Diffractions, Issue 12: The Many Faces of (Self-)Censorship

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DIFFRACTIONS

Diffractions | Issue 12 | Speak at Your Own Risk: The Many Faces of (Self-)Censorship-
Editors-in-chief: Inês Fernandes and Teresa Weinholtz

“In a society like ours, the procedures of exclusion are well known. […] We know quite well that we do not have the right to say everything” (Foucault 1980, 52). Often regarded as an instrument of repression of ideas and information (American Library Association 2021), censorship “refers to the control by public authorities (usually the Church or the State) of any form of publication or broadcast, usually through a mechanism for scrutinising all material prior to publication” (McQuail and Deuze 2020, 589). Most commonly associated with control that is visible and imposed by the State, censorship can be regarded “as a subject of history, which means that it has to be considered not only in its formal dimension, as an apparatus of State control and repression, but also as a social agent that permanently and complexly shapes the relationship between individuals and institutions” (Barros 2022, 17). Either through literature, with the act of burning books in Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 ([1953] 2018) and the control of thought in Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four ([1949] 2023), or the morality or political restrictions in cinema (Biltereyst and Winkel 2013), or even contemporary China with the firewall that controls internet access (Stanford University n.d.; Gosztonyi 2023), censorship has gathered a broader definition beyond that of State control.

The study of censorship should not be limited to dictatorships or historically oppressive political regimes, as it can also be found as an institutionalised social force, based on the concept of “public morality” (Mathiesen 2008, 577), in cultural institutions, digital platforms, and academic environments. In its more formal configuration, censorship can be a tool of repression and strict prohibition. In its informal and more personal perspective, it can be viewed as socially imposed censorship and/or self-censorship, thereby expanding its definition “to the productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new models of communication” (Bunn 2015, 26). As Judith Butler (2021) argues, censorship precedes speech, as it determines in advance what type of speech is or is not acceptable. Similarly, Bourdieu (1991) describes how censorship affects language, as what we are authorised to say becomes internalised. Censorship, in this light, is not only a legal or institutional force, but can also become a social imposition. This issue thus seeks to explore the many forms of censorship, self-censorship, and everything in between; past and present, imposed and chosen, visible and hidden.

Recent events have shed light into an ongoing reality of censorship that contributes to the urgency of these discussions. Most recently, in the United States, governmental restrictions on words

such as “women,” “diversity,” and “disability” in academic grant applications and school curricula (Yourish et al. 2025) reveal the close relationship between language and ideological control through State censorship. In Germany, artists and curators have been fired or publicly blacklisted for expressing solidarity with Palestine on their personal social media (Solomon 2023), demonstrating that speech can be punished even within liberal democracies when it contradicts socially established narratives, creating environments of fear through instances of social censorship. On social media platforms like TikTok, users increasingly engage in linguistic innovation. With phrases like “unalive” instead of “kill,” they intentionally alter or misspell specific trigger words to avoid algorithmic suppression, or shadowbanning (Calhoun and Fawcett 2023). This form of self-censorship is strategic and creative, but also reveals the pressures users face to remain visible in social media spaces that are moderated by strict automated systems.

This issue invites contributions that critically examine how all forms of censorship and self-censorship operate today, as well as how they have operated historically. We invite interventions from different contemporary, historical, and geopolitical perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches from all fields in the humanities. Besides proposals for academic papers on the topic of this issue, we also welcome proposals in the form of interviews, book reviews, essays, artistic contributions, as well as non-thematic articles. Suggested topics include, but are not limited to the following:

Historical and contemporary (self-)censorship
Censorship and political regimes
Self-censorship as personal, professional, and intellectual preservation
Censorship and self-censorship…
in media ecosystems
in film and cinema
in art, performance, and curatorship
in image and photography
in language, literature, and translation
in knowledge and academia
in artificial intelligence
in memory: preservation and/or erasure
in children’s media and literature
in social media, online content and behaviour
and cancel culture
…
For artistic submissions, we are interested in proposals that engage in form or content with the theme of censorship and/or self-censorship, such as:

Visual essays
Graphic or visual storytelling
Collaborations between text-based and image-based artists
Poetry and visual poetry
...

Submissions and review process

Abstracts will be received and reviewed by the Diffractions editorial board who will decide on the pertinence of proposals for the upcoming issue. After submission, we will get in touch with the authors of accepted abstracts in order to invite them to submit a full article. However, this does not imply that these papers will be automatically published. Rather, they will go through a peer-review process that will determine whether papers are publishable with minor or major changes, or they do not fulfil the criteria for publication.

Please send abstracts of 150 to 250 words, and 5–8 keywords by NOVEMBER 15, 2025, to info.diffractions@gmail.com with the subject “Diffractions 12”, followed by your last name.

The full papers should be submitted by MARCH 15, 2026, through the journal’s platform: https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions.

Every issue of Diffractions has a thematic focus but also contains special sections for non-thematic articles. If you are interested in submitting an article that is not related to the topic of this particular issue, please consult the general guidelines available on the Diffractions website at https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions. The submission and review process for non-thematic articles is the same as for the general thematic issue. All research areas of the humanities are welcome, and we accept contributions in English or Portuguese.

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