

“Censorship and Exile”

A Joint Conference of the University of Augsburg and the University of Texas at

Austin

May 23 – 25, 2013

“The paper burns, but the words fly away.” (Akiba Ben Joseph)

In an increasingly globalized world that is interconnected through new technologies of communication and in which the power over information and discourses gains constantly in importance, liberties like artistic freedom and freedom of speech must constantly be negotiated and defended. In order to gain power over discourses, censorship as the institutionalized control of free speech, be it fictional, non-fictional, verbal or visual and - in an extreme form - the destruction and burning of books have been used to suppress ideas that stand in opposition to dominant ideologies and discourses. Censorship is thus opposed to a pluralistic and democratically structured cultural life within a society. The burning of books constitutes a defamatory form of censorship which is not a phenomenon of the last century but has been practiced since antiquity and is still practiced today. Book burnings are public and ceremonial manifestations of censorship that are supposed to have a cleansing effect insofar as that a society is symbolically freed from non-conformist ideas. In 1933, at the beginning of the National-Socialist regime, book burnings were used as a means of defaming oppositional forces and establishing a national-socialist canon of works.

In the phenomenon of censorship the intersection and reciprocal tensions of the cultural and political sphere become drastically apparent. Literature as a form of cultural expression reacts to and criticizes ideological premises of certain political contexts. It thus constitutes a counter-discourse to processes of canonization that are prescribed and violently put into action by oppressive political regimes. Censorship has the function of exerting power by suppressing potentially destabilizing ideas. Yet, forms of censorship paradoxically reveal the self-consciousness and weaknesses of the censoring institutions. Censorship or book burnings are not aimed at books per se but at certain ideas expressed in writing. The potential power of these ideas is affirmed and acknowledged through the act of destroying their material manifestations.

During the last century, in the U.S. as well as in Germany, censorship – also in the form of book burnings – was organized and carried out. Within the respective political contexts, people who claimed liberties like freedom of speech or artistic freedom often saw themselves forced into exile or

emigrated internally. Censorship and the burning of books in this respect constitutes – in a metonymic relationship – a threat to the authors’ or artists’ physical and mental integrity on grounds of their race, religious affiliation, political views or sexual identity. Authors who had to seek refuge in other countries had in common their traumatizing experiences of exile, political, religious or racist persecution, alienation, loss, their deteriorating living standards and restricted possibilities of publication. However, exile literature is characterized by heterogeneity when it comes to whether and how authors processed their experiences. This heterogeneity constitutes a challenge to “exile literature” as a field of research as it is characterized by various continuities and discontinuities.

The joint conference of the University of Austin, Texas and the University of Augsburg with the title “Censorship and Exile” focuses from an interdisciplinary and transcultural perspective on exactly these continuities, discontinuities, and the heterogeneity of exile literature(s) as a result of censorship and repression of free speech and artistic freedom in Germany as well as the U.S. With the ‘Salzmann Library of Burned Books’ in Augsburg and the ‘Harry Ransom Center’ in Austin, both universities have important collections and institutions that facilitate research concerning the interdisciplinary and academic analysis of mechanics of censorship in relation to the experiences of exile and the reflection within the medium of literature. In this respect, the conference “Censorship and Exile” hopes to methodologically and systematically advance research in these fields. The scope of the conference is not limited to the first half of the twentieth century but includes synchronic as well as diachronic perspectives on the topic and also explores the transnational interrelationships and complex interactions of questions of censorship and exile.

The three-day conference (23-25 May, 2013) will take place at the University of Augsburg and constitutes the first joint project within the newly established cooperation between the University of Augsburg and the University of Texas at Austin.