

The Art of Deleting: On Poetry and Erasure (Q&A)

Speaker: Álvaro Seiça, Emerging Breslauer Scholar

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Abstract

This talk presents recent outcomes connected to the research and book project “The Art of Deleting” (ARTDEL). ARTDEL is a 3-year project (2018-21) funded by the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship and the Norwegian Research Council, at the University of Bergen, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Coimbra. The use of material and graphic erasure in the composition and formal display of poems has a varied tradition during the 20th century and, most prominently, in the early 21st century. Marks of erasure in literary works can be traced back at least to Heinrich Heine’s poetical narrative *Reisebilder* (1827), in which the author denounces and parodies state censorship by mimicking the censors’ cuts. Yet, since then, are all writers, artists, and poets using erasure in the same way? An overview of this expanding visual and literary form suggests that there are often formalist or conceptual concerns with no political aims, but that a great number of poets and artists also highlight themes and practices of resistance and activism, by connecting erasure with censorship and surveillance. While the first part of the talk will

contrast clusters of erasure poetics, the second part will present archival research related to how book censorship and erasure unfolded under the New State, the Portuguese corporatist and fascist regime of 1933-74. By searching the archives of the political police PIDE/DGS and the Censorship Commission, by inventorying, for the first time ever, the full card index of the Censorship Commission, and by unearthing part of the original books censored by the regime, it is now possible to better understand practices, motives, and objectives of material erasure that served the propaganda of Salazar and Caetano's regime. Having the knowledge of legal and political documents, it is appropriate to ask whether contemporary poets are using erasure or not in relation to history via documentary forms. While that does not seem to be the case in Portugal, in the United States there has been an erasing impulse, especially after the 2000s, to use declassified documents and redaction as found material for new creative work. The talk concludes with reflections on how different ideologic regimes in the post-Second World War in the US, Portugal and China seek to identify common threats among writers on the grounds of national security, patriotism, political subversion, pornography, gender roles or morals.

About the ARTDEL Project

More details about the research project, including the video of the talk, can be found at [https:// alvaroseica.net/ARTDEL](https://alvaroseica.net/ARTDEL)

About the speaker

Álvaro Seiça is a Portuguese writer and researcher based in Bergen, Norway. He is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at UiB, UCLA and UC, where he investigates the poetics and politics of erasure within the EU-funded project "The Art of Deleting." His publications include the poetry books *Supressão* (2019), *upoesia* (2019), *Previsão para 365 poemas* (2018), *Ensinando o espaço* (2017), *Ö* (2014) and *Permafrost* (2012), and the scholarly book *Transdução* (2017).

Q&A

Due to the time zone difference between Los Angeles and Bergen, the questions were gathered and posed via email by Johanna Drucker, on Dec. 3, 2020, and replied to by Álvaro Seiça on Dec. 8.

1) Do you think eliding the political “regimes” of censorship with the aesthetic practices of artists and poets risks eliding two very different kinds of practices—particularly when thinking about the stakes for individuals being subject to the one versus opting to engage in the other? Is it too “easy” for poets/artists to appropriate the tactics/techniques of censorship as a superficial gesture—a kind of graphical trope?

Those two types of artistic production are out there, perhaps more even so with the non-politicized approach to erasure as a technique. Now, that technique has obvious aesthetic consequences, which are many times not grounded on an understanding of the effect, and the affect of erasure, which is historically connected to acts of suppression. Authors that come from historically oppressed milieus are engaging with the erasure of their own communities, whether of class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. But, of course, with any criticism, there is always a side door. On the one hand, it is my understanding that, by eliding the political grounds of erasure, authors risk erasing those same histories. But I know of authors who are also aware of what it is at stake, but prefer to engage with themes of self-censorship or R.T. Moura’s “small politics,” as I mentioned, or who may have a perspective that all poetry and art is political because it is situated in the making of the polis. On a broader scale, my critique has to do with the role of art. We can advance our artmaking by creating original and aesthetically pleasing work, but then, what is the impact on society? This is obviously a very old debate between “l’art pour l’art” and social-politically-engaged art. On the other hand, yes, that is a good point, it may be too easy for authors to merely appropriate the materials of surveilled, classified, or censored materials as a political act per se. It can risk becoming a graphic trope. So, it really depends on how these materials are dealt with. The works I mentioned tend to emphasize the nature of disclosing these materials

as a first step, since the public might not be aware of them. Then, on a second level, the way these authors work through legal or political documents tends to go beyond disclosure or denouncement: reworking of visual forms with added meaning, or labor with language that constitutes a critique of injustices or unbalanced power relations.

2) You mention Spanish translations that perpetuate the censorship enacted in the censored Portuguese versions. Does that mean these Spanish translations are being generated from the Portuguese publications? Why is that? Why not from originals in French, English, or other languages? This is fascinating.

It is indeed fascinating. But perhaps I was not that clear. I mentioned that there is exciting new research to be done in tracking down the different versions of Portuguese-speaking texts as they were published before and after the Carnation Revolution. But there are two spheres: Lusophone and non-Lusophone authors. The case I focused on, because I had photos with me, Vergílio Ferreira, is peculiar because the writer survived the dictatorship and had the chance to edit and reprint his works. But there were authors that did not, whether because they died, or did not have time to restore or rework their literary work, or because they did not have the chance to reprint their work (lack of attention, marginalization, etc.). Thus, there is research to be done about checking Portuguese or Lusophone editions. Then, we have the case of translated works. I showed Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*. But, of course, even though it seems like Francophone literature was the most translated, besides French, there is Anglophone, Hispanic, or Germanophone literature. This is perhaps where we will find evidence—old translations that have not been restored, whose reprints are still perpetuating censorship. I started thinking about this issue after reading on equivalent research made by Jordi Cornellà in Spain (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/jordicornella>). What he found out is that Franco's censorship is still unknowingly haunting the present in all the Hispanic world. A generalist and quick article on this: <https://theconversation.com/francos-invisible-legacy-books-across-the-hispanic-world-are-still-scarred-by-his-censorship-115488>

3) So much of what you described made it clear that the very acts of deliberate

ensorship within these government practices were now exposed—in other words, their very enactment of erasure left a legacy of traces that could be “read” and “exposed.” Any thoughts about this? In a way, the censoring becomes an agent—the catalogue and editions are active players that allow us to explore this history.

Well, yes, due to different reasons, such as the end of regimes, or the disclosure of classified material (FOIA, etc.), these materials have been at least available for the past 20+ years. There are many ways to approach the legacy of these materials. What interests me the most is their link with the arts, that is, rethinking how state control has, and still does, impacted literary and artistic production. In other words, how can we reassess the legacy of state oppression in a writer’s life and creative production, as well as in the broader literary field? This is very hard to measure—I know this fact by interviewing poets that are still alive. On a literary level, in the Portuguese case, this meant that metaphor, historic parallelism, and other tropes were used to deal with the fascist regime, that is, to avoid total censorship. So, the state had a veiled and unveiled impact, in terms of self-censorship, soft censorship, and hard censorship. Because if writers were in a truly democratic environment, their production would have certainly been different. Now that we can study the documents, this is huge, because basically we need to reassess 48 years of literary production and reception. The censor becomes an agent of production but also reproduction. In one sense, sometimes I do not have to dig that much, because it is not that complex—it is enough to actually read the reports or the underlines in books to understand what was troublesome for the regime. The graphic marks speak for themselves; they are agents of disclosure. Gladly we have them! José Cardoso Pires once said that the history of Portuguese-speaking literature in the twentieth century is an apocryphal version. I highly recommend an article by him that was published in the first issue of the *Index on Censorship*, “Changing a Nation’s Way of Thinking,” from 1972.

4) Who set the protocols for redaction and censorship? Did it change over the four+ decades that this office was in existence? Was there a set of “rules” for what needed to be censored, or was a lot left to the individual censor?

Yes, very much so. No time to explore that side during the talk, but as any organization the Censorship Commission cannot be approached in a rigid way, because it was a fluid institution. Procedures changed a lot throughout those 40+ years. The rules came directly from Salazar and the Propaganda Office orchestrated by the New State ideologue António Ferro. The Information Office would do the rest, that is, setting rules with instructions and specifics that were updated throughout the decades in bulletins and internal memos, which can also be studied because they are available. What is interesting to explore is that specific historical moments were particularly harsh and set topics of what and how to censor, or whom: the Spanish Civil War, WWII, the Colonial War, elections, student rebellions, etc. But then, there was a lot of ambiguity as well, which is the most effective censoring tactic, and we can see how different censors would approach issues in different ways, sometimes contracting each other, etc. Salazar even stated in an interview that, poor him, he had been once censored and hated that fact. But, according to him, censorship was needed, and he was aware of the censors' arbitrary nature—his own censors could wake up in the morning and, if in a bad mood, censor anything they would read! These facts are also very interesting to follow-up.

5) Who read those reports on the books? What were other aspects of institutional processes and practices? What kind of lifecycle did these censorship reports have? Did they just disappear into files? Or were they read by someone?

The book reports would be archived but could be later taken as evidence for new assessments, such as in book reprints. There are cases of books that were forbidden and then later allowed, as well as the opposite. The book reports were only read by the head of the Censorship Commission and, eventually, by the director of the Information Office, if the case was severe: say, books on Marxism, sexuality, religion, or by a particularly known author who was seen as dangerous to the regime, that is, in their view, to the “public order.” There were many other modes of repression that did not necessarily have to do directly with censorship, such as the repression of publishers and booksellers, physical and moral attacks to authors, the prohibition of book reviews, or

any news related to a specific book or author (this was a tactics that was used to “ventilate,” that is, the regime would allow a book to continue in circulation not to attract extra attention, because we are speaking of post-print censorship, but would not allow any dissemination, book reviews, or advertisement in the media). This was highly effective. Of course, fear in itself was the main effective tactic. People feared to speak up, to move, to do. For publishers, there was also the real fear of having a full print run destroyed after getting a book forbidden and taken out of the market (Books could be set on fire, destroyed as old paper, etc. even though some booksellers kept hidden shelves or basements with forbidden books). For a publisher, a destroyed print run would have big financial consequences. Then, there was direct action: trials, imprisonment, torture, militia violence, etc. Maria Teresa Horta got beaten up in the street by a group of anonymous men one night in 1971 because she had published a feminist poetry book, *Minha Senhora de Mim*, that dealt with women’s sexual desire. (I am just finishing editing a long interview with her.) Another example is the vandalization and closure of the Portuguese Society of Writers (SPE). In 1965, SPE had attributed the Main Prize for Novels to *Luuanda*, by Luandino Vieira, who at the time was a political prisoner (he was arrested for 14 years) at the Concentration Camp of Tarrafal in Cape Verde. Even though he was already arrested and far removed from the public eye, his novel was seen to have such a power for the cause of Angolan and African liberation movements that the state arranged for the political police and militias to raid the institution that had attributed the prize. SPE was extinguished and it was only rebuilt in 1973. Moreover, the jury members of the literary prize were detained and interrogated by the secret political police PIDE. Once I have compiled all the reports and transcribed their text, an interesting work ahead will be to analyze their discourse practices, even to try to read them as (mostly bad) literary reviews.

6) Were there any specific racial aspects to censorship and erasure in the government Censorship Office? The Hannah Henderson piece was clear about this, but were there features to administrative practices that participated in these biases?

I think the previous reply might address this. Or, what kind of admin practices are you thinking about?

7) What kinds of trends/changes do you think you will see across the decades in which this practice existed? Did political themes get censored more/less over time? Moral/sexual ones? Others?

Indeed, at particular sensitive moments for the regime, surveillance and censorship would tighten up. This would be evident with social and political issues. The role of women's emancipation in society was highly repressed, as it was any kind of sexual, gender, or political liberation. In fact, all types of liberation were radically shut down. "Political subversion" and "pornography" were the most common reasons for banning a book. Translating this into common language means that any book or event that dealt with social justice, or a vague sort of socialism, was "politically subversive" because it was communism, and that any reference to a naked body in a book, or slight touch of eroticism was taken as "pornography." This meant that diversity in thought and discourse was impossible. But any mention to figure of Salazar was problematic, even sometimes when praising him. Then there was Catholic religion, the role of church as another pillar of fascism, labor unions, colonial war, etc. After 1961, with the colonial wars, repression got worse. But as Salazar got sick and Marcello Caetano took over the power in 1968, the political police and institutions were renamed, and supposedly all sorts of repression diminished—in what was called the "Primavera Marcelista" (Marcello's Spring). But this was in fact fake, and what we see is that actually censors were not the military personnel anymore, but highly specialized readers, professors, cinema critics, etc.