

# CONFERENCE REPORT

## CENSORSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA

Jan Beekman

1. Objective. Censorship, wherever it is found, could be summed up in one sentence: "I allow you to speak, but I order you to stay silent". Censorship is always confusing. Very few people, at any one place at any one time, will agree that the line was correctly drawn. That may be so, but it seems true also, that almost everyone in South Africa now agrees that at the moment, either the lines have been drawn incorrectly, or the procedure to draw the line is faulty in the legislation. The Conference tried to contribute to the discussions and to find facts and muster opinions which might help those who bear direct responsibility for the design of the censorship-system, to improve.

2. Format. The Conference lasted three full days and one day until late afternoon. Every day had a number of introductory lectures, a forum on a special subject and the first three days had a main evening lecture. All sessions had ample time for discussions. The programme, annexed to this report, was completely carried out, except for the fact that Professor Mathews (scheduled for Thursday morning) was ill. Instead of his lecture Miss Miriam Tlali spoke on the problems of the black women authors. Participation was open to everybody against a fee. It was possible to participate in: only a morning or an afternoon session, an evening session, a full day or the whole Conference. Students paid a lower rate.

3. Participation. Censorship is a specialised subject and cannot compete with issues which draw big crowds. Attendance at the sessions varied between 80 and 150 people. Altogether about 300 people must have participated in the Conference one way and another. The Publications Appeal Board and the Directorate had both decided not to be present at the Conference. The P A B's decision was more or less understandable. The decision of the Directorate not to be represented in Cape Town however, was very strange indeed. The Directorate is an entirely administrative body and from the point of view of sound public administration, the decision taken deserves the severest criticism. Fortunately some censors, past and present, were arranging their participation and their presence has been very beneficial to the vivacity of the discussions.

The Conference was fortunate in having a limited number of black speakers and participants. Their contribution was maybe the most revealing of all.

Participants belonged in the majority to the group of liberal white English speaking South Africans. It was, moreover, a group of mostly academically trained people, meeting at a University. As such one cannot speak about a "conclusion" otherwise than that this particular group, which represented nothing, nor wished to do so, came to certain conclusions. The importance of the conclusion, therefore, should not be exaggerated. It should not be underestimated either, because even this select group represents some aspect of the "vox populi".

4. Organisation. Most of the organisation was done by the director of the Conference, Mr K G Druker, the coordinator, Ms Carolyn Winter and a student committee. U C T provided some of the technical assistance through the Principal's Liaison Office and put the facilities of the University at the disposal of the Conference.

The Conference was made financially possible by a generous grant from the Chairman's Fund of Anglo American. The British Council brought Mr James Ferman, the secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, to South Africa. Mobil Oil, Barclay's Bank and Volkswagen made donations to the Conference. The organisers are extremely grateful to them all.

5. Impact. For a small conference like this, the reaction has been very positive. Both before and during the conference there has been wide press coverage and radio and T V have given attention to it. Questions in Parliament have been asked as a direct result of the Conference. A number of articles will be written in different periodicals. The papers of the Conference, there were many and of a very high standard, will be published.

6. Summing up. The discussions had clearly four focusing points.

Attitudes towards censorship in general. Four possible attitudes were mentioned, taking the S A conditions into consideration.

The attitude of acceptance of the situation as it now exists, on the assumption that it is the correct one. This must have been the opinion of the majority in Parliament, in theory representing the opinion of the majority of the South African population, at the time of passing legislation. At the Conference nobody, not even the recently retired Chairman of the Publications Appeal Board was of that opinion.

The second attitude was that censorship, more or less in the intensity in which it is now practised in S A, is acceptable. It is acceptable on the grounds that one assumes that the majority of the population wants it and that the country, for reasons of political safety and racial stability, needs it. But, although one accepts the intensity of South African censorship of 1980, one rejects its system and the structure of the relevant legislation. The rejection is based on practical and legal grounds. One cannot expect a body of 250 censors, more or less at random operating in groups of three and without either the guarantee that their judgements are really expert judgements or the guarantee that their judgements could be criticised, can produce a sensible and consistent body of decisions. The appeal procedure, which is not a real appeal procedure, but rather a first instance procedure, is not sufficiently clear and accessible.

A small minority of the conference, including the retired Chairman of the P A B was of this opinion.

The third attitude is one of objecting against both the intensity and the structure system of the present censorship, but of accepting the necessity of some censorship. Some censorship is deemed necessary, either to protect the safety of the country or to protect some particularly vulnerable groups in our society. Screening films for age groups in a highly professional give and take way such as the British system does, would be quite in order according to this point of view. The possibility of taking cases to a normal court of law with a right to appeal, always using reasonably clear criteria as to what constitutes harmfulness or danger, would be another example of acceptable censorship in this category. This was the majority of the conference participants' opinion.

The fourth possible attitude is, of course, no legal or state censorship at all. People of this opinion are rather optimistic as to the basic integrity of the human mind. If one believes that human beings are basically good, it follows logically that under normal circumstances one does not need state censorship. If one believes that the human species is basically bad, one

needs full censorship. Between these two extremes a continuum of in-between positions is possible.

No state censorship means: full responsibility for the human being himself, full responsibility of parents and teachers for children; emphasis on self censorship, group censorship, social control. But no censorship legislation. It does not mean that no censorship at all shall exist. In every society several forms of informal censorship do exist.

The Political Significance of Censorship. Right from the start the opinion was voiced that censorship in South Africa is an essential part of an overall system of conservative political management of the country. In our case, this means the policy of separate development.

In the beginning of the conference some participants doubted that and saw nothing more in censorship than a rather decent, innocuous and basically good safeguard against some sinister forces which threaten our "Western and Christian civilisation". At the end of the conference there was probably nobody left who had not at least a reasonable doubt in his mind as to the validity of that opinion. One paper, presenting censorship as a cybernetic input-output model was very clear in this respect, but almost all contributors to the conference showed abundantly clearly how any censorship is - by definition - conservative. Conservatism means that something must be conserved, namely the status quo. The status quo in society as it is run now, at this moment. Our society, as it stands now, stands for separate development. Censorship, both in its structure and its practice, stands for separate development. According to the vast majority of participants, and one may not forget that practically the whole world thinks along the same lines, separate development is evil and unjust. By consequence then so is censorship in the present form for political reasons. This argument put censorship in a much wider political context.

The different ways censorship works out for different groups in our population. Right from the start it was made clear to participants, firstly, that more attention could have been paid to the interests of other groups than the white liberal South Africans. Secondly that whites, in general, had practically no knowledge about the way censorship works out for the black man or woman author, playwright or film maker in our country. White people had access to resources which are simply cut off for the black. Resources like money, performance halls, quiet rooms in which to write or think, better education to draw from, easier communication etc etc. Black people have, on the other hand, the vital urge (emphasis on vital), the tension resulting from suffering. That urge, that tension is creative in a very special way.

One has, of course, to be more sophisticated than just to distinguish between black and white. Very little was said about the situation in the coloured and Indian groups and this was an omission of the Conference.

Special reference was made to the Afrikaner white group - particularly in connection with literature. The censor's attitude has been surprisingly harsh against these authors, presumably because their cultural background predisposes them to belong to the group which defends the status quo. They, and with them the Afrikaans culture, are hit harder than their English medium colleagues, because the latter can always try to find publishers overseas, something which is impossible for the Afrikaans writer.

In theory it is possible to go to the Publications Appeal Board. The Conference made it quite clear, however, that a great number of authors and

playwrights, particularly black artists, refuse to use the tools of the legislation on principle. They, and their publishers agree with them, are of the opinion, that any step towards redressing a decision by committee would be tantamount to recognising the system and its reasons for existence. These authors and playwrights consider it below their dignity to do so. Others, although understanding and respecting this attitude from an emotional point of view, were of the opinion that it would be preferable if authors would go to the Publications Appeal Board. Some negotiation took place during the conference on the possibility of creating a body of expert people, who would try to use the means of the existing legislation for the benefit of banned authors in the most efficient way. During the Conference no conclusion was reached on this point, because of the fact that too many authors and publishers absolutely and categorically refused to have anything whatsoever to do with a similar project. Negotiations, however, are continuing after the Conference.

Different fields of censorship. Censorship was discussed from many points of view. Political censorship, censorship in matters of sex, censorship on violence, religious censorship, censorship in matters of state, the press, the cinema, literature, theatre, T V and others. It soon became clear that, if one accepts a certain amount of censorship, the rules for the different fields and ways of approach have to be different. It was said, for instance, the the Appeal Board is more tolerant in cases where people read in private than in the cases of films or public entertainment. This makes public entertainment more vulnerable than other fields. It seems to be true also, that a stage production needs greater safeguards than a book, whereas it may be that a stage production can never be put together again. Mass media again, have their own problems and their own possibilities. A great number of factors were mentioned which are specific for one particular form of human expression or for one particular approach to censorship. A concrete system of censorship ought to be sufficiently sophisticated to reflect all these specific circumstances.

The Conference ended with a number of questions and conclusions.

The present censorship system urgently needs a drastic overhaul. Even people who are in principle in favour of strict censorship, object against the existing system because it is amateurish, unreliable and extremely unfair. Several alternatives were mentioned, ranging between a purely administrative system and a court system.

Is an acceptable set of criteria for censorship possible taking into account the specific requirements of specific fields?

In connection with the above point, is such a set of criteria internationally, that is, cross culturally acceptable? That might be desirable and in that case, the criteria would probably have to be formulated along the same sort of lines as they are formulated in some European countries. The British rules might serve as an example, to be adapted to the needs of this country.

In the meantime a strategy vis-a-vis the present censorship system has to be followed. This strategy can be very militant, fighting with all possible cunning, taking calculated risks, using all loopholes in the legislation. It can also be more moderate, concentrating on the fact that existing legislation often goes less far than people generally assume. Another strategy is complete refusal to have anything whatsoever to do with the existing system.

However one decides to proceed, the best strategy is truth. Truth, meaning

to talk about censorship, publish about it, study its details and effects, unravel facts and organise conferences. That is precisely what the U C T Conference on Censorship in South Africa has tried to do.

#### NOTE

1. "Je permet que tu parles, mais j'exige que tu te taises". Victor Hugo: Napoleon le Petit (1852).

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Papers delivered at the Conference on Censorship will be published in book form by David Phillip. The editors will be Jan F Beekman and Kalman G Druker who organised the proceedings. Authors will include Johan D van der Vyver, John Dugard, Nadine Gordimer, Barend van Niekerk, James Ferman, Andre Brink, Sipho Sepamala, Mirium Tlali and many others.

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# Ethnographic Film Festival

School of Dramatic Art, University of the Witwatersrand

The first Ethnographic Film Festival to be held in South Africa will be held at the above university from 21st-26th July, 1980. Visual anthropology and ethnographic film are becoming two of the most rapidly growing academic disciplines in the United States, and it is appropriate that the School of Dramatic Art - the only University department in South Africa offering major courses in film studies - should host the festival.

South Africa is uniquely suited to be a centre for ethnographic film studies since it has a rich variety of preliterate cultures which must be recorded filmically before they disappear. Furthermore, there are many other contemporary cultures and sub-cultures which should be documented visually. Lastly, there is a wealth of visual material, in the form of photographs and old films which must still be catalogued and analysed. All of this is doubly important when one realizes that South Africa has one of the oldest film histories - the Anglo-Boer War was the first war to be reported on film and African Mirror was the longest running newsreel in the world.

#### Speakers will include:

Jay Ruby, Professor of Visual Anthropology at Temple University, Philadelphia. He is also the Director of the Centre for Ethnographic Film making at Sante Fe, a Member of the Advisory Board of the Smithsonian Institute and the Centre for Southern Folklore. Professor Ruby is the editor of the Journal of Visual Communications and the author of many articles on Ethnography and Visual Anthropology.

Gei Zantsinger, independent film maker and Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Temple University and Rhodes University. Collaborated with Andrew Tracey on six films on the Art of the Mbira.

Peter Becker, author of Path of Blood and many other works on the History of the Zulu Nation. Writer and presenter of The Tribal Identity series for South African television.

Fiona Barbour, Curator of the MacGregor Museum in Kimberley which houses the Duggin-Cronin collection of photographs.

Other speakers will include John van Zyl and Keyan Tomaselli.

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