

## **CREATIVITY AND CENSORSHIP IN MUSIC: 'LIKE THE DANUBE CARVING THROUGH A MOUNTAIN, IT PRODUCES WONDERS' – A DIALOGUE WITH ADRIAN POP**

**CRISTINA ELEONORA PASCU<sup>1</sup>** 

**SUMMARY.** The article delves into the effects of censorship on artistic expression, drawing on the insights of composer Adrian Pop. In commemoration of the 35th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution, the conversation sheds light on how censorship influenced music during the Communist era and how composers ingeniously maneuvered through its constraints. Adrian Pop highlights that, while censorship enforced strict boundaries, it did not completely suppress creativity, which persisted and thrived, much like the Danube carving its path through mountains. The article explores the dynamic between censorship and self-censorship, illustrating how propaganda often acted as a counterpart to censorship. Additionally, it touches on the significance of folklore in music and the gradual shift of composers toward experimentalism, despite the regime's restrictive environment.

**Keywords:** Censorship, creativity, Adrian Pop, Communist era, Romanian Revolution

### **Pro Domo**

The year 2024 marks the 35th anniversary of the Romanian Revolution, a milestone that invites us to thoughtfully reconsider the Communist regime, and, more specifically, the pervasive influence of censorship within the realm of music. Acknowledging that primary sources are invaluable to researchers, and that the most profound among them are individuals, we

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<sup>1</sup> *Gheorghe Dima*<sup>2</sup> National Academy of Music, Scientific Researcher Grade 3, [cristina.pascu@amgd.ro](mailto:cristina.pascu@amgd.ro)



have the privilege of inviting Professor Adrian Pop - distinguished professor at the “Gheorghe Dima” National Academy of Music, esteemed composer, and an intellectual of remarkable depth - to illuminate the intricate dynamics of this phenomenon. His insights offer an insider’s perspective on the compositional process, masterfully framed within the historical and cultural fabric of Romanian music. Drawing on his experiences as a composer, Philharmonic manager, and witness to the evolution of a prestigious musical tradition, Adrian Pop provides a nuanced exploration of censorship’s impact on artistic creation.

The interview, which is also available on YouTube, was conducted as part of the project “Liberty in Quotations: Vocal, Instrumental, Three-Dimensional”, an initiative of the Sound Borders Association led by composer Alexandru Ștefan Murariu. In our effort to reach a wider academic audience, the interview has been adapted into a written format. Yet, a truly meaningful dialogue extends beyond the mere asking of questions; it entails fostering an environment where ideas can unfold naturally, where thoughts are given the space to breathe and reverberate. In this regard, the conversation stands out for the depth and documentary richness of Adrian Pop’s reflections. While the written medium may not fully capture the subtle tonal inflections or the expressive gestures so essential to human communication, it nevertheless conveys the essence of the discourse, preserving the substance of the ideas and the intricate conversation surrounding the theme of censorship.

**Ethics and Material Adaptation Disclaimer:** this transcription is a careful reformulation of the original dialogue, which can be viewed in its entirety on YouTube (Asociația Culturală Sound Borders). Given the inherent differences between oral and written expression, certain elements have been refined to conform to an academic style, ensuring clarity and coherence. Every effort has been made to retain the integrity and fidelity of Professor Adrian Pop’s message, and any minor discrepancies between the two formats reflect the natural adaptation process, without compromising the substance of the discussion.

### **Conceptual Landmarks**

**Cristina Pascu:** - *Professor Adrian Pop, our discussion today is framed by the significance of the date. We are celebrating 35 years of freedom since the Revolution. From the outset, I would like to mention that our conversation is part of a project organized by the Sound Borders Association, which involves a young generation of performers, most of whom were born after 1989. What should they understand about censorship? And what exactly was it?*

**Adrian Pop:** It's interesting that you asked, "what was it?" But is it no longer present? For today's young generation to fully grasp it, we must provide them with the tools for independent thinking. It is an ideal to think with one's own mind. And it is not an easy task.

First and foremost, censorship is a form of prohibition, a "this is forbidden." The form of prohibition studied by anthropologists is known as taboo, which represents a fundamental rule in any tribal society - establishing boundaries. Crossing these boundaries, in anthropological terms, is called transgression. This is an almost inevitable stage in the development of a young person, who, sometimes in a chaotic, sometimes even violent, and often unjustified manner - other times justifiably - rebels against parental or societal authority. These behaviors have been intrinsic to human nature since the dawn of time. So, I find it difficult to speak of what censorship was, when in reality, it remains present everywhere.

As I mentioned earlier, censorship is, at its core, a form of prohibition. This prohibition can be legal, moral, or religious in nature, and these forms often overlap. A legal system is founded on a certain moral code, and religion has always been intertwined with politics and social control until the late 19th century, when strong secularization movements began to emerge in Europe. However, even today, any fundamentalist state revives this close collaboration between religious doctrine and its moral, legal, and political implications. These dynamics are part of the historical trajectory of human societies.

*- What do you believe is the opposite of censorship? Freedom?*

Certainly, any prohibition represents an infringement upon freedom. [...] Yet I wouldn't consider censorship to be the fundamental opposite of freedom, because censorship serves specific purposes. In today's Europe, we live within a civilization that still considers itself Christian. How long this will remain the case, we do not know, but broadly speaking, it is regarded as Christian. And Christianity is based on certain texts, of which the Ten Commandments are central. The Ten Commandments are, in fact, ten forms of censorship. Let's examine them as taught by the Orthodox Church today. 1. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." But what if I believe in Olympus? 2. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor bow down to them." 3. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." These are all expressions of censorship elevated to the level of law. Then we have the others: 4. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." So, we are at the fourth commandment, and they all carry a religious-political nature, expressing religious intolerance. Today, we are entirely the opposite, but these commandments form the basis of the Old Testament and everything that stems from it. From the fifth commandment

onward, things become more practical: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the earth." This is both a deeply moral and inherently natural principle.

*- And the only one accompanied by a promise...*

Exactly. Then comes the sixth commandment: "You shall not kill." In what legal system does it say: "You shall kill!"? Moving on to the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." Then the eighth: "You shall not steal." Next, the ninth: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," a behavior that, unfortunately, has become quite prevalent today. And finally, the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor." This is how we lay the foundation for an entire civilization and social order, built upon a dichotomy of yes and no, good and evil, where evil is expelled through censorship. However, there is a certain relativity in defining what is good and what is evil.

Therefore, in my perspective, it is **propaganda** that stands as the antithesis of censorship. If we focus on the means of influence - whether it's "Don't do this, but do that" or "Buy this instead of that" - we inevitably arrive at the notion of advertising. What is advertising, if not a form of propaganda, present daily on the news, more and more invasive? In a way, advertising is the opposite of censorship. If we wish to discuss how censorship manifested at various historical stages, both within our profession and in society at large, we must look at the entire picture. And again, reaching a comprehensive understanding is no easy task. By ignoring history, we risk sliding into propaganda and a superficial version of the past.

*- So, what is the difference between the boundaries and normative aspects of a society, and direct censorship?*

Censorship establishes boundaries. And it is imposed by those who hold the power to set them. Censorship becomes harmful when power is corrupt. And with that, we return to the discussion of good and evil, both of which are so relative.

### **Censorship and Its Effects on Artistic Creativity**

*- Specifically, in relation to our topic - censorship in music - what did it entail? How did it manifest?*

The censorship we are discussing, in this historical context, took root around 1947-1948 when the Soviet victors, following the well-known

negotiations at Yalta, gained the power to shape and dominate a number of countries, including Romania. According to their principles (or to any victor's principles), to dominate a country, its system had to be reshaped to mirror the victor's one, in this case the Soviet one, which was communist. Romania had no affinity with the communist system - it had been banned in Romania since the 1920s. Nevertheless, we were forced to implement this system, a brutal action against society that dismantled social classes, confiscated wealth, and completely overturned the social order. Life in Romania was radically disrupted, and all natural customs and structures were forced to adhere to a new set of ideas. In this context, numerous prohibitions and strict censorship emerged. Regarding music, one of the main goals of Sovietization across countries in their sphere of domination, including Romania, was to sever their ties with the West. One particularly brutal measure was the outlawing of the Greek Catholic Church, a branch of the Romanian Transylvanian church with significant historical importance. Since it was linked to Rome, this church was intolerable to the communist regime, which imposed the forced (re-)conversion of Greek Catholics to Orthodoxy. They were simply called "returnees" (keeping in mind that before 1700, the Romanian population of Transylvania was entirely Orthodox). This policy removed any concern composers might have had for religious music, whether Catholic or Orthodox. This does not mean that such music ceased to exist entirely - it was still composed here and there - but it wasn't supported or published, and those who engaged with it could face consequences such as disapproving looks, subtle or even overt persecution.

*- Could you provide specific examples that illustrate how censorship influenced the creative work of Romanian composers?*

There was a composer, unknown to the younger generation, Ioan D. Chirescu, a church composer from Bucharest rooted in the tradition of Dumitru Georgescu-Kiriatic and Gheorghe Cucu. When I was a child in school, he was composing songs like *Republică, măreață vatră* (Republic, Mighty Hearth), and we sang the anthem, that song, and other similar melodies that were part of the school curriculum.

I always thought of this composer as a communist, someone who wrote mass songs for communist propaganda - the very opposite of censorship - but in truth, deep down, he was a profoundly Orthodox composer. I discovered this when working on my doctoral thesis, *The Romanian Requiem*. In the remarkable library of the Composers' Union, I encountered Mihai Popescu, an extraordinary librarian (he authored volumes on Romanian music up to his time, which are infallible). He gave me two Byzantine-style church choruses by Ioan D. Chirescu, written in ink, beautifully composed with a highly unusual

style adapted to Byzantine chant. This illustrates the power of censorship: the man had to stifle his true artistic personality, and this is where the aggression of censorship, which you are all curious about, becomes evident.

*- What were the psychological effects of censorship? Did it act as a catalyst for creativity by pushing composers to employ subterfuge techniques (metaphors, allegories), or was it a stifler of creativity?*

Censorship suppressed certain genres but did not necessarily stifle creativity or the composer as an individual.

During the early years of the Soviet Revolution, avant-garde artists were at the forefront, and the avant-garde movement played a significant role in Soviet art and culture. Just take an example such as at Majakowsky, an avant-garde poet, who was very much stimulated by the social effects of the Soviet Revolution. However, this movement was gradually suppressed as communist cultural ideology coalesced around the concept of "mass culture." The proletariat became the focal point of this culture, and artists were expected to create accessible, easily understood art for the people.

An important intellectual current, formalism - closely linked to the avant-garde and conceptual music - was highly regarded by Russian artists. But as it became more established (in the years '20 and '30), this movement clashed with the authorities. After the Civil War and the consolidation of communist power, the leadership became more involved in regulating culture. In the post-World War II period, Andrei Zhdanov, a high-ranking Politburo official, emerged as a key figure in the fight against formalism and the avant-garde, enforcing an art that aligned with the official ideology.

Composers like Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and others were criticized for certain modernist elements in their works. In such a harsh system, they had to accept these critiques, publicly confess to their "errors," and essentially apologize: "Yes, I was wrong," and "I admit my guilt." Censorship was incredibly severe. Yet, these composers did not vanish from the annals of music history. Neither Shostakovich, nor Prokofiev, nor Khachaturian. Paradoxically, the fact that they were forced to maintain a middle ground in terms of innovation - semi-traditionalist - did not prevent them from making groundbreaking contributions. Looking back now, we can clearly see their innovations and the impact they had. Today, if we examine concert programs, these composers surpass their avant-garde peers in terms of popularity. Why? Because they remained closer to a broader perceptual middle ground, catering to the tastes of a wider audience. The "proletkult" theory, propagated by the Soviets and imposed on us, wasn't just aimed at a larger cultural middle class - it aspired to influence everyone.

At the same time, the communist regime promoted inspiration from folklore. But this folkloric inspiration had deeper roots, cultivated by prominent Romantics like Liszt, Chopin, Glinka, Borodin, and others - high society figures who explored and elevated folklore out of a pure artistic impulse. In our context, it became mandatory. Look at works from the proletkult period: Sigismund Toduță's *Concerto No. 1 for Strings* - it's timeless. Yes, it's proletkultist, in the sense that it incorporates folklore. Constantin Silvestri's *Three Pieces for String Orchestra* - equally timeless, and again, folklore-based. Paul Constantinescu's *Concerto for String Orchestra*, which is also performed as a quartet. Theodor Rogalski's *Three Symphonic Dances* - composed in 1956. At that time, Zhdanov was in full power, and one couldn't compose any avantgarde things. And yet, look at what they produced. This is why I don't believe censorship can completely suppress creativity. Censorship is like a rock or a mountain, and creativity, like the Danube, carves its way through, producing wonders like the Iron Gates. Without those mountains, the Danube would have flowed differently, but now we have these splendid Gates. And what you're describing that clever "navigation" around censorship, was almost a sport. [...] Creativity cannot be silenced.

- *Can censorship become self-censorship?*

Yes, it can quickly lead to self-censorship. For example, you wouldn't write a religious piece because there would be no place to sell it. But doesn't the same thing happen today with the market? You wouldn't write something if there's no demand for it. Back then, what was "in demand" was shaped by censorship, on the one hand, and specific propaganda on the other. I'm not sure I'd want to write something that no one is asking for. I could maybe write it for my drawer. That's how "Our Father" was written - for the drawer, right? Similarly, Marțian Negrea composed his *Requiem-Parastas*: he started composing it during the interwar period, continued during the war, and finished it in the 1950s, by which time such works could no longer be discussed, as religious censorship had become a central issue. So, one couldn't write something religious, even if one's soul longed for it. There was nothing you could do with that work. You wouldn't be imprisoned for writing it, but you would receive a simple response: "Sorry, it can't be published."

- *What were the actual consequences of censorship? What happened if a work wasn't accepted by the censorship mechanisms?*

Censorship was particularly harsh in literature, especially for writers. Take, for example, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, a book

you are likely familiar with, a work of Soviet literature from the interwar period. Despite its fantastic and often comedic narrative, the inserted dialogues between Pilate and Jesus - a deep, unofficial conversation - are surprising. Yet, the book was published in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, a poet like Boris Pasternak wrote a profound novel in the 1950s, *Doctor Zhivago*. The novel was banned in the 1960s, even though Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for it. He wasn't allowed to accept the prize! The publicly available copies of the book were ordered to be destroyed. This is clear evidence that in cases of transgression, as I mentioned (and it wasn't even a significant transgression - Pasternak merely presented an unengaged portrayal, not of a communist, but of an aristocrat who lived through that period and saw his life falling into mediocrity and grayness), this was unacceptable to communist leaders: how could it be, after the Great Revolution, that a total mediocrity had set in, a persistent grayness, when the sun was supposed to rise?

### **Censorship in the Compositional Climate of Cluj**

*- To be more specific, considering your perspective as a student and your educational journey, you studied with Sigismund Toduță and Maestro Cornel Țăranu. I have read about them and their works, some of which were subject to censorship. During your formative years under these extraordinary masters of compositional art, did you personally experience this climate of censorship?*

I was a rather quiet child. I never rebelled against my parents, I followed the rules, and I didn't experience the typical youthful upheavals. I always maintained a sense of humor and a certain degree of self-irony, so I didn't suffer much. Not having a sharp-edged character, I rarely encountered obstacles. However, regarding what could have happened to Toduță or Țăranu - we need to know how censorship manifested at that time within the Composers' Union. The professional committees of the Composer's Union were keenly aware of the political context: works were submitted for approval in view of dissemination, i.e. to be performed in concerts or be broadcast on the radio. However, in order for a work to be broadcast, it required authorization, referred to as the "broadcast clearance." Thus, censorship operated primarily at the level of dissemination. [...] These committees were quite professional and evaluated works to determine these aspects. No piece that contravened censorship principles could be disseminated.

However, the situation was not entirely black and white. The broadcast clearance was granted to almost all, except for those who produced sub-standard work. There wasn't a need for heavy ideological censorship,



because self-censorship had already taken hold. Composers knew from the start which works would be rejected and, as such, didn't bother submitting them. It was common knowledge at the time that religious music wasn't permitted. You knew where the "ceiling" was and didn't attempt to surpass it; you lived within those boundaries. (Nowadays, there is no ceiling - you can leap as high as you want, but often with little effect. Simultaneously, horizontal tensions and interpersonal aggressiveness seem to have increased; sometimes, it feels as though there are so many antagonistic individuals, that it's difficult to navigate.) The removal of boundaries allows for more freedom, but often without meaningful purpose. Back then, broadcast clearance was primarily a **quality control** mechanism. Sub-standard works simply didn't pass. Of course, there were occasional mistakes and ill-intentioned individuals, but that's human nature. The principle, however, was professional. Once a work received clearance, it moved to the recording and publishing stages. The committees streamlined these processes, first evaluating the work, then granting clearance, and finally facilitating its broadcast, recording, and publication. Radio stations recorded the works, the Musical Publishing House scheduled their release, and so on. About 90% of the selection process was based on professional standards, and censorship, when necessary, was sparingly applied. Those with avant-garde tendencies, however, were kept on the sidelines for a while. This is something that Maestro Țăranu, for example, had to endure. As for Toduță's generation, I am not certain they faced significant professional challenges from the Union – after choosing to continue to live and work in the Romanian People's Republic, and implicitly assuming the harsh conditions. There were certainly rivalries between figures like Giuleanu and Toduță - these were mere human disagreements, but not censorship in the strict sense of the word.

The censorship felt by Maestro Țăranu's generation was mainly expressed in a temporary resistance to their strong desire to break free from traditionalism and move toward experimentalism, seeking alignment with the West. In fact, this openness quickly materialized. Many of these composers attended Darmstadt several times, received scholarships to Paris and other places, starting in the 1960s. Thus, we are discussing a period of harsh censorship between 1948-1960, dominated by Zhdanovism. After Stalin's death, under Khrushchev, with the critique of Stalinism, opportunities began to open up. The same happened here, and the stylistic atmosphere relaxed, allowing greater artistic freedom. Indeed, there was stylistic censorship during those years, but it eventually disappeared.

In our context, it was more a matter of adapting to the prevailing conditions, which later relaxed considerably. Censorship did not stifle talent or the drive to compose; instead, it functioned as a force that channeled creativity within certain boundaries. What did it cost composers to write in a

folkloric style? Nothing. They composed from the heart, and their works were warmly received.

- *Regarding your own works, have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to modify or adapt a piece?*

Yes, absolutely. I had to make such adjustments. For example, in my fourth year of studies, I became deeply interested in carols while working with an exceptional professor, Traian Mîrza, a key figure in the field of folklore at our institution, who completely transformed my understanding of folk music. Up until then, as a city dweller, a typical “asphalt-eater,” folk music wasn’t particularly appealing to me. I would hear it at my grandparents’ house, but it didn’t resonate with me. They had a speaker in the house corner that distorted the sounds, and the Oltenian songs from the ’50s didn’t appeal to me at all. But once I began to understand the layers and functionality of folklore, carols, and rituals, I was forever captivated. (Today, I still cultivate this genre in my own work.) Back then, I composed a carol that wasn’t a characteristic one - it was a parody, which Mîrza referred to as a “colindă de pricină” (mock carol). *My choral miniature* was initially titled *Colindă de pricină*, and it was a great success. It was performed, quoted, and even circulated abroad.

However, I encountered a problem with its broadcast because the melody was associated with Christmas (it is said Ceaușescu himself secretly celebrated Christmas in his own home, which shows the resilience of tradition and deep human nature). Consequently, I had to change the original title from *Colindă de pricină* to *Vine hulpe de la munte* (Here Comes the Fox Down from the Mountain), to ensure the piece could be aired on the radio. This was a case of self-censorship, ensuring the work could be recorded and broadcast. At the time, the treatment of religious works was unpredictable—sometimes carols were allowed, and other times they weren’t. I have similar stories from my time at the Philharmonic, but this one about *Colindă de pricină* is the most telling. The piece circulated in xeroxed scores, and in libraries, the first edition still bore the original title. But on the radio, it was broadcast as *Vine hulpe de la munte*. [...]

### **Censorship and Cultural Management at the Cluj Philharmonic**

- *You served as the Director of the Cluj Philharmonic. How did you perceive the experience of censorship in this role?*

I began working at the Philharmonic in 1983, at the start of the New Year, during a particularly difficult period marked by severe poverty. It wasn’t

uncommon for power outages to occur during concerts, a result of the stringent austerity measures in place at the time: resources were conserved to the extreme, energy was exported, and within the country, there was a severe crisis - low gas pressure, electricity and food rationing. All of these measures were aimed at paying off the country's external debts. This was the time when Romania had borrowed money from the IMF, yet the communist leadership, with its characteristic megalomania, continued to pursue grandiose projects, such as the Casa Poporului (The People's House). At one point, the IMF demanded use of the guarantees (for instance of the gold from the Apuseni Mountains, which was deemed unacceptable), and Ceaușescu decided instead to repay everything Romania owed.

During that dark period, anti-religious censorship became more stringent, but we still managed to organize organ concerts at the Reformed Church on Kogălniceanu Street. The public attended in large numbers, and the atmosphere in the church was extraordinary. However, the concert posters, which initially mentioned that the performances were taking place at the Reformed Church, faced censorship issues. Mrs. ("comrade") Cristian, a kind woman from the Cultural Committee who had to approve the posters, trying to help, suggested that we refrain from using the term "church" and instead use "edifice." And so, it remained - the concerts took place in the "edifice" on Kogălniceanu Street.

Another notable incident was the planning of a tour featuring Verdi's Requiem. By that time, everyone had conducted Mozart's Requiem or other biblical works like Handel's *Samson*. (But at one point, *Samson* was even removed from the program due to its association with one of the Israeli wars! In such cases, we were simply told, "It's not the right time" - that was an example of "soft" censorship.) As for Verdi's *Requiem*, during in the same period in which "church" had become "edifice," the Requiem itself was officially viewed with reluctance. Together with comrade Cristian and comrade Noja (the chief of the County Cultural Office), we decided to rename the concert "Verdi Medalion", to avoid potential issues. Nonetheless, word spread that Verdi's *Requiem* would be performed, and the concert hall was packed for four evenings in a row.

A separate censorship-related incident, which initially surprised me but now makes more sense, occurred when I organized an event in the Baroque courtyard of the Art Museum. We created a beautiful hand-drawn poster with a large, blue eye - very expressive and artistic. A comrade from the County Council made a huge scene, demanding that we immediately remove the poster with the eye. At first, I didn't understand the issue, until I recalled that, in the 1946 elections, "the eye" had been the electoral symbol of the National Peasants' Party, which had won the election before it was

falsified by the communists. Upon seeing the eye, the comrade believed it to be a subversive political symbol and ordered its removal. That was how sometimes censorship functioned at that time - crude and authoritarian. Not such a great wonder: today, we encounter new forms of censorship, such as “cancel culture,” which, in my view, can sometimes reach even greater heights of absurdity, especially with the technological advancements of our era.

## Epilogue

*- As we conclude our conversation, I'd like to ask: how do you think we should approach this period? How should we reflect on the communist era and censorship? Are there undiscovered or underappreciated works that we might recover?*

[...]

Reevaluating works that fell victim to censorship is not impossible, but it is unlikely, largely because there is insufficient interest. Perhaps, with the current projects underway, new rediscoveries will surface. However, it is not an easy endeavor. If one seeks to find these “forgotten treasures,” one must be prepared for hard work. Through the recent Cluj Modern project, I aimed to bring attention to the generation of Țăranu, Niculescu, Stroe, and other composers from the “Golden Generation.” This generation opened the doors to the Western avant-garde, as stylistic censorship had largely disappeared by the 1970s. [...] When reflecting on the effects of censorship, we must ask ourselves: did this censorship obscure the truth? Did it hinder what was good? Or, like the forbidden fruit, did it prevent us from making a possible mistake?

*- Thank you for leading us to reflect so thoughtfully on the phenomenon of censorship. We didn't experience it firsthand, but we've learned about it from books, stories, and the testimonies of our parents, grandparents, and teachers.*

You've only known about it from books and from what we, the direct witnesses, have shared with you. And I would encourage you to pay close attention to the censorship that even today surrounds you. It exists, albeit in different forms. We should not live under the illusion that we've escaped censorship. Whether in one society or another, in one form of imperialism or another, censorship and its mechanisms are always present. It's crucial to be aware of this, at least to know where the boundaries lie.