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Emancipation, Representation, Censorship

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2025, NR 1, S. 77–90

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1.

My presentation will refer to very general concepts that are widely used – perhaps overused – with complex genealogies, but whose definitions remain rather murky in everyday practice. While useful for communication, they can also be instrumentalized as new purposes arise. These are concepts in the repertoire of the liberal-leftist discourse to which I am close, though each has a different value. Emancipation, for instance, is an unambiguously positive category, serving to elevate social and artistic phenomena. It means aiding democracy, emancipating, working against violence. Representation, in turn, is a field of negotiation and critique; it can be good or bad, useful or harmful, and can aid or impede emancipation. Censorship carries a stigma; it is ascribed to political opponents, to foes wielding political power. We do not use it to describe our own tactics for controlling the representations we consider harmful, or hostile emancipation. A critique of representation is not considered to amount to acts of censorship.

While the first two concepts, emancipation and representation, exist in perfect symbiosis in liberal-leftist

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discourse, legitimizing one another, the concept of censorship is utterly absent in leftist self-critiques; it is a foreign and inappropriate word – it even threatens the self-legitimacy of emancipation discourses. Even if it is widely defined at present by the concepts of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler, it belongs more to the pre-existing hegemonic field of structural restrictions that may be disrupted by an emancipatory intervention. I am interested in the system of tensions between these concepts as they operate in today's art; how they are defined and reevaluated.

Today's postcritical spirit has undoubtedly complicated our picture of these mechanisms. Rita Felski, a major proponent of postcritical approaches in humanities today, asks, "Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage?"¹ Yet this question ought less to be posed to the critical theorists, as Felski does, than to the widespread swift reactions that dominate today's postcritical media discourses, especially, though not exclusively, in social media. Paradoxically, this critique of critical theory as over-suspicious, paranoid, condescending, and patriarchal provided an alibi for the practice of hastily (without much hermeneutic effort) outing content that is racist, sexist, homophobic, or classist, in both the public discourse and works of art. Yet this is not the practice attacked by postcritics – it seems they rather shield it as an act of compassion, securing the gains of emancipation by eliminating discourses and representations that threaten it. These automatic critical impulses indicate that the gains of critical theory have been less undermined by postcritique than, firstly, they have been normativized, and secondly, they have entered a phase of hegemonic discourse. Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker present a fairly simplified overview of critical discourse methods in the introduction to *Critique and Postcritique*, as mainly based on strategies of suspecting, self-reflexive discourses, and meta-perspectives. As such, they are devoid of all that is considered the virtues of postcritique: ethical care, diverse forms of affect, civic engagement, a spirit of affirmation and speculative invention.

Sara Ahmed has called this phenomenon of conveniently positioning an opponent in order to strengthen one's own position "inflationary logic."² She critiques contemporary strands of materialist feminism for similarly simplifying and misrepresenting the accomplishments of historical feminism as solely focused on cultural content, bypassing the biological and material aspects. Ahmed hazards a comparison with those who argue that telling racist

1 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

2 Sara Ahmed, "Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of 'the New Materialism,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15 (1) (2008): 23–39.

jokes proves freedom of speech. These people situate themselves in minority positions, trying to grapple with what they believe is the dominant discourse of political correctness. The scholar finds a similar logic in ways of reading the history of feminism as a sphere to prohibit speech about biology, only to elevate the status of current projects that take a biological perspective into account. According to Ahmed, inflation is a power reserved for those who establish prohibitions. The more powerful the old prohibition, the greater the contribution of those now breaking it.

In the spirit of inflationary logic, Anker and Felski depict critical stances as striking at all that might be considered natural:

Whatever is natural, taken for granted, essentialized, or transparent become the critic's target: such qualities are seen as not only theoretically inadequate (in failing to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural construction of reality), but also politically troubling (in "naturalizing" social phenomena and thereby rendering them immune to criticism and change).³

In these new approaches, art is primarily read as a discourse and a social practice, and the basic criterion for its evaluation is its emancipatory value, formulated in a normative manner. This means normativizing it just like any other domain of civic life. Institutional critiques treat the independence of art pragmatically and use it tactically – it is attacked or defended depending on the situation. Renouncing the transgressive strategies that have most often fallen prey to censorship facilitates devaluing freedom of artistic speech as something to be defended. It also strikes me that defining emancipation practices as non-violent automatically eliminates transgressive actions from their scope.

It is a truism that aesthetic values are increasingly seen as a weak basis for defining and evaluating art. Even the appreciation of aesthetics in socially engaged art by Jacques Rancière or Claire Bishop hinges on political efficacy.⁴ The radical critique of the autonomy of art vis-à-vis other spheres of public life has become dogma within progressive art discourse. We might add that the autonomy of art is also often now perceived as a premise for legitimizing violence within art institutions, associated with a critiqued modernist model

3 *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

4 Jacques Rancière, *Estetyka jako polityka* [Aesthetics as politics], trans. Paweł Mościcki and Julian Kutyła (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2007); Claire Bishop, *Sztuczne piekła. Sztuka partycypacyjna i polityka widowni* [Artificial hells. Participatory art and audience politics], trans. Jacek Staniszewski (Warszawa: Bęc Zmiana, 2015).

and the artist's position of power. The myth of the autonomy of art might also be included in the inflationary logic cited above – it would be hard to call works of modernist art a domain of impunity. On the contrary, they are full of cases of censorship, penalization and exclusion. Jakub Dąbrowski and Anna Demenko have dispelled this myth, writing that “art or artistic activity in its broadest sense are not circumstances that preclude guilt,”⁵ while the counter-proposition that art is a circumstance that relieves one of culpability strikes at the principle of civil equality.

Institutional constellations of mutually supporting subjects are formed around this reorganization of art. The basis of these alliances is affirmative practices and not transgressive intentions that threaten procedures stabilizing approved artist/activist practices, justifying the hegemonic claims of the institutions promoting them. We are joined by what we affirm. Small wonder that the concept of censorship has vanished from autocritical discourses, where it has been deemed worthless. Moreover, obscene content is seen as a threat to emancipatory practices and new concepts of art institutions (in which obscenity and transgression once pushed emancipation practices forward). Overpowering affect, negative affect and overly graphic images are threats to affirmative stances taking empathy and compassion as the basis for establishing social relationships. The constellation of allied institutions treats control of artistic practice as an open, democratic and consensus-based procedure – as such, it is hard, at least from this internal perspective, to accuse it of censorship. What is being attacked, at any rate, is less concrete representations than certain models for establishing them.

The politics of deconstruction taught us to focus our critiques on undefined or impulsively appreciated concepts of our own discourse, yet at present the politics of deconstruction have themselves come under fire for weakening the dynamic of activist involvement. Theories of deconstruction are thus being retracted from the modern socially engaged humanities and academic discourse. Anker and Felski examine this, questioning deconstruction's sensitivity to the distinction between sign and signifier, the sign and the real object it signifies, corresponding to a “natural” tendency to wipe out the boundaries between them. And, whereas a deconstructive critique of representation stressed the difference between the representing and the represented, postcritical strategies tend to collapse this difference, aiming to reduce the distance between the work of art and its social effect, between artistic practice

5 Jakub Dąbrowski and Anna Demenko, *Cenzura w sztuce polskiej po 1989 roku. Aspekty prawne* [Censorship in Polish art after 1989. Legal aspects] (Warszawa: Szum, 2015), 150. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

and non-artistic social practice. Good representations serve social change, while bad ones traumatize audiences or perpetuate damaging stereotypes. The principle of emancipatory art and its reception has become performing one's political, social and ethical standpoint, which means the representing is also the represented, and with the depiction of the other comes an undertaking that involves normative instructions and, where necessary, stigmatization. Moreover, the very notion of representation falls apart, finds itself in a state of disappearance, and consequently the affirmative self-performance contains a prohibition of depicting the other, which is treated as the norm.

2.

The concept of emancipation, if subjected to critique, leads us to a range of contradictions and self-negations. It has its own history, encapsulated by Reinhart Koselleck in his article "The Limits of Emancipation." Above all, we need to stress that at its source (Roman law) the verb "to emancipate" did not have a reflexive form – it was an empowered subject's way of acting to free another subject, their subordinate, from dependency. Self-emancipation was not possible. Change only came, Koselleck says, in the Enlightenment. But Immanuel Kant, aware of the meaning of "emancipation" in Roman law, did not use it when writing about Enlightenment. To his mind, emancipation meant a state of dependency on a position of subordination, more than the possibility of the subjugated subject changing that state. Thus, instead of emancipation, Kant wrote of "a man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity," adding that people "nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity."⁶ From this point of view, the obstacle to emancipation processes is not only those who wield the power, but also those subject to it. Koselleck traces the semantic process by which the term "emancipation" lost its strictly legal meaning and gained the "status and force of a catchword, one that admittedly presupposed or evoked a minimal consensus about the equal rights of all human beings."⁷

An interesting unfolding of Kant's critique came two centuries later, in critical examinations of the topic of emancipation, born from within emancipatory movements that were already ripe. A highly apt formula for describing the basic contradictions of emancipatory practices was put forward by Wendy

6 Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd S. Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 253.

7 Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 255.

Brown in the early 1990s in “Wounded Attachments.”⁸ In creating this concept, Brown revitalized a Nietzschean critique of resentment in the spirit of a radical left-wing critique. Her ideas were picked up later by Lauren Berlant, as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:

Identity projects for revealing social violence and hierarchies run aground when they become wedded to injury, creating, Wendy Brown claims, a group investment in maintaining the injured status with an attitude of *resentiment*. Identity is regarded as a possession, we might say, and is defended as property. What is most significantly missing from identity politics, as Brown insists, is the drive for freedom that should be their basis.⁹

From this standpoint, the emancipating subject is not interested in closing the emancipation process, as this would mean losing the basis for their political claims that come with their position of imposed subjugation. Emancipation, which ought to liberate from dependency, and thus from one’s prior identity, becomes a tool for reinforcing identity. On the one hand, identity becomes a basis for empowering groups against systemic abuse; on the other, it leads to conflicts between emancipating subjects. For instance: the tensions between Jews and Blacks in American society are well covered, while the history of ideological struggles between the feminist and gay movements also goes way back. As a prime example, let us take Peggy Phelan’s harsh critique of *My Queer Body* by gay performer Tim Miller, an artist fiercely attacked by the right-wing media in the USA and subject to economic censorship. Phelan saw Miller’s performance, exposing his naked male body, as within the realm of phallogocentric patriarchal cultural practices, denying his right to represent queer culture: “Tim Miller is not a lesbian. Nor is he a woman. (Or at least not in public.) As far as I know, he is not a transsexual or a hermaphrodite. The body performed and displayed in Miller’s *My Queer Body* is what would have been formerly called a young-white-gay-man’s body.”¹⁰ We can also refer to postcolonial studies for examples. Caliban – a symbolic icon of decolonizing struggles – is a rapist in Shakespeare’s drama, who sees the rape of a white woman as an act of rebellion against his captivity by the whites. In Amiri Baraka’s famous play *Dutchman*, the roles are reversed: in a New York subway, it is a white woman who stoops to violence against a random Black man. And the radical queer theatre of Jack Smith, based on Hollywood depictions of

8 Wendy Brown, “Wounded Attachments,” *Political Theory* 21 (3) (1993): 390–410.

9 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), 329.

10 Peggy Phelan, “Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*: An Anatomy in Six Sections,” *Theater* 24 (1993): 30.

exotic Asian worlds, was suspected of perpetuating colonial clichés. We could go on listing examples of this sort of collision in the ideological, political and symbolic spheres, between various emancipatory movements.

For all these reasons, Hardt and Negri, inspired by Kant, suggest replacing the word “emancipation,” with all its identity baggage, with the concept of liberation. At the same time, they note that nineteenth-century nationalism, elevating one kind of identity above all the others, was, consciously or not, a model and point of reference for many emancipation movements. They also call attention to an evident truth, that no subject is defined by one identity, but weaves many together – a gay man could be a Black worker or a white politician, a white woman may belong to the upper middle class or be a lesbian, a Black man may be heterosexual, a white heterosexual could be an unhoused victim of the capitalist system. As such, a question emerges: might not a subject with emancipatory claims secure class or economic privileges that could come, for instance, from being middle-class, heterosexual or white? Presupposing the hybridity of our identities, which are stabilized by emancipatory processes, Hardt and Negri see the revolutionary process of discarding identity as “monstrous,” traumatic and violent. They also critique the concept of queer as another identity category, embracing various kinds of queerness. “The revolutionary project goes beyond the reformist vision of emancipation,” they write.

The terminological distinction between *emancipation* and *liberation* is crucial here: whereas emancipation strives for the freedom of identity, the freedom to be *who you really are*, liberation aims at the freedom of self-determination and self-transformation, the freedom to determine *what you can become*.¹¹

Their vision of the revolutionary process is thus liberated from the increasingly confined field of consensus between the rival emancipations detailed by Koselleck. Hardt and Negri, moreover, point out that the forces of repression are not strictly external; they also shape their captives’ subjecthood from within. They are internalized, which is why they believe identity-based emancipation at some point impedes the possibility of liberation.

Hardt and Negri draw from Jean Genet’s last book, *Prisoner of Love*, an autobiographical tale of the author’s stay among America’s Black Panthers and in Palestinian fighter camps. They write that Genet was “captivated by the ‘style’ of these groups, by which he meant their invention of new forms of life, their common practices and behaviors, as well as their original set of gestures and affects.”¹² Genet stressed that the Black Panthers’ arguments were not “drawn

¹¹ Phelan, “Tim Miller’s *My Queer Body*,” 331.

¹² *Ibid.*, 356.

from the common fund of American democracy,"¹³ that this movement was driven by the dynamic of brutal phantasms, not a desire to negotiate a shared normative space: "what separates us from the Blacks today is not so much the colour of our skin or the type of our hair as the phantom-ridden psyche we never see."¹⁴ Genet does not, therefore, advocate creating a utopian space for the harmonious connection of various emancipatory claims; he stresses difference as a challenge for projects of political change.

Now let us turn to another concept – representation. This word is now quite distinct from one once taken for a synonym: mimesis. This matter was discussed in detail during Wolfgang Iser's famous series of seminars on the issue of representation organized at the University of California, Irvine in 1983–84. Iser called attention to the fact that the term "representation" was semantically overloaded (Koselleck wrote about emancipation in a similar spirit). Representation, Iser posits, with reference to the German word *Darstellung*, is a kind of staging, an enactment, a performance, and not, like mimesis, a picture of something, a description of a state of things, an imitation of reality. The stress falls on the performative aspect of representation, which creates reality, rather than replicating it. Performativity is understood here, however, as a constant and inevitably unsuccessful effort to collapse the differences between the object of representation and the very process of portrayal. The result is deformity, a disruption of meanings, an "eventful disorder," a network of links "evoking and simultaneously deforming extratextual fields of reference." Thus understood, the act of representation forces the audience to suspend their "natural attitude to the thing represented,"¹⁵ recognizing the aesthetic dimension of representation. The world as an aside may resemble the world, but at the same time it is a world that has empirically never existed. The performativity Iser describes in no way recalls its simplified concept; it presupposes collapsing this duality, disrupting our everyday approach to the things depicted outside the frame of the performance.

Outlining Iser's concept, Michał Paweł Markowski writes that the basic task of representation is "convincing us of its importance."¹⁶ Robert Weimann, who

13 Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Laurent Boyer (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 47.

14 *Ibid.*, 46.

15 Wolfgang Iser, "Representation: A Performative Act," in *The Aims of Representation*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Stanford University Press, 1987), 220.

16 Michał Paweł Markowski, "O reprezentacji" [About representation], in *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, ed. Michał P. Markowski and Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), 289–90.

also participated in this seminar series, saw the contradiction between the established order and the performative one as a fundamental source of the crisis of representation in modernity, manifesting itself in increasing efforts to make the audience believe that what is being performed also has a constative value.¹⁷ Weimann calls this phenomenon a culture of useful illusions, seeking to legitimize our performances. The modernist concept of art as domains of autonomy and aesthetics was less a way of resolving these contradictions than of avoiding them. Thus conceived, art, Weimann suggests, frees itself and its audiences from the duty of representation. Representations devoid of aesthetic value become bearers of unambivalent and self-exposing ideological content.

Another participant in the Irvine seminars, Dominick LaCapra, notes that the crisis of Marxism as a critical theory was chiefly tied to three issues. First: making the proletariat the force bringing salvation to history (a temptation of all collective subjects of emancipation). Second: the shift of the Marxist critique toward positivism. Third: putting the stress on the exchange value and the functional value of the representation.¹⁸ LaCapra suggests that an excessive critique of fetishism leads to leveling all representations, which then always reveal the same thing – how the system of oppression operates. The fetishism introduces an added symbolic value, however, that points to something else – something that was missed in the representation, which is not representative or harms representativeness. The concept of representation in psychoanalysis had a similar critical value – the representations available to the consciousness are, according to Freud, partial and distorted, often fetishistic, formed more from what they omit than what they include.

Queer theory gives us the most cogent warnings against excessive positivist and affirmative practices of representation, which emerge under the pressure of group emancipatory aspirations. Heather Love praises “backwardness,” which, read in our day, full of progressive and reparative practices in art, seems quite bold. Writing on lesbian literature, she defends dark representations and destructive and anti-communal emotions. In the midst of the praise, she formulates this view: “camp, for instance, with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art.”¹⁹ Heather Love stresses that her book on

17 Robert Weimann, “History, Appropriation, and the Uses of Representation in Modern Narrative,” in *The Aims of Representation*, 175–216.

18 LaCapra, “Criticism Today,” in *The Aims of Representation*, 235–36.

19 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

backward feelings owes a great deal to a long tradition of queer negativity, such as Lee Edelman's *No Future* or the works of Leo Bersani. José Esteban Muñoz, in turn, creates a queer concept of disidentification, which shatters the moral categories of "good" and "bad" representations:

Disidentification means recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it continues to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.²⁰

Both Love nor Muñoz admitted to being inspired by psychoanalysis. From their standpoints, representations are not the result of intentional and unequivocally ethical actions: they are hybrid, and their dynamic is based on a play of contradictions, which is why they can stage resistance to any simplifying identity politics, be they those of the majority or the minority. The fetishism of the dominant representations ought not to be negated, only reworked – or, as Muñoz puts it, recirculated, which he believes to be the basis of queer subjects' survival.

In Freud's concept, every mental representation is ruled by two processes at once: primary and secondary. The former is based on a constant inflow of energy, images and meanings, taking the shortest path to "hallucinatory reproduction of those ideas upon which the original experience of satisfaction has conferred a special value." The latter process pertains to functions like "attention, judgement, memory, the replacement of motor discharge by an action aimed at an appropriate transformation of reality."²¹ There is no representation without censorship, says Freud. Censorship creates its dynamic and complexity. Our task, however, is to discover the covert activity of the censoring mechanisms which, above all, conceal themselves from sight.

Freud reformulated his concept of censorship several times. It was first personified as a guard standing before the door leading from the foyer to the living room, preventing the crush of unconscious desires from entering the space of consciousness. Its next incarnation was the mighty superego,

20 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 72.

21 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

modelled on moral and social authorities that tell the Ego how to think and behave. In Freud's concept of representation, censorship emerges as a player, a trickster and a negotiator between social processes and aspirations – always ready to change the rules of behavior and paving the way for vital transgression. In this personification I see a chance to restore the concept of censorship to being a self-critical tool in emancipatory practices, especially where they fall in line with conservative tendencies towards normative solutions.

Contemporary postcritical theory keeps its distance from these psycho-analytical traditions. The concept of censorship and dynamics of unconscious processes affecting the shape of representation has been attacked and undermined as part of a phenomenon to which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick attached the lethal moniker “paranoid criticism.”²² One would have to be paranoid to suspect that a good representation is perhaps not good. Yet Freud often behaved this way. Here, I believe, is the reason why the concept of censorship has been cut from liberal/leftist self-critical discourse. The limit of reality is set by the appointed guardians, after all. Performances involved in the emancipatory process, trusting only the mechanisms of the secondary process, are forever recreating this boundary and will not let it be crossed. On the other hand, they offer their audiences a utopia of normative dimensions and protection from destructive phantasms. Discarding the category of censorship as a self-critical tool causes moralizing, idealistic, programmatic and authoritarian standpoints to be inflated in its judicature.

3.

To conclude, in place of a summary, a few remarks on Rainer Werner Fassbinder. I once, in the 2021/22 academic year, explored his work during a dramaturgy seminar at Krakow's Academy of Theatre Arts, no doubt as a form of ideological sabotage and as an invitation to disarm today's dogmatized fields of artistic practice within the theatre. The film director, who emerged in the German counterculture movement, experienced various attempts to censor his work. The most famous event was the aborted Frankfurt premiere of his play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* under his direction in 1975. Fassbinder was accused of antisemitism at the time. A character in the drama is called the Rich Jew, and is indeed a rich Jew, earning on investments leading to the gentrification of various districts of Frankfurt. Many antisemitic remarks in the play are aimed at him: “I'd sleep better if he was gassed,” “he drinks our

22 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or: You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Text Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

blood," "he sucks everything out of us." It is hard to describe the extent of the media storm Fassbinder created with his attempt to stage the play. It was claimed that the author had crossed every line, that he was perpetuating racial stereotypes, spitting in the faces of Holocaust victims. The chorus of disapproval was mighty and unanimous – it crossed the whole political spectrum of Germany at the time, from left to right. Yet no one analyzed the play particularly carefully. No one asked who was making the antisemitic statements, nor what politics were behind the events in the drama. It was not conceived that Fassbinder was exposing the covert antisemitism of Germany's respected citizens. The participation of Jewish businessmen in the project to rebuild Frankfurt was a fact, but behind it was cynical calculation by the local government: If they involved them in the investment, it was believed no one would dare to reveal the corrupt relations between the politicians and the businessmen, fearing accusations of antisemitism, which could only mean civil death in Germany at the time. Fassbinder dragged the biggest secret of post-war West German life into the light of day, with all the dissonance between the official anti-antisemitism and privately acknowledged antisemitism.²³ Attempts were made to disarm his radical political provocation, unprecedented in the German theatre of the time, with accusations of regurgitating antisemitic clichés. The Fassbinder case illustrates perfectly how a critique of representation from the tool of emancipation can easily transform into an instrument of censorship in the hands of conservative and reactionary forces and how the ideologies of emancipation, foregrounding moral concerns, are helpless against more complex mechanisms in political life. Judith Butler pointed this out, writing that a "return to ethics" often means an escape from politics.²⁴ Fassbinder was conscious of drawing from antisemitic clichés, but he also knew that the anxieties about them that were key to a public existence were cynically exploited in a political game raking in huge economic profits. The disgust dished that Fassbinder's play encountered made it impossible to perform it in German theatres even a decade later, in the mid-1980s.

Yet it was not only this play that caused Fassbinder to come under attack. His work probing the consciousness of the German society – bold, uncompromising, artistically innovative – was accused of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and glorifying violence. The "negative" representations that staged resistance against the collective "positive" liberation ideologies were hard to digest. The list of incriminated works is long. I will mention only one – *The Law of the*

23 David Barnett, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the German Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 233.

24 Judith Butler, "Ethical Ambivalence," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2000), 15–28.

Strongest. This film portrays a wealthy homosexual community who cause the downfall of a young boy from a working-class background, also gay, having relieved him of his lottery winnings. We need not think hard to imagine the accusations that were made here. Firstly, perpetuating social stereotypes of rich and immoral middle-class gays that harmed the cause of emancipation; and secondly, the film's refusal to portray the discrimination against homosexuals that was rife in Germany at the time. This critique was based on criteria developed in the gay liberation movement, which was by then already becoming an institution. The famous film critic Al LaValley stepped up to defend Fassbinder, without obscuring the fact that his films were a form of conscious resistance against certain aspects of the gay liberation movement. Yet he did stress one point: Fassbinder appeared in his own films as a gay man, often nude, in intimate scenes with his lover, as a radical kind of artistic coming out – an unprecedented move at the time. By presenting the lives of gay men as evident and real without stressing their suffering, LaValley believed the director was effectively striking out at bourgeois morality and homophobia. And most importantly, Fassbinder did not hide the brutal phantasms a gay life can hold. His films, LaValley writes, “perform an act of resistance and utopian questing, but they also explore the often troubled world of gay desire and relationships, masochism and conflicting emotions, the persistence of patriarchal patterns and loss of power, domination and submission, separation and mourning.”²⁵ He also recalls that the large Fassbinder exhibition in Berlin in 1992 tried to whitewash the gay content from his films, thus removing “an essential and radical component from his work.”²⁶ This kind of censorship, also extending to the artist's biography, was, LaValley thought, a condition for reintroducing Fassbinder's work into public circulation after the unification of Germany. This is another example of the ties between an emancipatory critique of representation and institutional acts of censorship.

LaValley stressed that the utopian aspects of Fassbinder's work can be found outside the “negative narrative trajectories.”²⁷ He joined Thomas Elsaesser in stating that “what counts most in Fassbinder is not narrative solution but identification, the relationship of the filmmaker to his material and his and our identification with the characters.”²⁸ LaValley points to new ways of reading Fassbinder's work from a queer perspective that focuses not on

25 Al LaValley, “The Gay Liberation of Rainer Werner Fassbinder: Male Subjectivity, Male Bodies, Male Lovers,” *New German Critique* 63 (1994): 108–37.

26 *Ibid.*, 110.

27 *Ibid.*, 112.

28 *Ibid.*, 112.

negativity, but on seeking solutions through acceptance of the masochism that is the libidinal drive of his films. The key is what breaks out of the narrative to support the powerful presence of bodies. It is worth recalling LaCapra's arguments here about the necessity of protecting fetishism to resist the dominant exchange and functional values governing what representations get circulated in culture.

Fassbinder remained true to the Brechtian principle of critical mimesis and the careful separation of politics and morality, which always eventually comes after the arts, demanding censorship. Another lesson learned from Brecht was the powerful conviction that acting – striving for political aims – cannot block the principle of examining reality. Fassbinder not only did not hide the facts that could have blocked the way to emancipation; he teased them out and showcased them with desperate consistency.

Abstract

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Emancipation, Representation, Censorship

This article attempts a critical redefinition of basic concepts such as emancipation, representation, and censorship, and looks at the field of tensions created between these concepts in the field of emancipatory movements, particularly in post-critical discourses accentuating ethical issues and in queer theories complicating the political and ethical meanings of artistic representation. It also explores the modern-day functionality of the definition of censorship in the Freudian psychoanalytic definition.

Keywords

emancipation, representation, censorship, queer art, Fassbinder