**Censorship on the two sides of the Curtain and literary reactions in capitalist and communist worlds.**

**Introduction**

According to René Girard, conflicts usually take place when two individuals can no longer share one object they both desire. Thus not only will they become enemies, but also the one will be influenced by the other and end up enacting the same strategies of his opponent. Eventually, they will become more and more alike and the desired object will be almost forgotten[[1]](#footnote-2).

The Girardian theory of mimetic desire has been applied not only to biblical texts but also to real life, - in particular real social dynamics and literature, concerning studies on the myths and on the Bible but also on several contemporary or at least modern authors.

Even acknowledging that it is not possible to give an interpretation of history in girardian terms, something seems basically right about the theory when analysing thepolitical strategies that former USSR and the US deployed during the cold war. Despite being opposite in many ways - political choices, social organization, living conditions – the USSR and the US had in common some characteristics as well.

For instance, the two countries were the main political forces in the world and thus both pursued world supremacy. Rivalry was expressed through any sort of offence and retaliation on different scales: production of nuclear weapons, conquest of space, appropriation of new countries within the influence of capitalism or communism, sport competition, localized military actions, strategic deployment of troops and military bases.

Both systems were characterized by a strong propaganda designed to demonize, by and large, the other side of the Curtain; actually, both sides used almost the same images to give an awful portrait of the unknown Other, very often intended to be the personification of Evil.

A few examples: fearing a nuclear attack on USSR's part, a campaign of advertisement came into force between 1950s and 1960s. It was designed by the US government and intended to make civilians prepare for the approaching nuclear war by building themselves a home fallout shelter[[2]](#footnote-3). Eventually, few americans did really build one, and the campaign was more effective in restating the importance of gendered division of homely duties.

Looking back, some generalized categories employed by both USSR and the US media to describe the Other could seem more a fiction than a fact. USSR public television portrayed America as the imperialist leading state – a fearful country in which social and economic injustice was the major plague, but in which there was also a widespread racial conflict. The entire world and above all USSR was defined in opposition to the Enemy. The same as for the United States: whether in normal times or in periods of communist fear, the representation of world one could gain was one of a strictly dichotomized reality. Communist and anti communist powers were discussed in terms of gains and losses[[3]](#footnote-4).

Moreover, these politic choices also affected other spheres of that reality for which media provided information to citizens: culture, music, the arts. For instance, after the Revolution, in Russia only survived, as artistic accepted form, the so called “social realism”, of which Deineka was one of the most important figures and, perhaps, the only one who was really able to stick to the directions of the party without loosing his own creativity. Needless to say, other currents like futurism or cubism, all movements that had gained the favour of critics and that had renewed russian culture in the early 1920s, disappeared from the artistic scene. On the other side, in the US, many cultural figures were accused of sympathising with communism, as well as in USSR people were accused of sympathizing with the capitalist enemy. Even Charlie Chaplin was involved in allegations of anti- american activities, which marked the end of his career. Espionage was in its heyday both in the US and in the USSR[[4]](#footnote-5).

That rivalry between the two countries could not avoid affecting also literature. Literature and writers represent, in some ways, the consciousness of a nation, and we should now move on to acknowledge how writers reacted to this state of being and how censorship dealt with them.

We will explore facts both in the former USSR and the US literatures, and it is important take into account as a major theme that it is possible to detect, by and large, some differences and some similarities between the two contexts.

The main difference, to sum it up and to give an hint of the conclusions, is that the Russian had to come to terms with the party and thus confronted death, torture, deportation just to have thought a prohibited concept; while American writers, mostly during the years of the Beat Generation, took refuge in drugs and in an irregular life, defying the hypocrisy of both government and society to try to renew the existing rules.

Thus, I would stress the fact that, while in Russia writing was more a matter of consciousness, in the US it was a matter of dissent.

**CONSCIOUSNESS**

*“Our writers should work as if they were Shehrazade” M. Gorky*

The story of censorship within the soviet bloc starts as soon as communists started ruling the country.

But it was just in 1934, when the first congress of socialist writers took place[[5]](#footnote-6), that the rules of the party really came into force and the death of freedom of speech was really acknowledged. From that moment on, literature had to be considered as an instrument to actively educate the consciousness of the proletarian people. The work of art became an element of public life, and any writer who did not stick to the party's instructions went through public political accusation. This was, of course, one of the luckiest of options, for writers could also confront other forms of repression: exile, torture, gulags or immediate death penalty through shooting. In the years of terror, almost six hundred writers were arrested and directly shooted, or died in the gulags.

Writers were just craftsmen[[6]](#footnote-7) of the voice of the people, assuming that it was the same as the party's one. Thus, they became part of the ideological machine, in charge of providing an optimistic view of the country and to forecast a better, utopian future.

The paradox was that sovietic writers, while doing this, had also to approve the same regime that could kill them.

The result of this system was a commodified novel mainly focusing on industrial and technical improvement of the country. An alternative was the genre of novel that dealt with life in the Kolchozes. The typical hero of such novels was a man with sound principles, happy of being at the service of the Soviet, intended to be the expression of the country itself. In many cases, the hero had to take difficult decisions and was often bound to be sacrificed. In almost every novel of this kind there was also a spy of the enemy to be found. Examples of this literary frame can be found in novels such as “The Hydroelectric Central” by Šaginjan, “Flags on The Towers” by Makarenko.

Right after the death of Stalin, the first signs of the real writers' consciousness appeared. The book that marked the era, Il'ja Erenburg's “The Thaw”, seemed the literary correspondent of an article written by Pomerancev[[7]](#footnote-8) in the review “New World”, that was about honesty in literature. In Kruscev's era writers experienced, at least officially, the possibility of writing within certain limitations about the past. In reality, many were the obstacles that had to be overcome yet.

The usual method of allegation was still used whenever an author spoke too clearly: such was the case of Pasternak's “Doctor Živago”, whose publication in Italy and whose Nobel provoked a scandal with even insults from the party's members. Another important case of censorship was the one of Solženicyn who, having written “A day in the life of Ivan Denisovič”, in which the great novelty was to tell such a dramatic autobiographical experience was not allowed to go to Sweden to receive the Nobel prize, and eventually emigrated in the US. He was one in a long line: before him Nabokov, Zabolocky, Zamjatin and many others had emigrated.

Another phenomenon of the time was the distinction between the official culture and a hidden subculture. Examples of the latter were Tamizdat and Samizdat. Tamizdat, literally “published there”, meaning abroad: the case of Pasternak could be representative of this strand. Samizdat, literally “published on one's own”, meaning the distribution of illegal printings. Thanks to Samizdat, not only could Russian people read banished authors like Dostoevsky, but also foreign books like Orwell's “The Animal Farm”. The aim of Samizdat was to distribute prohibited books and at the same time to give readers a chance to choose what to read, since they had to make copies of books themselves and distribute them. Obviously there were not only novels but also social science essays, other kinds of print products like periodicals. One of the most famous samizdat periodicals was the so called “Chronicle of Current Events” that was issued for fifteen years.

Russian writers represented in the thirties the party’s consciousness, and just later the real consciousness of the country. On the whole, the sheer fact of writing outside the norms was a witness to the truth and to the right of rethinking the past expressing new thoughts.

**DISSENT**

*“We will modify the laws that ruled the nowadays so- called “civil countries”: laws that have filled the Earth with secret police, camps, oppression, slavery, war, death.”* A. Ginsberg

*“Beat Generation is a group of children talking about the end of the world at the street corner”.* J. Kerouac

While Russian writers had to come to terms with such problematic situation, the US literature after the second World War experienced a wave of dissent exemplified by the Beat generation. The kind of dissent expressed by that current of American writers – both poets and novel writers – was perhaps more philosophical than the Russian could do, and was mainly about the changing of society.

Dissent had been in the American literary tradition since Modernism[[8]](#footnote-9), if not before with Transcendentalism, particularly in the case of Thoreau[[9]](#footnote-10) that advocated a new kind of life, essentially closer to nature.

Even if we just took into account Modernism, however, we would discover in the Waste Land not only the substance of a whole literary current, but a representation of consciousness. The main message seems to be that salvation through purification can be reached just after having gained the consciousness of one's own situation in a modern world of business and lack of real relationships.

In the opposite way, representing the dead souls of a generation that were so unable to see anything outside their glamorous world, even the main writer of the so called “Jazz age”, Fitzgerald, represented the lack of a structured consciousness.

Thus no wonder, maybe, if the Beat Generation drew from sources like Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and shared in some ways ideas that were already part of Modernism.

An important theme, within the Beat generation, was the utopia of a new world that was also the result of the age's context. The beats inherited a world in transition after a big war and supposedly before other wars, suggested by Cuba, Koreas and Vietnam; thus, in a climate of anxiety and, within new generations, of hopelessness.

This was accompanied by political events such the so called “second Red fear”, alongside a series of established truths that every American was supposed to respect and believe in: family life, fidelity to the country, a simple life in a small city[[10]](#footnote-11).

This set of established norms was opposed, with the fact that, later on, the Young were sacrificed in military actions for a nation in which they were losing faith. They felt to not being able to get to grips with established order.

We should remember, perhaps, that this was also the period in which the concept of adolescence came about in social sciences, acknowledging the problems of youngsters and concerning how to educate them in a time in which they did not anymore share their parent's values[[11]](#footnote-12).

The reaction of writers to this context was explosive.

The movement is, in substance, the refusal of schemes, rules and taboos of a society. Beats did not want to stick to norms, rather invent new ones on their own.

Their lifestyle included different elements: the use of drugs, free love and sex, an ecological spirit, a naive ideal of primitive nature - this particular interest is exemplified by Mexico[[12]](#footnote-13), for it was interpreted as a primitive land in which to start a new life -, different religions. In particular, they fancied - as Ginsberg and Snyper did – Buddhism, but there was also a widespread interest in Existentialism, Neopaganism[[13]](#footnote-14).

Resistance and dissent were achieved by breaking taboos and social conventions, in particular a liberation from the concepts of family, community and nation. They sympathized with marginalized people like addicts, migrant labourers, homeless people and all those who represented something different from the norm.

In Kerouac, for example, resistance to the status quo is made through mobility. The road stands not only for a myth but also for the search for an american essence. Movement is connected with something transcendent and not only the way different cities are discovered and then left in an atmosphere of dissatisfaction does respond to a romantic ideal[[14]](#footnote-15) - according to which it is better the expectation rather than the actual place - , but also to a kind of myth of eternal return written like a series of jazz variations[[15]](#footnote-16).

Beats experienced new ways of expanding the self, not only with drugs but also with a free sexuality. In particular in Ginsberg, Lowell and Bishop there is the experience of a new being, almost bisexual.

At the beginning, since it was a novelty, the Beat movement gained consent; but later on, had to get to grips with the attacks of some US associations and of journalists, who saw a way of making money with their personality.

As for censorship, Ginsberg was perhaps the most famous within the list of poets and writers involved, because of his poem “Howl”. Howl was both a lament about the political and cultural conservatism and a protest against a society of mechanized conformists[[16]](#footnote-17).

In 1955 he made the first reading of Howl in “Six Gallery” in St Francisco, and at the beginning it created furore and controversy. In 1957, the copies were taken from commerce and the poet was charged with obscenity, above all for the homosexual content of the poem. In the so called “Howl obscenity trial”, a number of critics and editors defended Howl, and in the end the Municipal court judge, C.W. Horn, had to overturn the charges. Howl, in spite of its harsh contents, had a "redeeming social importance." This decision helped the success of the Beat generation, made Ginsberg an important poet in the eyes of the public and also created a way for the publication of previously censored books, like Tropic of Cancer by Miller and Lady Chatterley's lover by Lawrence.

Another writer targeted by censorship was Burroughs, because of the book “Naked lunch”, whose trial took place in 1956, on the same grounds of obscenity.

Kerouac, though a reportedly controversial writer, was never involved in a trial. On the road had been censored by editors before coming in the bookstores.

**Conclusion**

In the article we made a cross cultural study of the dynamics of censorship that were into force both in the USSR and in the US.

To focus the attention in the decade between 1950s and 1960s we had first to draw a brief account of what was the situation before, just to have a rough idea about why those dynamics took place in that particular decade. Unfortunately, it is not possible to further develop what was after this particular span of time.

Dealing with this cross cultural study we came across particular conclusions as regarding the similarities and the differences that affected censorship in both countries we examined.

First and foremost, the major differences between the US and the USSR in the literary field were obviously about the methods deployed by censorship, that in the US was less harsh than on the other side of the Curtain.

In addition, the themes that the Beat generation developed were very different from the ones that Russian writers dealt with, given the particular political and social context of both countries. US writers dealt more with philosophical and social themes that mostly had to do with a renewal of society and a defiance of conformism. Russian writers had very different problems to solve, related to freedom of thought and of speech; all rights that, were perhaps at the base of the birth of the United States.

On the other hand, there was a major similarity between the USSR and the US cultures in that decade: the split between the official and the unofficial culture that acted in response to the former one.

There is also another basic similarity to be taken into account. It was the very concept behind censorship that could be shared in both countries: the established order is sometimes threatened, or feels threatened, by the voice of dissent, and in many cases even the voice of consciousness could be very annoying.

To sum up, when talking about literature and censorship, in any time and any political organization, we could say with the words of A.W. Griswold: “Books won't stay banned -Ideas won't go to jail”.

1. R.GIRARD, Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca, Bompiani 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. S.A.LICHTMAN, Do-it-Yourself-Security: Safety, Gender and the Home Fallout Shelter in Cold War America , The Journal of Design History, spring 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. P.C.WASBURN, B.R.BURKE, The Symbolic Construction of Russia and the United States on Russian National Television, The Sociological Quarter, autumn 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. J.H.MATHEWS, Art and Politics in Cold War America, The American Historical Review, october 1976 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Between august and september of 1934 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. It is no coincidence that before the revolution writers were against capital punishment, and in the thirties they were all favourable. The sharp division was among sovietic and non sovietic writers, that is to say enemies. A.KELLY, Self-censorship and Russian Intelligentsija 1905-1914, Slavic Review, summer 1987 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Pomerancev was one of the main cultural figures of the time, director of the review “Novij mir”. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. We remind Pound's slogan “Make it new!” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. J.MYERSON, The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoureau, Cambridge University Press, 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. R.D.COHEN, The Delinquents:Censorship and Youth Culture in Recent U.S. Story, History of Education Quarterly, autumn 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. We should remember that in those years, namely in 1955, “Rebel Without a Cause” was released. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. R.ADAMS, Hipsters and Jipitecas: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of The Border, American Literary History, spring 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. B.BUYUKOKUTAN, Toward a Theory of Cultural Appropriation:Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of U.S.Poetry, American Sociological Review, august 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. T.CRESSWELL, Mobility as Resistance:A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's “On the Road”, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 1993 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. In fact, the original book was written without punctuation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. B.MORGAN, N.J.PETERS, The Battle for Free Expression, City Lights Books, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)