

Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World
edited by Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel

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Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World is part of the publisher's Global Cinema Series, which endorses a historically and geographically expanded concept of globalisation, repositioning the “global” away from a US-centric/Eurocentric grid’ (p.i). Dedicated to this objective, *Silencing Cinema* covers over a hundred years of cinema history (from 1896 to 2011) and brings together sixteen case studies from four continents – Africa, America, Asia and Europe.

The editors of this collection, Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel are two Belgian scholars aligned with ‘New Cinema History’. Departing from the study of film texts and their production, this movement within screen studies is characterised by an emphasis on empirical engagement with local and (trans-) national contexts in which films were exhibited and received. In regard to censorship, film scholars have routinely assumed the hegemony of Hollywood’s self-regulative bodies without paying much attention to the concrete workings of censorship outside of this global cinema production centre (p.1-3). By shedding light on the different nuances and complexities of film censorship around the world, this collection contributes new insights to the field of cinema studies.

The empirical merit of the collection is accompanied by a theoretical shift away from understanding censorship as a static apparatus that only works from the top, the censorship bodies, downwards to the fields of production, distribution and exhibition. Instead the editors stress the interactive nature of censorship as a discourse engaging a variety of agencies that constantly negotiate the boundaries of legitimate filmic representations. The volume offers a range of studies highlighting the “multiplicity” of censorship’ by examining different legal frameworks, particular procedures available to censorship institutions (banning a film from exhibition, age classification, etc.), their effectiveness in a given context and the discourses censorship practices were embedded in (p.4-6).

Guiding the reader thematically rather than chronologically or geographically, the collection comprises of four parts, each organised around a specific topic. Every part includes four chapters based on empirical, mostly archival, research. Most of the authors have written extensively on censorship before, so readers interested in the details of a specific case are advised to consult the footnotes at the end of each chapter. The work of established film historians is invigorated by the inclusion of a few emerging scholars such as Carmen McCain, who contribute fresh perspectives and innovative methods (for example ethnographic research) to the field.

The first part questions Hollywood's hegemony in the realm of cinema regulation. The chapters by Laura Wittern-Keller and Jon Lewis discuss two of Hollywood's self-regulative bodies – the Production Code Administration (PCA) and the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA)'s Code and Rating Administration – arguing that political-economic concerns of the film industry itself affected them just as much as the government and local censors. In the following two chapters the influence of Hollywood's self-regulation on two nations bordering on the United States – Canada and Mexico – is being considered. Consistent with 'New Cinema History', the authors, Pierre Véronneau and Francisco Peredo-Castro, foreground regional variations in censorship policy and application.

The departure from the Anglo-American perspective is more marked in the second part, with the focus falling on Germany, Russia, China and Turkey, all nations that have witnessed the dominance of totalitarian regimes. Martin Loiperdinger portrays no less than five political systems under which film censorship was exercised in Germany, two of them totalitarian (National Socialism, 1933-1945; and Socialism in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1989). Richard Taylor finds that censorship in the Soviet Union was rigorous, involving pre- and post-censorship, for instance the funding of conforming movies as well as extreme criticism of noncompliant films after release. It was, however, never as thorough as the state intended, due to inefficient communication links between central government and local authorities. Zhiwei Xiao argues that, in the case of China, the Nationalist government of the 1920s and 30s as well as the Communist party, stepping into power in 1949, regarded censorship not merely as a prohibitive tool. It was applied also in the name of 'nation-building', for example through film funding schemes.

The third part looks at national and transnational censorship practices under the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC). Julian Petley applies the post-structuralist concept of 'governmentality' – a form of governance that supports the internalisation of social values through education and the use of expert advice – to a critical study of the BBFC's ties with

the Home Office. He stresses that the efficiency of liberal censorship practices must not be underestimated. David Newman compares censorship practices in three British colonies – Hong Kong, Straits Settlement, and Shanghai International Settlement – between 1916 and 1941. Similar to Véronneau and Peredo-Castro's studies, he finds that the extent to which BBFC guidelines were enforced depended on the social and political structure of the colony. Nandana Bose and Kevin Rocket follow with comparable chapters on censorship practices in India and Ireland.

The fourth and final part emphasizes the role of religious organisations in cinema censorship. In a study focusing on recent developments in Nigeria, Carmen McCain uses ethnographic methods to examine the impact of the implementation of the Shari'a law in the state of Kano since 2001, resulting in a complete ban of film production and exhibition for a brief period. A similar exploration of film production bans elsewhere (for example Iran) could have benefitted the collection. But the following three chapters confine themselves to studying the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States (via The National Legion of Decency), Italy, and Belgium. Biltreyst, for instance, uses oral history interviews to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Church's un-official censorship strategies on audiences in Belgium, foregrounding an aspect of cinema history that remains largely unexplored.

The collection succeeds in bringing attention to the multiplicity of censorship across the globe and within specific localities. It demonstrates that film censorship is based on the acknowledgement of film's popularity with the masses, its power to persuade and seduce. The twin concerns of politics and morality prevail in all censorship discourses, their local distinctness seemingly threatened by a cultural medium operating on a global scale. The authors tease out these local nuances in censorship laws, procedures and debates. This contributes to the cohesiveness of the book and renders it a good starting point for transnational comparisons. The book's comprehensiveness is, however, realised at the expense of more detailed case studies. It can then quite literally only provide a starting point for readers who want to explore the complexities of local film censorship further. This is a scholarly but accessible book, likely to attract academics who work on cinema, censorship and transnational culture(s) more generally, but also recommended to undergraduates and other readers interested in the topic.