

# DESIRE AND EROTICISM IN DICTATORIAL TIMES. FILM STRATEGIES AGAINST CENSORSHIP IN TOTALITARIAN REGIMES \*

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“But is sex hidden from us, concealed by a new sense of decency, kept under a bushel by the grim necessities of bourgeois society? On the contrary, it shines forth; it is incandescent”  
(Foucault, 1978: 77).

Every totalitarian regime sustains the weight of its oppressive force with a powerful censorship apparatus. As the great dictatorships of the twentieth century were contemporaneous with the rise of cinema, the use of moving pictures became a preeminent propaganda tool, and a motive for repressive action against all who opposed their ideology. Censorship was not—and is not—a phenomenon exclusive to such regimes, because there is no national film industry that has not turned its attention, in its manner of mediating between product and public, to content that could potentially challenge certain ideological principles, or undermine the ordinary certainties that those principles upheld. Cinema was nevertheless a revolutionary invention that challenged many commonly held conceptions, and which, beyond any doubt, normalised an activity as traditionally deviant as the guilty pleasure of voyeurism. The

ambiguity of the images (and the immediate control of those images by the vigilant guardianship of the State or the parallel institutions that serve it) aroused a debate that still rages on between the hypothetically educational nature of films (KHUN, 1990: 105), and their subversive underbelly (which, as the surrealists understood quite early on, was present in the very nature of the invention).

With respect to morality, and the sexuality associated with it, restrictions arose just as quickly in countries operating on a modern democratic model as they did in the dictatorships that flourished in the age of cinema. Some form of institutional censorship was established in China from 1905, in the United Kingdom from 1909, in Canada in 1910, in Mexico from 1911, in Nigeria from 1912, in Italy and Spain from 1913, in Germany from 1920, in the Soviet Union from the year of

the Revolution (1917), in Belgium from 1921, and in Turkey from 1932, to name a few of the geographically and politically diverse nations that succumbed to the same temptation to control the new medium. And while beyond the government restrictions the Puritan leagues became an active front against film production from its very origins, the Hays Code, self-imposed by the Hollywood film industry in 1934, completely blew apart the utopian notion that a democracy could self-regulate moral content without a super-structure of censorship to watch over it.<sup>1</sup>

The three major fascist regimes of the first half of the twentieth century (Spain, Italy and Germany) combined propaganda and censorship as two sides of the same coercive coin, overseeing all aspects of the political, and also, of course, of the erotic. As eroticism was already an issue in film prior to the rise of these regimes, their codes of censorship were not necessarily structured by explicit legislation. Implicit self-censorship emerged as early in Italy as it did in France, in the same way in Germany as it did in Britain, and in Spain just as it did in the United States.

In the traditional dictatorships, the prohibition of the erotic was always related to religious tutelage. In the communist dictatorships, however, the same censorship was also present, as if the need for order were a feature of these regimes regardless of traditional dogmas or the body-soul debate. Any distortion of the functional uses of sexuality was also subject to fierce vigilance in the communist totalitarian regimes. Along with the political uses of censorship, the repression of eroticism was thus imposed as one of the key pillars of the dictatorships' authoritarian policies.

But cinema, due to its heterogeneous nature, the haphazard construction of its images, and the complexity of its techniques, could always elude the vulgar obsessions of the censors. In his study of the contradictions inherent to the repressive system of the Hays Code in the United States, Greg Tuck (2007: 13) draws on the phenomenological

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### IN FILMS MADE IN CONTEXTS OF DICTATORSHIP, THE METAPHORICAL FORM TURNS INTO A SOURCE OF LIBERATING DISCOURSES, FAR REMOVED FROM THE CERTITUDES OF THE RULING POWERS

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ideas of Merleau Ponty to remind us that the metaphorical capacity of cinema makes us perceive its expressive potential with our whole body: "films are not merely showing or implying sex, they are also evoking it at a sensory level, so we are made not merely to see that which we cannot see, nor simply to 'imagine' it, but to be 'touched' by it. This is the pleasure of invisible sex." This overwhelming force of the cinematic spectacle is an invitation to turn the coercion of the censor into a stimulus for the imagination: "limits do not merely proscribe, they can equally channel and inspire." Here, Tuck (2007: 2) explicitly evokes the ideas of the scholar Lea Jacobs, when she suggests that "censorship as an institutional process did not simply reflect social pressures; it articulated a strategic response to them" (JACOBS, 2000: 94). To articulate a creative response to censorship represents both a challenge and a distancing strategy that directors can use with greater freedom than might be expected, precisely because of the effective indeterminacy of the film images that flow with the ambivalence of life that passes before our eyes. While in his landmark work *Hollywood Censored* Gregory D. Black (2012: 323) suggests, much to his regret, that "we will never know how many films that were never made could have been made, or how different those that were filmed could have been" (an assertion that could be extrapolated to any country that has been subject to some form of censorship), we might propose a less pessimistic alternative: a re-reading of the images that we do have available to identify not only what escaped the repressive coercion, but rather what the films

themselves could offer as a form of subtle subversion.

In this respect, it is obvious that a film made in the context of a dictatorship does not necessarily adopt the ideology of the regime. It may be conceived from a position that definitively opposes the implicit repressive aims of the state propaganda apparatus. Films always contain a tension between what is meant and what is shown, and, as noted above, they resist a monosemic interpretation of their images. Because of cinema's vibrant and free nature, films made in totalitarian contexts have not always served the dictates of the censorship apparatus to which they are subjected. Indeed, there is clearly a game of cat and mouse between censor and filmmaker,<sup>2</sup> which was taken to the extreme in the well-known episode of censorship of the screenplay to *Viridiana* (Buñuel, 1961), in which the *ménage à trois* clearly identified following the card game that ends the film was the optimal (and without doubt more provocative) solution to the simple ending in the film's original script.<sup>3</sup>

The key to this penetration of the subversive lies in the adoption of metaphor as the perfect instrument for pushing beyond the wholesome content on the denotative level ensured by the censorship system. It is worth recalling here that the Greek word *metaphorá* comes from *meta* (over) and *phora* (carrying), and thus refers etymologically to transportation; as Chantal Maillard suggests, it invites us "to build abstract worlds" (1992: 97). Maillard, following the reasoning of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, points out that the metaphor does not have to transport us to a similar image, because the ultimate aim of the metaphor is to create a new space: "both objects are fluidized, losing their natural boundaries to acquire the qualities of the imagination" (1992:108). The metaphor therefore "draws us into another world", as Ortega y Gasset (1964: 258) reveals with an expression that denotes movement, transportation, to another universe.

In films made in contexts of dictatorship, the metaphorical form turns into a source of liberating discourses, far removed from the certitudes of the ruling powers, in filmmakers as significant as Carlos Saura in Spain or Andrei Tarkovsky in the Soviet Union. This metaphorical quality that opens a film's content up to universes beyond what is visible (or what is explicitly stated) can fill the meaning of a whole film—like *La caza* [The Hunt] (1966), to name one of Saura's most paradigmatic works—or symbolically unlock a detail of the action (as the example of the ending to *Viridiana* sums up paradigmatically). At the same time, metonymy and synecdoche will shift the imagination in all kinds of directions, from the visible to the merely imagined, constituting a complex vocabulary of strategies that have turned film rhetoric, almost intrinsically, into a space for the unbridled expression of the forbidden.

The repressive system cannot counter this metaphorical register because, paradoxically, it is present in all its devices. As Foucault noted with such sharp insight, sex is a carefully conceived piece in the organization of the State, mediated and consolidated according to a series of relational mechanisms that ultimately uphold a social organization that cannot do without it. Carolina Meloni (2012: 65) sums up the matter by paraphrasing the philosopher when she suggests that "sex is not repressed, it is administered", and Annette Kuhn makes it her own (1990: 6) when she takes up Foucault's notion of censorship as a *device*. The organization of the film narrative is not immune to this idea of controlled dissemination that underlies the filmic art itself, and which, precisely because it is an indispensable structure, permits (or even instigates) the pleasures of displacement.

It is clear that Foucault, in his penetrating analysis, does not reject the view of censorship as an institution designed to prevent the expression of sexuality itself, based on a "logical sequence that [...] links the *inexistent*, the *illicit* and the *inexpressi-*

ble in such a way that each one is at the same time the principle and the effect of the others” (2006: 88)<sup>4</sup>. However, cinema is a space that evokes contradictions because the image is itself polysemic, and because its meaning is always located in the imagination of the audience: that which is required *not to exist* would find, even in the most heavily censored films, strange *re-expressions* under a *licit* appearance that is nevertheless open to the powers of the imagination.

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### **THIS EROTICISATION OF THE BODY, EXPANSIVE BUT NOT NECESSARILY ASSOCIATED WITH PROHIBITED ELEMENTS, WAS PROMINENT IN THE RISE OF THE CULT OF THE PHOTOGRAPH THAT WAS CONSTANTLY PROMOTED BY THE ILLUSTRATED PRESS**

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An eroticism always existed, exists and will exist, in spite of censorship, because it is really an eroticism that is necessarily inscribed into that censorship. The purpose of this issue of *L'Atalante* is to offer a critical contribution to this hypothesis, explored from different perspectives. First of all, we take Spanish cinema during the Franco regime as a generic starting point and a primordial exemplary model, as the monograph begins with a university research project dedicated to the erotic body of the actress during the fascist period in Spain, Italy and Germany (Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness Project CSO2013-43631-P), although not all the articles limit their analysis to that period or to those countries.

If we take Francoism, due to its historical and geographical proximity, as a privileged space for an exploration of this issue, we will discover two co-existing phenomena: in a sense, the filmmakers of the period, even those most complicit with the regime, could not avoid the forced tension between

implicit censorship and the need to feed the erotic desire of the audience as one of the essential goals of the classical film narrative (both comedy and drama), to which the entire rhetoric of the films ultimately yielded. The most representative actresses of the early years of the dictatorship (Conchita Montenegro, Ana Mariscal, Amparo Rivelles, Mercedes Vecino, Isabel de Soto) were stars in the conventional sense of the word (and thus filled the covers and picture spreads of film magazines like *Primer Plano*) because the film industry viewed erotic desire, voyeurism and all sexual aspects of human relations as an indispensable internal structure, albeit adorned with all manner of elliptical subterfuges. Film directors continued to use their creativity, and since the main object of the voyeuristic attention of the film spectator was the female figure, in terms already analysed in depth in the studies of Laura Mulvey (1975), and subsequently nuanced by Gaylyn Studlar (1988), it is clear that filmmakers had to use all kinds of expressive strategies to draw out what lay beneath and turn eroticism, and all expressions of sex, into an integral element of a film tradition that could never completely do without it.

This role of the woman as the catalyst of erotic desire has a twofold rhetorical dimension: it represents the construction of the visual narrative based on the female body (which may be restricted but never entirely ignored), and at the same time, for that very reason, it represents the assumption by the female of a certain seductive power. The question of whether behind this idea of the female body as an object of desire for the male gaze there lies an autonomous desire is now one of the areas of concern in star studies from the perspective of gender theory. And to address this question in relation to national film traditions marked by censorship means to push to the limit the tension between what is deemed forbidden and that never entirely silenced erotic impulse that is triggered by the female subject herself. This issue of *L'Atalante* proposes, among other

things, a dialectic between the censorship model of Francoism and its hypothetical subversion as a case study that could be methodologically extrapolated to other film industries operating under totalitarian regimes.

The article by Carlos Losilla that opens this issue, "Seeing Inward, Looking Outward: Female Desire in Francoist Cinema", presents a general overview of the variations and complexities of erotic desire, with the intention of exposing the nuances (and the underlying crises) concealed behind the mere assumption of a standardised morality. This overview posits a spectrum that ranges from the outspoken exaltation of the body-nation of the Cifesa film studio heroines in the early years of Francoism (where the erotic is replaced by the zeal for imperial conquest) to the mystical internalisation contained in a withdrawal to the life of the inner world and the home, as revealed in the best dramas of the 1950s (for example, *Black Sky*). Against this forced fluctuation between boundless distance and domestic seclusion (from the "body-nation" to the "body-home"), the new pop heroines of the 1960s, in a mimesis of trends in international cinema, presented a new openness that was no less problematic. Thus, in the musical film model begun with *Las chicas de la cruz roja* [Red Cross Girls], "the woman's desirous gaze falls more on objects than on bodies", with the result that "the eroticism of consumerism has taken possession of the imagery of female passion, as the perfect halfway point between mystic rapture and domestic vulgarity." While the prototype of the new strong and self-sufficient woman embodied in Teresa Gimpera in the 1960s ended up being isolated from the world to constitute an autonomous and somewhat sterile image, Losilla turns to an analysis of the most apparently mundane products in this context (the musical comedies of Pili and Mili, Marisol or Rocio Durcal) as a means of determining whether this outburst of dreamlike exoticism could be where the simplest expression of the erotic imagination of femininity in Francoism might be found.

Female desire, as an anomaly proscribed by Francoist cinema, is thus sublimated with substitutes (either neurotic or playful) upon which an alternative history can be constructed based on the observation of the images. In this sense, the application of iconographic models to cinema, as proposed by Jordi Balló and Marga Carnicé in their article "Visual Motifs in Cinematic Eroticism under Fascism: Spain and Italy (1939-1945)", makes it possible to identify how eroticism was expressed in fascist films through the repeated use of certain devices of representation. Based on a study of films starring Spanish folk divas like Imperio Argentina and Estrellita Castro, the authors of this article identify spaces like *bars on a window* (separating the female star's gaze from any desiring subject) or *the tavern* (a privileged space for song and dance whose popularity allows for certain choreographic depictions with an unequivocally erotic sheen), as well as gestures (the embrace) and parts of the body treated as provocative synecdoches (the white-toothed smile). As for Italian models (erotically more permissive, in spite of the paradoxical presence of the Vatican influence), the hypothesis of a diva model that appeals to sensuality as a quintessential part of her media power makes it possible to identify three prominent iconic elements, all of them related to the body of the actress: the long black mane of hair, legs suspended in the air and even, occasionally, bare breasts. Based on this choice of icons and on the analysis that follows it, the article effectively confirms the hypothesis around which this monograph is organised: the impossible nature of repressing the metaphorical and metonymic capacity of film images, and the existence of a sexuality underlying the filmed body that reaches beyond the repressive context of the country where the film was made.

This eroticisation of the body, expansive but not necessarily associated with prohibited elements, was prominent in the rise of the cult of the photograph that was constantly promoted by the

illustrated press. Albert Elduque's article "Primer Plano: The Popular Face of Censorship" explores the use of a Spanish film magazine established at the beginning of Franco's regime and initially linked to the Falange as an informational platform exposing the implicit restrictions of the censors that any producer would have to confront in a context in which there is no official censorship code: in other words, a critical education in the morality of film narratives, mostly exemplified by Hollywood and international films which (in spite of the already unequivocally repressive Hays Code) were deemed to go far beyond what the new Spanish film industry should permit in moral terms. However, the ambivalent capacity of the magazine's pictures to reflect various manifestations of an eroticism inherent to the allure of cinema, very clearly embodied by its female stars, should not be underestimated. It is perhaps because of this inevitability of the visible that these texts for censors tend in general to display more concern with the morality of the story than of the images themselves, and propose, in response to all the dangers of debauchery brought by foreign films, a specifically Spanish model, based essentially on the chastity and sacrificial capacity of women, revealingly identifying above all with the Nazi productions of the era.

Without a doubt, alongside the repression of female desire (and the metaphorical expression of the problem of that desire), another major element that was silenced throughout the Francoist period was homosexuality. The article by Beatriz González de Garay and Juan Carlos Alfeo, "Portraying Homosexuality in Spanish Film and Television during the Franco Regime", offers a revealing overview of the evolution and limits of such representation, based on three possibilities: concealment (requiring the consequent elisions and veiled insinuations), caricaturing (the only form of allusion to homosexuality that was really permitted under the discriminatory patriarchal model), and appropriation, a strategy of

homoerotic satisfaction that does not arise from the films themselves, but from the capacity of the homosexual gaze to assimilate certain icons (from Spain's folk divas to the military imagery of the Spanish Legion) into its freely subjective perspective. The article, which also explores television production (and its much more limited possibilities for touching on this topic), ultimately offers, from a diachronic perspective, an overview of the meta-discursive re-reading of Francoism in relation to homosexuality in the films and television productions of the post-Franco era: a transition that should be considered a legitimate form of redress and liberation.

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### ALTHOUGH THE EARLY YEARS OF FRANCOISM COINCIDED WITH THE PERIOD OF THE FASCIST DICTATORSHIPS IN GERMANY AND ITALY, THE MODELS OF REPRESSION AND SUSPICION OF EROTICISM WERE NOT ENTIRELY THE SAME

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Positioned on the boundary between the castrating space of Francoism and the openness represented by the films of the transition to democracy is *The Cannibal Man* (*La semana del asesino*), a film made in 1972 whose reference to homosexual is only tangential, but which nevertheless constitutes one of the films of the late Francoist period that offered one of the most forceful messages challenging the social conventions of its day. In "Subversive Effects of Perversion: Sexuality and Social Construction in *The Cannibal Man*", Carlos Gómez shows how the use of perversion in Eloy de la Iglesia's film facilitates a subversive deconstruction of the certainties of sociological Francoism. And this is not only through the evolution of a narrative whose protagonist turns into a serial killer as the story unfolds, but (and this is an essential point for the purposes of this monograph) through

decisions related to the *mise en scène*, which “in iconographic terms offers a series of inversions of particular motifs on which the dominant ideology is sustained.” As the international version of the film contains various scenes cut from the Francoist version, a comparative analysis reveals the degree to which certain scene cuts can alter the content of the discourse, as is particularly the case with respect to the representation of homoerotic desire in the film. However, the subversive element is still conveyed in the images that were not cut, to constitute a metaphorical condemnation of the repressive nature of Spanish society in those years.

Although the early years of Francoism coincided with the period of the fascist dictatorships in Germany and Italy,<sup>5</sup> the models of repression and suspicion of eroticism were not entirely the same. The conversation between Alejandro Montiel, Gino Frezza, Raffaele Pinto and Marta Muñoz in the “(Dis)agreements” section, discussing eroticism and desire under the European fascist regimes and, in particular, the treatment of femininity in these repressive contexts, reveals significant contrasts between the three countries; the differences in the treatment of the erotic between the diverse repertoire of the Italian divas and the categorical repression of Spanish women, or the use of nude images in Germany by a director of the regime as paradigmatic as Leni Riefenstahl, again highlight the need to differentiate between the emergence of the visible and the moral drift of the narrative, which in all three cases condemns behaviours alien to the ideology of the family order.

While Francoism and its geographical and political neighbours constitute the focal point of this monograph, the perspective is extended to other historical models of repression in totalitarian contexts, offering examples of new tensions and strategies of expressive liberation. The comparison that can be made with Brazilian cinema during that country’s dictatorship (the first ten years

of which overlap with the Francoist period) confirm that film production inside the system does not always equate with submission to the dictates of the censors: resistance and the revelation of the concealed continue to be indispensable travel companions. However, Emma Camarero’s article “From the Banal to the Indispensable: *Porno-chanchada* and *Cinema Novo* during the Brazilian Dictatorship (1964-1985)” also focuses our attention on the differences that articulated this battle. This is firstly because the genre of *porno-chanchada* (the erotic film style that experienced a boom during the years of the dictatorship) would have been unthinkable in the Francoist context; it is reasonable to assume that the Brazilian State was more concerned with political rather than sexual repression, to the extent that it allowed this type of erotic film consumption perhaps as a form of “distraction”. But as the author of the article proposes, “concealed behind the eroticism and the sex there was also a furtive ideological revolution that not even the censors and the tools of repression could restrain.” In this sense, both the commercial productions that enabled the government to promote an image of tolerance towards eroticism and the *Cinema Novo* productions that were rarely allowed to be screened in Brazil itself but that brought the country prestige at international festivals, and that also included an erotic strain, turned Brazilian cinema into a unique and paradoxical space where eroticism was an ambivalent testing ground for introducing the idea of social liberation.

Equally paradoxical was the repression of sexuality in the communist states, unrelated to any religious coercion. Secularism is not synonymous with sexual liberation, and governmental fears of the disorder that eroticism could provoke played a decisive role in this alternative historical context. In their article “Eroticism and Form as Subversion in *Daisies*”, Orisel Castro, York Neudel and Luis Gómez make a case study of one of the masterpieces of the Czech New Wave that took place in

the years leading up to the Prague Spring, before the Soviet occupation silenced many of its directors or forced them into exile. However, this film movement occurred in a communist state that already had a censorship bureaucracy and was therefore prone, as the authors suggest, to the “game of hide and seek between the artist and the official.” Their case study demonstrates the extent to which Vera Chytilová saw in eroticism a mechanism for criticising a system characterised by the conservatism of 1960s Czechoslovakia, where etiquette and good behaviour were to be observed at all times, especially by women. The openly subversive nature of the actions of the two heroines of this film is founded on the utterly futile nature of their wild and mischievous pranks in terms of what they contribute to society. The article, based on George Bataille’s theories on eroticism, examines how Vera Chytilová nevertheless channels all this squandered energy through two elements of distraction which, although the film would later be banned by the state altogether, got it past the censors the first time around: ambiguity and formal experimentation.

Implicitly related to the theme of censorship, although not the question of eroticism, the interview included in this issue, conducted by Carlos Muguiro, documents a revealing encounter with Georgian filmmaker Marlen Khutsiev, whose emblematic film *I Am Twenty / Ilyich’s Gate*, was forcibly re-edited after completion of its original version. A first-person testimony to the eternal clash between a creator and the suspicious bureaucracy of a totalitarian system, Khutsiev reveals, in this exciting discussion, the origins of the controversial film and the moral objections it incited from the repressive apparatus that he had the misfortune to confront, while also offering us a priceless chronicle of his training and evolution as a filmmaker in the historical context of the former Soviet Union. The sober clarity of his testimony serves as a valuable complement to the different explorations of the clash between creators and

censors that constitute the core of this issue of *L’Atalante*. ■

## NOTES

- 1 For a comparative study of national censorship policies in film history see the anthology *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World* (2013).
- 2 On the question of the censor-auteur relationship, see Chapter 15 of DOHERTY, Thomas (2007)
- 3 That *Viridiana* was subsequently banned does not undermine our view that it was thanks to censorship, or more precisely, in the challenge of *outsmarting the censors*, that the cinematic image of the Francoist film tradition found one of its most subversively erotic representations.
- 4 Underlining is ours.
- 5 And also of course with the Portuguese dictatorship, although the Portuguese film industry in this period was considerably less productive.

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## INTRODUCTION

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## DESIRE AND EROTICISM IN DICTATORIAL TIMES: FILM STRATEGIES AGAINST CENSORSHIP IN TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

### Abstract

Along with the use of censorship as an instrument of political repression, dictatorships have also tended to censor expressions of eroticism. In the realm of cinema, this repressive tendency has sometimes been challenged by creators, by means of rhetorical devices of a metaphorical nature. This article traces the theoretical bases that can explain this clash between what the authorities attempt to prohibit and what nevertheless emerges in the artistic expressions of cinema. Based on Foucault's definition of censorship as a *device*, this article explores the degree to which that device has the effect of bringing out on the imaginative level what the censors sought to prohibit, as revealed, in relation to diverse totalitarian contexts, in the different filmmakers referred to.

### Key words

Eroticism; Censorship; Dictatorships; Francoism; metaphor; female desire; homosexuality; Foucault.

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## DESEO Y EROTISMO EN TIEMPOS DICTATORIALES: ESTRATEGIAS CINEMATOGRAFICAS CONTRA LA CENSURA DE LOS REGIMENES TOTALITARIOS

### Resumen

Al lado del uso de la censura como instrumento de represión política, las dictaduras han tendido a censurar también la expresión de lo erótico. En el campo del cine, esta tendencia represiva ha sido a veces contestada por los creadores, mediante procedimientos retóricos de carácter metafórico. El artículo rastrea las bases teóricas que permiten explicar este choque entre lo que se pretende prohibir y lo que sin embargo emerge en las manifestaciones artísticas del cine. Se parte de la consideración foucaultiana de la censura como *dispositivo*, para dilucidar hasta qué punto dicho dispositivo hace surgir imaginariamente lo que se pretendía prohibir, tal como demuestran, con relación a diversos contextos totalitarios, los diferentes autores a los que se hace referencia.

### Palabras clave

Erotismo; censura; dictaduras; franquismo; metáfora; deseo femenino; homosexualidad; Foucault.

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