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ENG 1003 Academic Research

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Research Essay #1

Censorship and Self-Censorship: Meta-Intolerance.

The Imagined Order of Expression.

The topic of censorship is a vast smoky hall, filled with locked rooms and shadows. In the center is a labyrinth with a Minotaur guarantee. The examination of censorship begins with a look inward, a careful introspection to monitor your own tolerance. First question to self, "Do we place limits on what can be seen and discussed? What is the line and how far is too far?"¹ Tolerance and limits are the personal threshold wherein lies the line between 'acceptable' and 'offensive'. We all like to think that we have a high tolerance for what is inoffensive. We also like to imagine that freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, this is an imagined order. Expression is carefully regulated, we go to great lengths not to offend. Such great lengths that self-censorship has become an unconscious function. What we find appropriate, in good taste or beautiful² in truth fits in a very narrow margin. Second question to self, "Can we be open and tolerant to oppositional beliefs?"³ Third question to self, is freedom of expression a fundamental human right or an imagined order? "The imagined order exists only in our minds [and is] embedded in the material world"⁴. To elaborate, "You [also] educate people thoroughly. From the moment they are born, you constantly remind them of the principle of the

¹ Philip, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits", *Social Research* Vol.83 No.1 2016 p.219.

² Philip, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits", p.217.

³ Philip, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits", p.219.

⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah, "*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*", Random House Canada 2014 p.113.

imagined order, which are incorporated into anything and everything”⁵. The imagined order of freedom of expression is written into the U.S. Constitution as the First Amendment.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances”⁶.

Contrary to popular belief, freedom of speech is illusory, “There is no way out of imagined order. When we break down the prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison”⁷. We have made a commodity of expression and as such is carefully regulated and controlled. The paradox of freedom of speech (expression) in the liberal West is that censorship manifests discreetly in the form of self-censorship. This maligns into a hyper-sensitivity, “meta-intolerance – that is intolerant of any view that is judged intolerant”⁸. This bizarre contra-coup to the open mind controls every aspect of every moment of our lives, from the workplace to the education system. The imagined order of freedom of expression dictates that we raise our children with manners. Do we allow them to swear? Do we decide what they witness? Censorship and its labyrinth is extremely complex to navigate yet we do so with grace and apologies and sincerity.

To narrow the topic regarding “freedom of speech and the thornier issue of self-censorship”⁹ the arts will be the focus of this study. Accordingly, the arts carry a tremendous responsibility, “[the] power to surface critical issues, to ignite conversation, even controversy”¹⁰. Art “has the capacity to transform and

⁵ Harari, Yuval Noah, “*Sapiens*”, p.113.

⁶ https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment

⁷ Harari, Yuval Noah, “*Sapiens*”, p.118.

⁸ Philip, Lisa, “Examine Your Own Limits”, p.219.

⁹ Philip, Lisa, “Examine Your Own Limits”, p.221.

¹⁰ Philip, Lisa, “Examine Your Own Limits”, p.217.

arouse intense emotion; it can be loved but also hated [...] it can challenge social attitudes"¹¹. More dangerously, "images, words and gestures [...] bring chaos and disease to the population in the middle of which they make their appearance"¹². This power to challenge and illicit change in a tenuous, frenetic world is being stripped of its power to offend.

Beyond the individual and into the world, censorship has taken the violent face of the Minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth. Subversive expression bound by extreme secular and political influence has been hunted. How does creativity thrive when artists are being hunted to extinction? The answer lies in the hearts of the fearless, who dare challenge the regime. The fearless often pay a great sacrifice.

Expression can be dangerous. September 1976, the trial of four musicians from the Czech underground music scene, "The Plastic People of the Universe"¹³ gave birth to a manifesto on censorship. "Many [...] writers and intellectuals [collectively] led to the creation of the human rights group called Charter 77"¹⁴. The manifesto was revolutionary. Reacting to Charter 77, "the government collected "millions of signatures" in its "campaign to compel the entire nation that Charter 77 was wrong", which in itself proved the truth of the claims Charter 77 made"¹⁵. Printed and widely distributed secretly, it challenged the Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic, calling it a system of "suppression of the aims of life [...] based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life"¹⁶. The manifesto called to the regime to abide to civil, cultural and human rights as acceded in 1976 under the Helsinki accords¹⁷. "The system sustains itself through manipulation and violence"¹⁸, kidnapping, police brutality, raids and illegal house searches. The violence was fanatical, and "of all human collective activities, the most difficult to organize

¹¹ Mintcheva, Svetlana, "Self-Policing and Self-Censorship", *Social Research* Vol.83 no.1 2016 p.207.

¹² Groys, Boris, "Hurting the Feeling of Others", *Social Research* Vol.83 no.1 2016 p.214.

¹³ Havel, Vaclav, "Open Letters: Selected Writing 1965-1990" Ed Paul Wilson, Random House Inc. NY 1992 p.102.

¹⁴ Havel, Vaclav, "Open Letters", p.102.

¹⁵ Casey, M.A. "Vaclav Havel: Living in Truth in Democracy", *Quadrant Magazine*, July-August 2017 p.64.

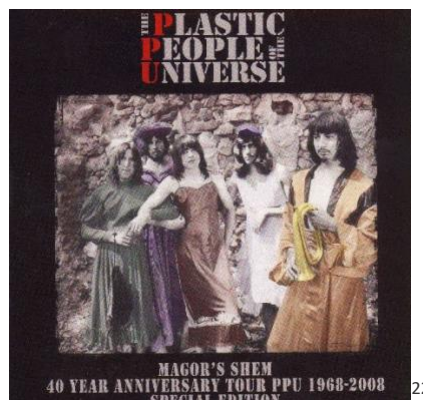
¹⁶ Casey, M.A. "Vaclav Havel", p.66.

¹⁷ Casey, M.A. "Vaclav Havel", p.64.

¹⁸ Casey, M.A. "Vaclav Havel", p.67.

is violence”¹⁹. It requires true believers and absolute control, using propaganda and fear as weapons. This is censorship at its most absolute, “for if the regime could punish musicians for simply playing the music they liked, it could well start locking up everyone who thought independently and who expressed himself independently, even if he did so only in private”²⁰. The Plastics generated a bloody and brutal reaction from the CSR, yet created a movement of solidarity among the people of the Czech Republic and beyond. The effects were far reaching and long-lasting. This is art at its most potent.

“The attack on an obscure rock group [The Plastics] was “an attack on the very notion of ‘living within the truth’, and the response to it demonstrated what living in the truth entails: a defence of plurality and “independent self-constitution [...] a defence of the freedom of the individual anchored in accepting responsibility for others.”²¹



The Plastic People of the Universe

The album that caused the manifesto against censorship: Charter 77.

Czechoslovakia circa 1978.

¹⁹ Harari, Yuval Noah, “*Sapiens*”, p.111.

²⁰ Casey, M.A. “Vaclav Havel”, p.65.

²¹ Casey, M.A. “Vaclav Havel”, p.65.

²² <https://www.google.ca/search?q=the+plastic+people+of+the+universe>

The trial of The Plastics is used here to demonstrate that censorship can be challenged by artists, but at great sacrifice. “Something originally quite ordinary suddenly casts a surprising light on the time and the world we live in, and dramatically highlights its fundamental questions”²³. This demonstrates the aforementioned great responsibility of the arts. “Art [...] as a political actor can challenge social attitudes [...] It can open up new ways of thinking [...] Indeed, art can be dangerous”²⁴. The extraordinary result of this revolution was Charter 77, a call for revolution and a defiance of censorship. The following is the ultimate definition of censorship, an Orwellian control of expression, freedom and thought:

“Freedom of public expression is inhibited by the centralized control of all the communication media and of publishing and cultural institutions. No philosophical, political or scientific view or artistic activity that departs ever so slightly from the narrow bounds of official ideology or aesthetics is allowed to be published; no open criticism can be made of abnormal social phenomena; no public defense is possible against false and insulting charges made in official propaganda.”²⁵

This is a challenge of censorship under totalitarianism, the following is a demonstration of censorship in the West. Recall the First Amendment in the American Constitution, freedom of speech. The music industry in the mid 1980’s fell prey to an organization hell-bent on cleaning up rock and roll in America. A well funded wildly influential organization called The Parent’s Music Resource Center (PMRC), headed

²³ Havel, Vacav, “Open Letters”, p.103.

²⁴ Mintcheva, Svetlana, “Self-Policing” p.207.

²⁵ https://chnm.gms.edu/1989_archive/files/declaration-of-charter-77_4346bae392.pdf

by Tipper Gore, wife of future Vice President Al Gore²⁶ “managed to secure a senate hearing on what they called “rock porn” – aimed to apply pressure to record labels in the hope of forcing them to submit to their demands”²⁷. American made censorship from the very top accused Jello Biafra and his band the Dead Kennedys from Alternative Tentacles label of ‘distributing harmful matter to minors’. The album was called Frankenchrist, and the harmful matter distributed was a painting by HR Geiger called “Landscape XX” inserted into the record sleeve,

“It’s not a pretty picture. That’s what I like in art sometimes. Something inspires you to think, even if it’s not something you necessarily like to look at or hear. To me, there it was – consumer culture on parade, society, America, bent on screwing each other in more ways than one. That’s what the Frankenchrist album was saying.”²⁸

What followed was an eighteen month court battle waged against Biafra, the case was high profile and costly. The PMRC did not get a conviction, but the landscape for alternative music in America was never the same. Warning labels soon appeared on album covers stating ‘parental advisory: explicit content’; now legal writ. Censorship had taken root, a line was drawn by wealthy conservatives and a declaration against indecency was made. As for the Dead Kennedys, the band broke up, the defence was paid in part from Biafra’s “No More Censorship Defence Fund”. Alternative Tentacles nearly went bankrupt. Jello Biafra fought against setting a legal precedent against major-label artists, Tipper Gore’s Top Fifteen including Ozzy, Judas Priest and Prince. Biafra declared “History is never on the side of the censor – just ask Allen Ginsberg or Socrates”²⁹. Biafra won the battle but not the war. Censorship is shapeless and unpredictable, one could say it’s like a very moody crocodile swimming in toxic waste, or like swimming

²⁶ <http://diffuser.fm/jello-biafra-obscenity-trial/>

²⁷ <http://diffuser.fm/jello-biafra-obscenity-trial/>

²⁸ Biafra, Jello; Transcribed excerpt “High Priest of Harmful Matter” Alternative Tentacle Records USA 1989

²⁹ <http://diffuser.fm/jello-biafra-obscenity-trial/>

naked in holy water with Christian piranhas. This is art being censored by the wealthy benevolent groups, the PMRC that actually got this album all the way to an American Senate hearing.



Frankenchrist

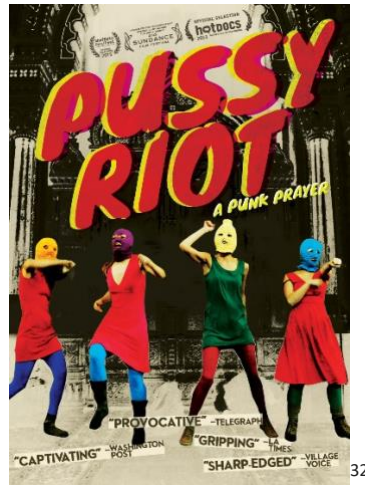
Alternative Tentacle Records: Won the battle but lost the war 1985 USA.

Another demonstration art making a sacrifice in defiance of censorship is The Pussy Riot, Пусси Райот. They are an all-girl girl-power Russian punk rock band. These fearless artists performed a guerilla punk show on hallowed ground in an orthodox church: right where only the ordained are permitted to tread (circa 2012). According to Russian courts, this was an act of profanity. The trial was high profile, as the imagination of the world witnessed one guerilla moment and the fallout. Three band members were formally charged with “premeditated hooliganism performed by an organized group of people motivated by religious hatred or hostility”³¹. The indictment was 2800 pages long, the sentence: two years for three band members. The performance was effectively a demonstration of anti-Putinism, and to state that the feminist angle would place me in the area of meta-intolerance. This act of coordinated defiance against secularism, the Russian Orthodox Church was a brazen display that earned international notoriety. With the omnipresent eye of social media The Pussy Riot caught the eye of the world, and challenged tolerance thresholds on secular, regime and gender in a two-minute guerilla

³⁰ <http://alienexplorations.blogspot.com/1985/10/dead-kennedys-frankenchrist-and-penis.html>

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pussy_Riot

performance caught on film and gone viral. The Punk Prayer was intent on the censorship of the role of women and the church. The Dead Kennedys would certainly not be offended by the performance, and The Plastics would absolutely applaud the performance.



The Pussy Riot

Guerilla performance of 2012 that challenged Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church at the same time

The reaction of censorship took public form as financial punishment, “To punish the young artists and mobilizing the Orthodox believers against contemporary art. The long-time cooperation between the church and contemporary art ended here. [The Pussy Riots]”³³. This censorship is the result of the control church and states have over the arts. To defy the secular in the arts is to defy an imagined order. As art has the power to illuminate power and corruption the two most obvious targets and threats are church and state. Your own tolerance and meta-tolerance, and trained behavioural thresholds become subjective in the face of art. This is how art challenges, but the social idealism that is so deeply engrained in us, individually and collectively. This is an imagined order, which is the form and structure

³² <https://www.google.ca/search?q=pussy+riot+2012>

³³ Groys, Boris, “Hurting the Feeling of Others p.214.

that we carry individually. Whether consciously or unconsciously we are censoring every moment. This is the constant wherein lies the character and threshold and examined life we each live at all times. This is how we make sense of the biological, physical and spiritual components of self. Thus, the imagined order;

“ shapes our desires. Most people do not wish to accept that the order governing their lives is imaginary, but in fact every person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths. Our personal desires thereby become the imagined order’s most important defences.”³⁴

What we see, we interpret. The actions and reactions to art, which is empowered by our emotional reaction to it. The personal threshold is the line drawn. We have to remember that “no image or text has magical power [...] they are not supposed to be able to change the world with their mere presence”³⁵, yet our reactions to creative works can be volatile, ambiguous, hostile. Art can enrage and engage. That is the duty and responsibility of creativity. The empowerment of our meta-sensitivity causes censorship. This censorship is directly related to an imagined order. This order can be undone, but is latent and present in all of us all of the time. Expression can change the world, be freed from tyranny or discreetly controlled by the imagined order.

The artists in this study demonstrate that censorship is multifaceted. These artists took their expressions into the public eye dangerously. The consequences of these demonstrations of expressions are where the truth of personal expression manifests. For every action there is a painting of your reaction. There is a song or a poem about it. Will you like it?

³⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah, “*Sapiens*”, p.114.

³⁵ Groys, Boris, “Hurting the Feeling of Others p.214.

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