

# ARTISTIC FREEDOM, CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE FILM INDUSTRY OF LATVIA

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## Abstract

The concept of censorship associates with authoritarian regime; however, it is not unequivocally, i. e., also in a democratic country there may be obstacles that create barriers for artistic self-expression and limit the artistic process by stimulating the topicality of self-censorship. Also, in Latvia the parliamentary democracy creates legal framework that formally excludes the ideological censorship of creative process and artistic creativity. Simultaneously, the society's attitude towards artistic expressions, as well as dominant ideologic values among various groups of society and within the country may create critically condemnatory or supportive framework for certain expressions of art. The main aim of this article is to find out how the artists of today comprehend and explain manifestations of artistic freedom, censorship, and self-censorship in Latvia nowadays. Eighteen in-depth interviews involving the Latvian directors of the films were conducted in the framework of FARP "The art of nationalism: Social solidarity and exclusion in contemporary Latvia". In general, the study (1) reveals multi-shaped manifestations of censorship in the creative activities and dominant conditions in which it forms, (2) allows to follow up the sources of self-censorship for artistic activity, and (3) draws conclusions on the conditions and barriers of creative freedom in Latvian society.

**Keywords:** *artistic freedom, censorship, film art, self-censorship.*

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*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol21.268>

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ISSN: 2500-9974



## Introduction

The article continues an academic discussion on how different restrictive factors in the creative process of art manifest in practice. The focus of the study is the issue of artistic freedom, censorship, and self-censorship in the film industry of Latvia. The phenomenon of artistic freedom in the context of the article is described by theories of philosopher Haig Khatchadourian, whereas censorship discourse is expanded by conclusions of the cultural studies researcher Beate Müller, but researchers Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann help to explain multidimensionality of self-censorship. The main aim of the article is to establish how artists comprehend and explain manifestations of artistic freedom, censorship, and self-censorship in contemporary Latvia. The empirical part of the study is based on qualitative research methodology that allowed to acquire opinions of the study participants, as well as analyse the reflection of informants on their personal creative process experience and conditions in which it has formed. The study is done within the framework of FARP “The art of nationalism: Social solidarity and exclusion in contemporary Latvia” during which 18 in-depth partly structured interviews were conducted involving film directors from Latvia. The transcripts of the in-depth interviews with the directors have been used as data source for the study. Data is coded using thematical analysis and structured in four topics: perception of the film directors on the concept of artistic freedom, censorship experience within the personal creative activity, private self-censorship experience, public self-censorship experience.

## The concept of artistic freedom

The concept of artistic freedom can be interpreted differently. This article examines the detailed explanation on the artistic freedom by the philosopher Haig Khatchadourian. According to Khatchadourian, *“every person has the right to self-realization, and that includes the right for the artist to create freely both as a form of self-realization and as a freedom to create as an existing state. The right to self-realization can be regarded as the main form of freedom, which is the basis of all values”* [Khatchadourian 1978: 25]. The author considers that the artist has the right to create freely, because the creation of good art lets the artist to self-actualize, and this self-realization as a human also includes the self-actualization as an artist [Khatchadourian 1978: 25]. At the same time the author also emphasizes that no rights emerge and exist in the vacuum – the actual use of self-realization rights is limited by the rights of other individual. There can be two theoretical limitations for exercising the artistic freedom rights to create [Khatchadourian 1978: 25]. Firstly, the artist’s freedom to create is limited by other persons’ right to exercise their freedom and rights. For example, the artist is not allowed to engage in certain lifestyle one deems necessary for oneself or pleasant to own creative process of art, if it in any way forbids or disturbs other artists

to create, and limits or disturbs the lifestyle chosen by other members of the society. Secondly, the artist's own drive for creativity cannot disturb the lifestyle chosen by other members of the society, for example, in author's opinion, it is morally unfair to use one's influence on harming other artists that one envies or opposes their creative process of art. As the author emphasizes such cases are extremely rare and looking from the historical perspective more often quite the opposite is happening – state and people that are not artists based on their own opinion of what is good or bad art press the artists into creating what they supposedly should create [Khatchadourian 1978: 25].

As the legal researcher Simina Tanasescu expresses, the individual freedom is the core value in the contemporary societies and freedom of expression is the basis of human rights in any liberal democracy [Tanasescu 2011: 11]. Tanasescu emphasizes that the art aspires towards absolute, but the freedom can never be absolute. In addition to that, the expression of freedom in the democratic society provides free movement of information that is one of the key foundations in any democratic country and goes hand in hand with precluding the censorship and self-censorship [Bar-Tal 2017: 38]. Freedom of expression is closely related to artistic freedom because once the freedom of expression emerges it allows freely express one's opinion in public, as well as offers an opportunity to receive and share information freely. Unlimited access to all necessary official information is essential for general freedom dimension and a condition for free political climate ensuring well-functioning democratic society.

### **Censorship and self-censorship**

The cultural studies researcher Beate Müller stresses that until about twenty years ago, the term *censorship* was commonly restricted to direct forms of regulatory intervention by political authorities (mostly the state and the church). Two types of censorship were commonly distinguished: pre-publication censorship, or licensing, and post-publication censorship [Müller 2004: 5]. Censorship was seen as a set of concrete measures carried out by someone in a position of authority to exercise the right to censor. Many countries, including Latvia, have encountered censorship, for example, by being under the regime of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet Union the society lived in an era of total information blockage – information was hidden, censored, certain publications and authors were forbidden. As the author Valeria Stelmakh mentions, “*the censorship of the Soviet period as distinguished from, for example, that of czarist Russia had a number of specific features. First, it was not restrained by any provisions of law and hence was arbitrary and not accountable to anyone; second, it was carried out, for the most part, before publication; and lastly, it was performed in secret and anonymously*” [Stelmakh 2001: 144].

Nowadays the concept of censorship has gained new nuances and is perceived more extensively than ever before. Currently, the censorship can be not only institutionalized as a repressive political measure turned towards the artist, but it can also be influenced by the social interaction and communication among members of society. Along with it these various discourse forms regulate what can be said to whom, in what way and what the context is. Respectively with time and these various censorship forms the phenomenon of self-censorship is constantly observed and studied, for example, such authors as Philip Cook, Conrad Heilmann, Beate Müller et al. have reflected upon this subject. According to the contemporary understanding the censorship and self-censorship often are not related to a certain authoritarian regulation but the ones playing an essential role are the culture canon, norms, self-censorship, and self-doubt [Müller 2004: 12]. Whereas the political sociologist Olga Zeveleva with reference to the theories developed by Bourdieu and Matthew Bunn explains that *self-censorship is the type of structural censorship that arises from the way in which social life and access to resources are organised*. Respectively, the self-censorship of content creators (in the case of the study conducted by O. Zeveleva – journalists) is anyway stimulated by state regulation only it has transformed from traditional views as a repressive type of censorship to “hidden” or “deceiving” self-censorship that relates to opportunities for content creators to access resources [Zeveleva 2020: 47]. Sociologist Daniel Bar-Tal explains self-censorship as a situation that any individual can encounter daily, respectively, this process occurs when a person due to various reasons decides to withhold accurate information or, their own thoughts from family, friends, media, or other members of society. In all such cases the individual is convinced that disclosure of information is risky, and it is necessary to hide it [Bar-Tal 2017: 37].

Researchers Philip Cook and Conrad Heilmann in their theoretical papers propose an idea of two self-censorship categories. Namely, self-censorship can be divided into public and private self-censorship [Cook, Heilmann 2010]. In case of public self-censorship, the role, norms, values of society and its attitude towards certain topics are very important [Cook, Heilmann 2010: 2]. In this case the artist limits oneself due to impulses of public discourse. In the case of private censorship, the role is played by author’s self-censorship [Cook, Heilmann 2010: 14]. Within its framework there is no relation to how the society defines something, what is or is not acceptable. In both cases the essential difference is clear, respectively, in the first case it is possible to identify certain censor and its agent to be “blamed” for actualizing self-censorship, whereas in the second case the censor and agent is one and the same individual [Cook, Heilmann 2010: 15].

*“Public self-censorship describes a range of individual reactions to a public censorship regime. Self-censorship thus understood means that individuals*

*internalize some aspects of the public censor and then censor themselves. Private self-censorship is the suppression by an agent of their own attitudes where a public censor is either absent or irrelevant” [Cook, Heilmann 2010: 2].*

By exploring the self-censorship phenomenon, it becomes clear that not always it is an intentional process where the artist assesses the possibilities to include or exclude potentially contestable content. The ultimate form of self-censorship is the physical destruction of artist's own unpublished work prior to public accessibility [Müller 2014: 25], for which we often find out from the biographies on historical individuals of literature, fine arts, and other art areas. As an example, Müller mentions Kafka, who was severely doubting the quality of his own literary works. Kafka expressed his wish for his friend Max Brod to destroy all his unpublished papers after his death. In this case it is important to note that the political context in which Kafka lived and worked, may affect the scope of actions that can be taken by the artist, however in case of destroying works, it cannot be regarded as the main reason for their destruction. As Müller concludes, *“these limitations of a simple cause-and-effect determinism make the analysis of censorship more challenging: the many factors relevant to censorship – the writer, the text, its code, its medium, the reader, and the context – encourage us to view it as an unstable process of actions and reactions in the struggle for power, publicity, and the privilege to speak out, rather than merely as a repressive tool with predictable results”* [Müller 2014: 25].

Considering the factors of self-censorship, Daniel Bar-Tal distinguishes five motivational conditions why an individual decides to censor oneself, respectively, (1) motivation to protect the in-group, (2) personal motivation to avoid external negative sanctions and gain positive rewards, (3) motivation to protect self-image, (4) motivation to protect a belief, and (5) motivation to protect a third party/group [Bar-Tal 2017: 46]. By exploring these five motivations it can be concluded that content creator or in the context of this study – an artist – during the creation process of his work identifies any existing external risks that can threaten the contextual values, norms, ideas represented in the work thereof offending reputation or image of oneself or other groups/individuals of society. The process of self-censorship includes both personal stimulating factors in the form of expressing one's own opinion, in case of artists – self-expression, and the importance of collective identity, the society's understanding on certain topics, current events [Bar-Tal 2017: 43].

In general, it is possible to conclude that self-censorship includes various personality traits, general and specific world views, values, norms, attitudes, and motivations [Bar-Tal 2017: 60]. The study of this phenomenon has become more complex, however, according to the authors of this article, it is essential not to miss these processes for the purposes of this study, when looking at the development of

creative process, more specifically in this case – films, in order to understand whether and how it is possible to observe the presence of self-censorship in the works of Latvian film directors, thus discovering what values and norms are essential for the creative people of film industry in contemporary Latvia.

### **Empirical analysis of research data. Opinions and experience of film directors**

Trends mentioned below were discovered during the 18 in-depth interviews with the Latvian film directors:

1. Reflections on the concept of artistic freedom;
2. Censorship experience;
3. Private self-censorship experience;
4. Public self-censorship experience.

For the anonymity purposes, the personal names and/or film titles identifying an individual have been substituted with “X” sign in the quotes below used to illustrate the analysis of empirical data.

#### **1. Reflections on the concept of artistic freedom**

By reflecting on the concept of artistic freedom, artists mostly admitted that artistic freedom includes the ability to express freely and create art free from any restrictions. Freedom should not be influenced neither by political tendencies, nor ideologies, nor the opinion of surrounding society, nor prevailing processes in the world. At the same time artists face an inner censorship and political processes in the world that can prevent manifestations of artistic freedom.

*Most likely, for me as an artist, if we discuss me as an artist not as an individual, then the freedom means not being afraid to speak out in terms of what I believe, well, in a sense, that exactly this language used in the art is not affected by the opinion of external persons, not directly influenced by any kind of ideological or political tendencies, in spite of that in the moment when such text, film is created in some sort of sense it is ideological, but ideology in this case is some kind of my own private ideology. Also not being afraid of complex forms of expression that could be uncomfortable for wider film-viewing masses. Freeing oneself from such fears is very complex and personally I think that this freedom cannot be captured in any pure form, you never really reach it. You only try to contrast your own fears from such freedom with your own, so to say, life restrictions, limited lifetime by trying to show that this captivity or moment of fear has no meaning at all.*

Ethical dilemmas are crucial, for example, whether to include children in movies, one of the film directors mentions in this case it is ethical, where as an example we can look at a scandalous French movie, streamed on Netflix, “Cuties”.

*Well, art should have not a single limitation, there should be space to do absolutely anything one wants. The issue concerns the practical execution – related to the ethics of the author, let’s say, is it good or bad to include little children in the movies?*

*The question itself – what is freedom? It is the same for artist or any other person. Freedom of expression. Freedom from perception. Freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility.*

In general, it can be concluded that artistic freedom is extremely important for the film directors, and they cannot imagine creating their art without it. It is worth mentioning that various film directors interpret the artistic freedom differently and there is no single terminology that would describe it, however, there is a common denominator – true freedom to express one’s opinion and perspective.

## **2. Latvian film directors’ experience with censorship**

Considering the state censorship, artists admitted that they have not encountered it in contemporary Latvia, except one case that is analysed more deeply in the quote below, however, various directors recalled their past experiences during the Soviet Union.

Reflecting on the quote below, the informant, kind of jokingly, says that during the Soviet times there was no censorship as the rules were already clear – what is or not allowed to be displayed – thus the guidelines for everyone were clear, and this indicates to the fact that the existence of censorship was generally known phenomenon.

*During the Soviet times censorship as such was not existing as we knew what can or cannot be done – it was already somehow in our blood. I was so trained, and the greatest censorship I usually received was from my colleagues: “X, no need for this, it won’t go through, it will be too much, do not include this and that.” If only once I would have received from my colleagues, we had an editorial board, Moscow won’t accept it, we were the greatest, the greatest were here.*

Separately informant also mentions that he has encountered censorship during the process of project creation, where in this case collaborating with various directors,

the Latvian Television ordered to cut out a piece of material with a condition that if it is not done, the movie will not be shown at all.

*Latvian Television censored and ordered to cut out a piece with a condition that if it is not done, then the movie will not be shown at all, especially some kind of not so complementary passage both in text, and photos about Kārlis Ulmanis.*

Some artists also mention that they have faced the censorship and that it exists in other countries, for example, Russia, Hungary, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland.

*No, no, of course not in Latvia, but by producing a film in Russia I was suddenly informed that some of those shots cannot be assembled, and such films cannot be shown. I asked – why? Because when I produced a film “X” with a widow X in the shot where she says: “In all truth, Putin, is a great fool”, then I was told that it must be cut out as it is not polite (laughing). Also, I replied, it is not me who says that, it is the heroine.*

Another director mentions encountering censorship that came from professional colleagues, however, those are just a few cases, and are not related to any certain authority or institution.

*I have encountered censorship from my closest professional colleagues. There are separate cases that are drastically huge but those are individual, specific cases for whom the reasons are psychological and related to human nature.*

In general, it can be concluded that in Latvia there is no dominant manifestation form of censorship, however, it must be emphasized that in several cases artists faced censorship both in the Soviet Union and in the 1990s. Examples from other countries also can be marked out, as mentioned in the quote above when the censorship is related to showing certain politicians from not so favourable angle.

### **3. Private self-censorship experience of Latvian film directors**

During the interviews with Latvian film directors above mentioned theoretically discussed private self-censorship or extremely distinct self-criticism of an artist towards oneself was discovered. It should be specified that personal censorship refers to aesthetical aspects, not political, as it was in Soviet times. Directors see themselves as this censor, agent that stimulates self-censorship by doubting the quality of production. In such cases artist finds it difficult to explain why it is happening so. Inner intuition, doubts, self-criticism are mentioned here.



*At other times it is not so, then it is only the inner censor, and that inner censor is terrible, as every morning, today also I come, and the film is almost assembled but I am thinking that it has to be thrown into the Daugava River together with the computer (..) But for me it is so that with years the intuition develops itself, that very often upon starting to assemble, it is a full patience<sup>1</sup>. You complete it, assemble and understand that it is absolutely to no good!*

In some of the interviews it can be observed that the self-criticism and desire to censor oneself in some way internally is based on the pressure that the certain form of the film requires, respectively, the result that will be published cannot be changed with time, as for example, it could happen in the theatre when producing plays, therefore this pressure promotes strong self-criticism before publishing the ready production.

*I believe everyone, at least I do not know anyone who would not have inner self-censorship and I believe that each director is his own worst critic and judge (..) But this inner censorship, of course, exists, because that film may be a lasting value, maybe, if we compare with theatre – you watch a play and it is not memorized, you go home and in a way this play fades away. The film you can watch after two, five, ten years and you still will need to answer to the same questions, is it still relevant, have you not been mistaken in, let's say, your world's vision, the way you have created.*

Along with this pressure the artist is overtaken by doubts, worries on whether his own current opinions on how the film should be, how it should address certain topics and what are the most suitable artistic instruments, will not differ from his own opinions in future.

#### **4. Public self-censorship experience of Latvian film directors**

During interviews reflecting on the presence of censorship, artists individually highlight public censorship – willingness to be liked by the society and create their artistic works either by emphasizing certain topics or silencing their inner creative voice to surrender to certain opinions of a society, or in a way that the production would not be received negatively. Based on materials discussed in the theoretical part, such type of censorship can be called public self-censorship.

*But I think, certainly, self-censorship. Already very unconsciously when choosing topics to be discussed in films, when choosing characters, maybe also*

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<sup>1</sup> Patience – a card game.

*even in more technical processes as actor castings or what is included in the publicity materials of a film... how you are trying to show yourself. There it can be sensed that in a way you divert from who you truly are and that you try to censor yourself for the society's liking.*

Considering the factors promoting self-censorship some film directors reveal what are those topics that still are considered sensitive, possibly unacceptable to the society or where there is a risk of public censorship once the director chooses to include such topics in the creative process of art. Firstly, minority issue is mentioned as one of the most common sensitive topics, especially issues regarding Latvian and Russian nationalities and thereof national relations issues. Secondly, the intolerance towards another minority group, i. e., sexual minorities or LGBTQ+ community, is also mentioned that could potentially contribute to the risk of public censorship. Thirdly, informants frequently refer to sensitive topics as a set that is relevant at the exact moment in the public space, few of the mentioned examples include immigrant issues, scandals of "Cheka bags"<sup>1</sup> that are related to criminal offences done at the time when Latvia was occupied by Soviet Union and alike.

*For example, from such National documentary films, the topic that would be uncomfortable is the following: who are all KGB and Cheka workers, showcasing that they are still taking some positions, and some uncomfortable situations, and all the "Cheka bags", and maybe those who are not in those "Cheka bags", or what is truly happening with the European funds, that from the state's point of view could be like – wait a minute, we don't want this to surface, and certainly some people would not be interested in doing so. From art, first that comes in mind, even if the relationship between Latvian Russians and Latvians improves, it is also a topic for the society – was it necessary? Or, let's say, I talked with X once, for instance, the Jew issues, if we dig them out ourselves and feel that there is such a surrounding pressure.*

It can be concluded that these are some of the topics that could encourage artists to self-censor their art, artistic vision, by trying to avoid or minimize the exposure of certain groups in their films. At the same time, other film directors reveal that during the creative process in art they feel fully free and are trying to not limit themselves due to biases and stereotypes determined by the society.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheka bags – this expression is used in Latvia to denote the collection of data about KGB agents.

## Conclusions

In general, the study, firstly, discloses the complex relationship between artistic freedom and censorship in the contemporary society, as well as the conditions it develops, and secondly, allows to follow the self-censorship sources of artistic activity; thirdly, draws up conclusions on the conditions and barriers of artistic freedom in Latvian society.

Corresponding to the aim of the study it was established that theoretically the artistic freedom is based on absolute freedom of expression that cannot be limited in any way. Among the artists, the dominant opinion is that it should be so, however, at the same time the self-censorship issue that is inescapable occurrence in contemporary society, does not lose its importance. Self-censorship can be accomplished in two ways – as private and as public or a self-censorship induced by society [Cook, Heilmann 2010]. It is worth noting that during the interviews the dominant opinion is that the state censorship is not identified as an existing problem in Latvia. Censorship in Latvia does not express itself as an ideological, authoritative prohibition, state normative, but in the individual interview cases it can be observed that sometimes politicians or film buyers give recommendations on what should be displayed in the film and in what way. In general, during interviews a tendency can be observed that the answers of directors when asked to go into details on censorship mostly are leaning towards self-censorship experiences and examples. In conclusion, as previously stated, the main, typical taboo topics towards which it is possible to observe society's intolerance and the risk of self-censorship are various types of minorities – either national or sexual whose inclusion in the creative process of art could amplify the thinking on how, what, in what way, and to what extent include in the production. As well as it is important to consider the topics that are current and sensitive for public space at current moment in general and could potentially create sharper reactions from the society.

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