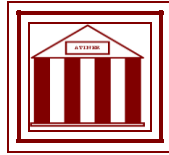


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**Film Censorship during the
Portuguese Dictatorship (1926-1974)**

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Film Censorship during the Portuguese Dictatorship (1926-1974)

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Abstract

With the raise of the fascist dictatorship in 1926, film censorship was created in Portugal to prevent the use of violent or immoral scenes, defined by a few simple rules. After the end of World War II, the inner rules of Censorship Committee became more severe, preventing the Portuguese public from dealing with the consented liberties in democratic countries where film censorship, though existing, was not as restrictive.

Cinema was seen as a special 'penetration force', and members of the Committee were nominated directly by the head of the government, Salazar. Thus censorship criteria reveal closely the State strategy of information (and misinformation). However, without any written definition in the law, the criteria of censors was subject to changes, adaptations and reinterpretations, along the 48 years of the authoritarian regime.

But the main damage was the one inflicted by censorship to Portuguese films: many films were cut, some were forbidden and many projects aborted. We have found that, besides formal censorship, other forms of censorship had place: informal, commercial and self-censorship. This menace would reinforce the fear of being censored and confined our cinema to remain less than mediocre.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate and discuss the different mechanisms of censoring. The scope of our research is the censorship imposed to films during the Portuguese dictatorship (from 1926 to 1974). The corpus of our research is the minutes and reports from Censorship Commission, as well as the cuts upon films itself, compared with the original scripts.

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Introduction

Censorship history goes along with social and cultural history for centuries. To censor is to shut up the mouth of someone whose thinking is not wishful to someone else. The act of censoring usually is taken inside a power relationship (or the attempt to get the power). So, we could advance a simple definition: censorship is a restriction to freedom of speech imposed by force.

The purpose of censorship is to maintain the power; the way to get is to control the freethinking; that can be done by two means: propaganda and censorship.

In Europe, during the XX century, censorship has crossed different political regimes and countries, until it was formally abolished in the seventies, according to most of the constitutional national laws¹. Although other forms of information control persist, such as the age classification of film and video².

Censorship usually begins with a justification based upon collective interests and eventually as a social *accepted* mechanism of ideological control. But within time it becomes a strong repression tool at the service of a small group (the one which has the power) - acting against freethinking through a general capitulation by the acceptance of self-censorship.

Short history

In 1926 – after 16 years of republican freedom of speech (and a lot of political revolts and instability) – censorship was once again re-enacted in order to guarantee ‘citizens interests’³, ‘to defend public opinion from pernicious ideas to social order’⁴, and to convey ‘truth and justice’⁵. The claim for the truth is usually the sharp evidence and the totalitarian will of this propaganda. As Salazar (the Portuguese dictator for 40 years) stated: ‘Politically it only exists what the public knows to exist’⁶.

Then the State created a ‘system of vigilance’ aiming to ‘mold mentalities’ and ‘indoctrinate the people’⁷. The instruments to achieve it are information control and police repression.

LAW

During the 48 years of dictatorship, censorship criteria evolved somehow. The first written law after the military coup who took power in 1926, prevented movies from showing violent or criminal scenes and images able to influence spectators in a pervasive way, and it was helpfully precise in the definition of image contents that were to be forbidden:

¹ Which rights were unified in 2000 within the ‘The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union’, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/default_en.htm

² Petley, 2009.

³ Caldeira, 2008, 9.

⁴ Artigo 3º da Constituição Política de 1933 (Cabrera, 2008, 31).

⁵ Artigo 20º da Constituição Política de 1933 (Cabrera, 2008, 30).

⁶ Caldeira, 2008, 13.

⁷ Santos, 2008, 68.

‘The exhibition of pernicious movies to the popular education is strictly forbidden’, as well as the incentive to crime, by the attack on morality or the political regime, and all images containing: bad treatment to women, torture of men or animals, naked people, sensual dances, chirurgical operations, death executions, prostitution, assassination, burglary, and the glorification of crime by any signs or photographs’¹.

The specifications of such contents supposedly defended common moral standards and were clear enough to have the agreement of the people, even if any criticism to the political regime could be punished.

The educational purposes of censorship were deeply expressed later on. In 1939, children under the age of six were forbidden to assist to any public show, and until 12 they could only attend during the day². In 1957, some restrictions were attenuated, and the total prohibition was reduced until 4 years old, and were created five age different classification levels, in prevention of the ‘spiritual formation and moral and intellectual development of youth’³.

WAR TIMES

After the end of World War II, while democratic regimes were created in some countries in Europe, Portugal, Spain and Greece endured authoritarian regimes for 3 more decades.

The actual Censorship Committee for Spectacles was created only in 1945, and the inner rules of censoring became more severe, defending the Portuguese public from dealing with the consented liberties in other countries where film censorship, though existing, was not as restrictive⁴.

However, the new laws never defined the contents and the criteria for the action of censorship. Nobody could know, except from the experience, what should or should not be said, mentioned, expressed, imagined... Censors had their own criteria, which were tighten or softer depending on they subjectivity, strategy and superior orders given directly by the head of the government, Salazar.

Film censorship over foreign movies was a hard job to do⁵, as the state tried at all costs to maintain people unaware of political, social and moral realities in Europe and the United States.

National propaganda and mythology turned to Africa and its colonial territories. In 1961, a colonial war began – in Angola, Guiné and Mozambique. It lasted 13 long years – until 1974 when a military coup restored democracy and gave independence to those countries.

¹ António, 2001, 17.

² António, 2001: 18.

³ Decreto-lei nº 41051, de 1 de Abril de 1957 (António, 2001, 20).

⁴ We should remember that until the seventies, and further, even democratic Europe countries had censorship (Maarek, 1982; Robertson, 1989).

⁵ *Vide* António, 2001.

During the sixties, pacifist films were strictly forbidden¹, and the age allowed to attend war films was downgraded in order to prepare youth for the war². The representation of eroticism was slightly accepted. But Portuguese films were always severely cut and prohibited.

The resistance was almost impossible. Just one neo-realist director – Manuel Guimarães – had the strength to persist, but he was hardly punished by censorship, with most of his films mutilated and diminished.

The New Cinema generation of the sixties tried a different strategy; they avoided explicit political references and created an allegoric and allusive mode of expression that could allow them to express distress without mentioning the causes. A culture made of taboos did grow inside film art and deeply stuck their roots, even long after the democratic revolution (1974).

SCOPE AND CRITERIA

Different censorship committees existed for different areas of control: press, books, theatres, movies, radio, television³, education, and arts. Theatre and cinema were together into the Censorship Commission of Spectacles⁴ and were censored by the very same men.

Unlike other media based upon verbal language (press, books, radio), cinema and theatre use visual and corporal languages. Censor attention is concerned with gestures, behaviour, prosody, but also suspected intentions and veiled symbols.

We can say that those *censormen* – in face of the imprecise semantics of images and gestures – revealed a strong anxiety and redoubled severity towards this *media*, considered at the time as effective means for influence and shaping of behaviour and ideas. They had no doubts about the ideological power of images, and so they used it as propaganda tools, following the principles enounced by António Ferro (the creator of the New State *philosophy* for culture) in the so-called ‘Politics of Spirit’⁵.

From the comparison of different studies on censorship in different countries, we could say that dictatorships have similar methods and they try to prohibit similar contents. The national security is ‘the same old pretext’, says Costa who studied Brazilian censorship, but soon this reason legitimates moral and aesthetical police control⁶.

Also, these contents remain common to different areas of action: press, theatre, cinema, etc. Their ‘motivators’ or ideological motives concern these 3 aspects:

- a) Educational and moral

¹ Since 1961, the year of the beginning of colonial war. (António, 2001, 57).

² António, 2001.

³ Television was born in Portugal in 1957 and its own characteristics – the direct emission and the huge flux of information demanded a special inside organization, with a personal *agent* and several internal and disguised surveillance *officials* (Caldeira, 2008: 15).

⁴ Later named by the eufemism: ‘Commission for Exam and Classification of Spectacles’ (1957).

⁵ Santos, 2008.

⁶ Maria Cristina Castilho Costa, 2008: 79.

By classifying films according to educational and age proper values, and also preventing people from seeing immoral scenes like adultery or sexual references, in a paternalist attitude towards the illiterate masses of population;

b) Political

Preventing the State from being questioned, pinched or even referred, and certainly never let the government itself to be touched; in all portuguese cinematography of the dictatorship only 2 or 3 films of propaganda could refer to the man in power;

c) Religious

The aspect that relinks both other two, educational and political: at a moral level by using bad and good moral examples into the films, mostly concern with women behaviour; and at a symbolic level defending any disrespect or dishonour towards the *sanctity* of power, by teaching obedience to the Pátria (Fatherland, the nation itself) and their patriarchal representatives¹: the priest, the *pater familias*, and the *patron* (the boss).

Significantly, the religion topic still provokes hard reactions claiming censorship, even after the end of dictatorships².

THE CENSORSHIP COMMISSION

Since 1945, Censorship Commission kept their weekly meetings and respectively minutes, as long as censoring reports over films and plays. These documents recently released into the National Archive³ enable us to study and try to understand his scope and criteria.

The 10 members of the censorship Commission discussed their own criteria, and when they disagreed, they wrote down their arguments and took decisions by vote. Surprisingly enough, they used democratic methods.

Also, producers and distributors could appeal from their decisions, and these letters are the richest documents about the motives and details of the cuts and prohibitions. But most of the times censors had no doubts, when they had they would vote and usually maintain their cuts or prohibition. Indeed there was a fearful unanimity that would prefer to castrate than to authorize and became *unauthorized*.

Some exceptions did happen. In 1956, a new president of the Commission was designated, Eduardo Brazão, who defined a new criterion that would not condemn to the oblivion great universal authors, like Shakespeare, for instance. The commission censors were forced to accept this basic rule, even though with some reluctance.

A few months later, Brazão extended the rule to Portuguese authors – in defence of national culture – and our great play writer from the XVI century, Gil Vicente, had to be protected and authorized. That's how the neo-realist

¹ Areal, 2011.

² There are many examples of films about Christ that were targets for fanatic religious people. In Portugal, it was the case of *The Hours of Maria* (*As Horas de Maria*, 1979) by António Macedo, who received menaces and agressions.

³ SNI files were release in 2006 CF by Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (antt.dgarq.gov.pt)

Manuel Guimarães luckily had its film *Vidas Sem Rumo / Lives with no Goal* (1956) approved, four years after having been half cut and refilmed. But Eduardo Brazão soon quit the job, and censorship again became slowly more fearful and restrictive.

In 1969, Salazar was dying and the new head of the Government, Marcelo Caetano, opened up a little the censorship criteria, but it didn't last long¹. Government felt the control was escaping them, and they reinforced again the severity of criteria. Several films were prohibited, as they had already gone too far in their rebellion representations².

Portuguese movies: the methods of censoring

While foreign films were authorized, cut or prohibited³, and eventually re-evaluated when distributors claimed for, Portuguese films endured stronger restrictions, because they needed the Censorship approval before being shot. Many projects were aborted before they could breath. Cinema was asphyxiated like no other form of art. Projects remained in the censorship's drawers, and its study – still to be done – could reveal the potential for a cinematography that almost didn't exist⁴.

However, film directors, in their strong will to film and their ingenuity, submitted their projects to the Commission and to the Fund for National Cinema. This is the evidence that the relationships between filmmakers and the power were close enough, and that reward and punishment were administered in such a manner to keep the former quietly hoping.

Even directors who were pro-regime were censored and his films cut and even prohibited⁵. Even those tried to always to push the limits of representation a little forward. It was like a dance or a game, in which each part measures forces and tries to enlarge or restrain the boundaries of morality, mainly in the representations of sexuality and behaviour.

This shows the prescriptive nature of censorship and its apartment from real life and the representations of life itself.

Censors did see more films than anyone else in the country; they had a large filmic culture, and a broad notion of life representations in foreign countries. However they considered Portuguese public was not prepared for it.

Year after year, they kept their standards and refused to understand times had changed. That's how and why the revolution was made possible: men in power were blind within their old convictions. Authorities were not prepared for it.

To fully understand the scope and criteria of the Committee, we currently study the reports and minutes where their members discuss and write down

¹ Cabrera, 2008, 47-54; António, 2001, 44-50.

² Areal, 2011.

³ Costa, 2000, 457.

⁴ João Bénard da Costa, *O Cinema Português Nunca Existiu* (Portuguese cinema never existed).

⁵ Arthur Duarte, one of the regime trusted directors, had a film forbidden, *Encontro com a Morte* (*Dating with death*), produced in 1965 in Brasil, and telling a sensuous story of adultery.

their arguments. Some examples can demonstrate the methods or processes by which censorship was applied and achieved within a social stable situation. These *forms* of censorship appear to be constant patterns within different contexts¹.

1. PREVIOUS CENSORSHIP

O Dinheiro dos Pobres / The Money of the Poor (1956, by Artur Semedo) is a moralist film. The protagonist is a priest whose the hard job is to take care of orphans and coping with their own family traumas, namely the rape of his former bride.

The ‘previous censorship’ approved the script, warning that it would be very difficult to maintain decency within the theme and that it could be forbidden later². The film was made and suffered several cuts, but still conveyed a strong moral message that passed the censoring standards.

To avoid such restriction, other filmmakers presented their scripts and asked for financial support saying the shooting had already begun, even if it wasn’t necessarily truth³.

The preventive censorship of films was cancelled after 1957, putting the risk of production into the hands of producers making them the ones to weight about the appropriateness of its content, if they didn’t want to lose their money.

2. FINAL CENSORSHIP

When *The Money of the Poor* went to ‘final censorship, many cuts were applied, but the hard scene of the raping was authorised and also the small reference to the female protagonist being a prostitute; two things did not pass, though: the final miracle where the paralytic child walks and his mother’s redemption abdicating of him, but still crying. Censorship denied moral release for the protagonists; they should suffer forever the consequences of their errors, conveying to the public a strong moral warning.

Many other movies were victims of the sharp scissors of censors who knew perfectly how to interpret simple gestures who expressed subtle feelings or judgments. They also knew how to defend the powerful class from being regarded distrustfully, like in *Pássaros de Asas Cortadas / Birds with cut wings* (1963, by Artur Ramos), where the upper class tedium is affected by a glimpse at the clock while a funeral is taking place; this insert was cut⁴.

Any references to the religion or the social structure – like showing poor people with hunger – were to be cut.

To avoid the severity of cuts, some directors did send their films to foreign festivals before they presented them to censorship. If the film was accepted, and the press made a big news, this was a trump over the Commission, who would be more cautious. That’s the example of *A Promessa / The Vows* (1972, by António de Macedo) selected for Cannes Film Festival in

¹ Petley, 2009.

² Areal, 2011: 28.

³ The case of Manuel Guimarães’s *Vidas sem Rumor* (Areal, 2011, 462).

⁴ Príncipe, 1999, 232.

1973. But it turned out that the Committee was inflexible and ordered fatal cuts to the film structure¹.

3. INFORMAL CENSORSHIP

However, directors and producers had the possibility of making a complaint and used it often. These texts are the best testimonies to motifs that were implicit in the cuts, because, unlike producers, *censormen* didn't argue much; so, in these words we can read and understand their deeper intentions.

So, Macedo made several requirements without any success. As a last resource, he took the courage to speak directly with the Secretary of State above the Commission, and he could get their agreement.

In fact, the limits of expression – the cuts on films – were negotiated in-person between social agents: censors, producers, authors, and directors. Most of the negotiation was done not only in the written form, but personally by meeting some member of the Commission.

In *O Trigo e o Joio / The Wheat and the Tares* (1965), the director Manuel Guimarães), in order to save the consistence of the whole story, abdicated of a lot of sorcery scenes, reducing the amount of heterodoxy in change for a pre-final fumigation ceremony without whom nothing would make sense.

Other testimonies² refer to this practice as a smart way to go around the tyranny of the censors, sometimes mentioned as stupid and stubborn men.

4. COMMERCIAL CENSORSHIP

Another type of censorship is the commercial or 'private'³ censorship, is a kind of censorship made by the intermediate; here is the producer who agrees or takes the initiative of the cuts. Manuel Guimarães had the film *Lives with no Goal* half censured for commercial reasons, which we still don't know⁴.

The goal of the intermediate is to get some advantage from the sympathy of the power or the public; as to get more public, by lowering the age of classification of a film. In *The Wheat and the Tares*, the producers, unsatisfied with the public numbers, asked the Commission to lower the age classification, by cutting the scenes of prostitution. But suddenly they received numerous complaints from the public, deceived for not being able to see them. So, they went again to the Censorship Commission, asking to undo the cuts.

It's a non ideological form of censorship, maybe worse than the previous ones, because it's not based upon any kind of principles, just in money or private advantage; the intermediate doesn't care about the film or the public or the moralities, just about money or alike. It's still nowadays a very common way of censoring, even if nobody calls it like that.

¹ Macedo, 2007, 31-35.

² Areal, 2011, 47.

³ Pallottini, 2008: 26.

⁴ Cardoso, Adelino. 'Manuel Guimarães esclarece o caso Vidas sem Rumor'. *Imagem* nº17, 1956.

5. INTIMIDATION AND RETALIATION

A subtle and disguised way of censoring is the use of intimidation, a preventing way of shutting someone's mouth before it's open. But it is not easy to prove that it exists, because it's usually done through advice or menace, doesn't leave any traces, and happens before the thing is done.

The intimidation also works indirectly; when friends or family are warned or indeed called to the police just to answer about some thing done, it's a dissuasion method whose effects spread around.

The retaliation, on the contrary, it's an indirect consequence for some act that doesn't please the power. As an example: Manuel Guimarães had a group of leftist friends, artists and neo-realist writers, maybe related to clandestine Communist Party, so suspicions upon them were high. The very President of the Commission, in 1952, wrote to Salazar referring to Guimarães as being part of 'that group of intellectuals of misery' with 'social and political intentions in art and literature'¹. It was a stigma from which he could not escape. More than a decade after, the Commission expressly ordered (without let him knowing) that the film *The Wheat and the Tares* could not get out of the country².

Another case: Ernesto de Sousa was arrested at the frontier by PIDE, the political police, when he was travelling to Cannes to present his film *Dom Roberto* (1962), for having given an interview to a French magazine³.

The most extreme form of retaliation in order to censor someone could be persecution and murder, as Julian Petley points out⁴.

6. REWARDING AND PUNISHMENT

This silent war between official power and the artists seems quite strange, because Guimarães and other directors kept trying and trying for years to have their projects selected by the Fund for National Cinema, which depended on the same authority – the SNI – then the Censorship Commission.

Where they *naïve* enough to expect the good will of authorities? Did they have no alternative? Did they have some friends who gave them some hope? In fact, they were not wrong; many of them had the chance to get commissions to produce several documentaries; or to study abroad; or to make a feature film; even Guimarães, the outcast, had 2 features films made with the support of the Fund.

By having the creators close by and in expectancy, it would be easier to control them; the authorities waved the carrot and sometimes gave a candy, if they behaved well. The beast is tamed. Censorship doesn't wish to annihilate the enemy, just to dominate him. Lauro António calls it the 'economic censorship'⁵.

¹ Comissão do Livro Negro sobre o regime fascista (1980), *A Política de Informação no Regime Fascista*. Lisboa: Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 167.

² Areal, 2011, 323.

³ *Témoignage Chrétien* (18-01-1963). Vide www.ernestodesousa.com

⁴ Petley, 2009, 2.

⁵ António, 2001, 30.

But the master can also be manipulated. Film directors had the power and the skills to dribble censorship, to push further the limits; but they didn't managed to captivate the public; Portuguese cinema had few spectators, and just 5 movies were made each year.

Indeed the best way to censor film was to restrain funds; between 1952 and 1957 no loan or subsidy was given. It's the best way to dry the source. And then, to fund carefully selected mediocre films or propaganda films. Manoel de Oliveira, the great Portuguese film director, didn't have the chance to make a feature film for 30 years. Censorship, Salazar knew it, creates the omission of facts and manages to reduce some aspects of reality to the inexistence or irrelevance¹. The same is happening in 2012: the austerity cuts upon cinema are 100%.

7. SOCIAL CENSORSHIP AND CRITIQUE

I don't expect society to be sorry for cinema financial cuts; still I feel sorry for every other cutting around us. Indeed, today like 50 years ago, people and groups are eager to censor others behaviour, be it for political ideas, moral behaviour or aesthetic taste. Social censorship is the origin for and the justification for official censorship, as we've seen in a while ago. It was frequent for groups and individual citizens to wrote letters to the authorities denouncing plays and films by its immorality². The presence of a 'censorial ambience' is typical of dictatorial societies³.

During the fascism period, film criticism sometimes was the only way one had – if not to see – just to imagine movies that were made in foreign countries. Film criticism was one of the few possible escapes from mind censorship. In the sixties, an Association of Cinema wrote a letter to *Diário de Lisboa*, a daily newspaper, complaining about film critics and menacing to remove film publicity. The newspaper didn't get frightened and put the letter on the front page, accusing them of trying to make commercial censorship. Surprisingly, press censorship didn't censor this new. Journalists took the opportunity to state a libel against censorship.

However, film critics were severe upon Portuguese movies, never good enough for their international standards. Film criticism was also very moralist. When Guimarães directed a musical comedy in 1957, he was almost insulted and misclassified as a commercial author, and for 7 years he couldn't make another long movie. One could almost say the effects of criticism were harder on him than the censorship ones.

8. SELF-CENSORSHIP

The most perfect form of censorship – and every censor's dream – is self-censorship, when people shut their mouth or refrain their behaviour for fear of being judged by others. Everybody becomes the police of himself.

¹ Caldeira, 2008, 16.

² Cabrera, 2008, 53.

³ Renata Pallottini (2008, 23) uses the expression to describe Brasilien dictatorship in the seventies.

This has consequences. In Portuguese cinema, the presence of censorship for half a century created a *sui generis* cinema, a cinema of allusion, ellipses and taboos. A very interesting cinema, believe me, but yet cinema of suffering. It's a superficial cinema¹, where one could not refer to war, nor to death, nor to hate, nor to disgrace; neither to joy. There were no words to convey such feelings and ideas. It was cinema of silence and pain.

It's a cinema that prefers to use allegory and symbols rather than to express its wills and dreams. This cinema developed a particular brooding way of expression. And its effects remain in Portuguese film aesthetics still nowadays.

Concluding

It's not difficult to get to the point of self-censorship, since every other previous strategy or method lend to this result. If the stress persists, self-censorship becomes a way of surviving, or a way of living. The goal of censoring, which is to control freethinking, is fulfilled.

But we ought to ask: isn't self-censorship a necessary way of avoiding conflict and aggression within a society? What if everybody started insulting whomever? Isn't self-control part of the good education? Isn't education itself a method of teaching self-censorship rules? Isn't self-censorship itself a psychological mechanism inside group behaviour? Yes.

The difference between self-control, education, social manners, good taste, on one hand, and what on the other is called censorship, is that the later one's goal is to maintain or conquer power over other people. Real censorship is an abuse of power and that is why it's not compatible with universal human rights.

So, we talk about censorship when there coercion is made by an instance of power, which can be formal or informal. It can be a dictator, it can be a newspaper director, it can be any boss, it can be a teacher, it can be a parent, it can be a group, it can be anyone who tries to take advantage and force others to shut up their mouth and stop thinking freely.

Censorship works very well. And creates a whole culture where self-censorship becomes an irrational fear of disapproval, and people are not capable of showing their revolt.

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¹ As Luís de Pina said: «it created the fear of approaching issues more than in a superficial, documental and conventional way» (Pina, 1977, 137).

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