and objects of societal norms and moulding, and are therefore particularly aimed at by this phenomenon, whether it is openly asserted or more insidious. This applies to all bodies: bodies of colour, disabled bodies, fat bodies, queer bodies, trans bodies, women's bodies (this is a non-exhaustive list).

Censorship can intervene from the very conception of a work of art up to its present or late reception. It can therefore take different shapes: officially prohibiting the work of art, refusing to publish or to display it in front of the public, but also concealing it insidiously or spurring artists to censor their own work.

It is during the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the catholic Church hardened its position towards representing naked bodies, whereas the Middle Ages were characterised by a greater tolerance in this field, the Church's active actions being mainly aimed at breaches of dogma and heresy. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) started a new movement towards a sharper control of artists on nudity, and several treatises were meant to provide them with guidance on that matter. Works of art that were produced earlier are now "corrected", veiled, or destroyed. The Council confirmed a shift that started at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Censorship belonged at first to the Church as an institution before its exercise started to be increasingly shared with the central power and became first and foremost the doing of the ruling class in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through laws and trials. Nowadays, censorship's boundaries and means seem to grow more intricate and more diverse.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance *Représentations-limitées des corps sexuels dans le cinéma et l'audiovisuel contemporain*, 2015, INHA.

<sup>2</sup> *Contextes, formes et reflets de la censure. Création, réception et canons culturels entre XVI<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, 2019, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Les mises en scène de la sexualité et leur (dis)qualification : obscénité, pornographie et censure (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, 2008, Université libre de Bruxelles ; *Des corps dans la ville, normes et écarts au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, avril 2020, (dans le domaine de la presse et de la littérature).

To ensure the consistency of our symposium, we choose to limit the geographic area for potential communications to France. Proposals with a transnational comparatist approach or regarding the reception of foreign works in France or French works abroad will however be included.

*The following examples and issues are meant to help the reflection on the symposium's subject; it is not, in any way, an exhaustive inventory. All forms of art, every aspect of visual and literary culture will be considered.*

1. **CONDITIONING / HIDING BODIES:** danger and immorality of (the) flesh

From the prudish repainting of pictures to the trials faced by some writers and artists, censorship has often sought to hide bodies that were considered immodest and immoral. After the Council of Trent, biblical figures are hidden, covered with new elements even when it means distorting the artist's original meaning. Depending on the historical and moral context, the same body can be regarded as faithful, authentic or blasphemous.

In visual arts, if hiding and covering means using objects to hide the subject's genitals, there can also be a "fig leaf by omission"<sup>4</sup> when the pubis is altogether missing, negating both the reality and the scandal potential of flesh itself. These choices go beyond their original religious context, and the censoring power can be hard to identify between the institution, the artist, or even the public – especially as of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, the official censor's eye is castigated by artists who find it lustful. In 1903, the Franco-Belgian periodical *L'Idée libre* ("The Free Thought") published an inquiry about "Art and pornography" which came to the conclusion that censorship had a pornographic dimension since it sought to look only for obscenity, and not for Beauty<sup>5</sup>. Questioning the gaze of the man or woman who censors is crucial, as well as the space of exhibition. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a work of art that got into the Salon is not tolerated in a church whereas another like Gustave Courbet's *Origine du monde* ("The Origin of the World"), which could not be presented at the Salon, finds its place in a private collector's home.

Censoring and self-censoring, although extremely important in visual arts, also happen in literature. Publishers have regularly tried to erase entire passages about sexuality and desire, especially when it concerns autobiographical writings of any sorts in order to bring the text back to what is socially accepted. In the posthumous publication of Marie Bashkirtseff's *Journal*, her mother deleted any reference to her love stories and desire, which also raises the question of gender norms and of the importance of respectability for a young noblewoman<sup>6</sup>.

Inquiries into the forms that censorship and self-censorship can take are therefore expected, especially if they relate to how bodies are framed, altered or even erased. One should also ask whose eye is carrying the power to censor, and why.

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<sup>4</sup> Sylvie Aubenas et Philippe Comar, *Cache-sexe : le désaveu du sexe dans l'art*, Paris, Éd. de la Martinière, 2014, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> "L'Art et la pornographie", *L'Idée libre : littéraire, artistique, social*, t. 5, 3e année, n° 1, janv.-juil. 1903.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Éléonore Chartier, "Marie Bashkirtseff : les complexités d'une censure" dans Catherine Viollet et Claire Bustarret, *Génèse, censure, autocensure*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2005.

## 2. **CONTROLLING/OVEREXPOSING BODIES:** creation framed by society's norms

The process of overexposing a standardised body, presented as 'normal', is complementary to the invisibilisation of marginalised bodies and completes the censoring operation. The various norms thereby impose patterns upon representations. Antique statuary is a striking example of this process. Received for a long time in the modern Western world as the epitome of a corporeal perfection based on whiteness, firmness of the flesh and a bashful/modest eroticism, this statuary had a lasting impact on mindsets. It enforced the idea of a body kept under very strict control. For instance, the neoclassicism of the French Revolution sets itself under the patronage of the Roman Republic by exhibiting muscular and stoic Hercules. These political issues often double as moral issues – still during the Revolution, David's Horaces refer to a noble, heroic and hegemonic/dominant vision of masculinity.

When female bodies begin to appear on stage or on screen, at the very end of the 19th century, it is not without conditions: they have to be wrapped in a coloured flesh suit – white of course –, or covered in a white pearl coating which makes it look like marble. In both cases, bodies are standardised, smoothed, whitened and "statuarised". They convey a vision of a single exhibition-worthy body. This standardisation of performing bodies is very frequent for instance in ballet, where the individuality of the bodies is negated. They have to fit in the mold to 'be as one'.

Representations also endeavour to exhibit immorality in order to exert a firmer grip on it in the society. It is what 19th century physiologies, written or visual, try to do. Heirs to the categorising science of the French Enlightenment, they portray vices, deviances and anomalies and scrutinize them, identify them to prevent them. The same process of fascination and repulsion is at stake in the exhibition of colored bodies since the beginning of Orientalism, and in further representations influenced by colonisation.

Such a framing of the representation of bodies in visual and literary culture participates in framing the collective imaginary it creates. It is also setting the boundaries of this collective imaginary, and pointing out what stands outside of it, in the margins. Which bodies belong to the unthinkable, the unspeakable, the 'unexhibitable'? Which bodies are rejected in abjection and become bodies that, in Judith Butler's words, 'do not matter anymore'?

## 3. **WHAT ABOUT AGENCY?** Eluding censorship to shape new ways to see diverse bodies

To conclude, we will focus on the relationship between institutions and artists. Institutions relay and produce sets of norms that influence creation, sometimes by limiting it, or even by censoring it. Some artists question through their work these sets of norms that they cannot ignore, and in which they have to evolve. By calling up and using these norms, they analyse them, make them visible, elude them and play with them. We are interested in bringing up the question of artistic agency and the revolutionary dimension of some endeavours and approaches, which rise up against norms and against the dominant gaze.

Indeed, some artists knowingly create artworks that could be censored in order to demonstrate the impact thereof. Censorship enforced by institutions consequently becomes a symptom and a proof of the existence of a normative system from which artists try to emancipate (see Deborah de Robertis' work). Censorship becomes a confrontation of a dominant gaze and it enables us to notice its effects and to deconstruct it to allow other visions of bodies to emerge. Summoning, among others, Laura

Mulvey's concept of 'male gaze', we would like to investigate approaches of artists in resistance, and the ways in which they confront normative visions and representations while putting forward alternatives.

What are the survival strategies of the artists who are systemically censored? At the end of the 19th century, women artists invest 'minor' forms of art such as mediumnic performance, their bodies becoming a way of existing on artistic scenes that usually exclude them<sup>7</sup>. These endeavours have a very strong echo today, in a context where representations of marginalised bodies are often censored by the algorithms of social media such as Instagram or Twitter.

What could be the limits of this creative agency? That is another question we would like to address. To understand the diversions/misappropriations created by these artists, one often has to have distanced themselves from a normative way of thinking, which might exclude a large part of the audience. Moreover, these artistic initiatives may be seen as limited in a way that they are those of individuals facing institutions that mirror and perpetuate in their structure systemic inequalities while participating in maintaining dominant representations.

This call is meant to favor a transdisciplinary dialogue and is open to all researchers whatever their disciplinary field or status (master student, doctoral student, post-doc, independent researcher, tenured). Communications will not be longer than 20 minutes. If you are interested, please send your bio-bibliography (250 words) and their proposals (500 words, in French or in English) to the following email address **before July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021**. The symposium will take place **on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> 2022 in Paris**.

**EFiGiES's Corps, genre, arts Workshop** and the **association Queerinal** of l'Ecole nationale des Chartes are taking care of the scientific organisation of the event. More information can be found here: [ateliercga.hypotheses.org/578](http://ateliercga.hypotheses.org/578).

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<sup>7</sup> Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, *Créatrices en 1900. Femmes artistes en France dans les milieux symbolistes*, Paris, Mare & Martin, 2015.

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