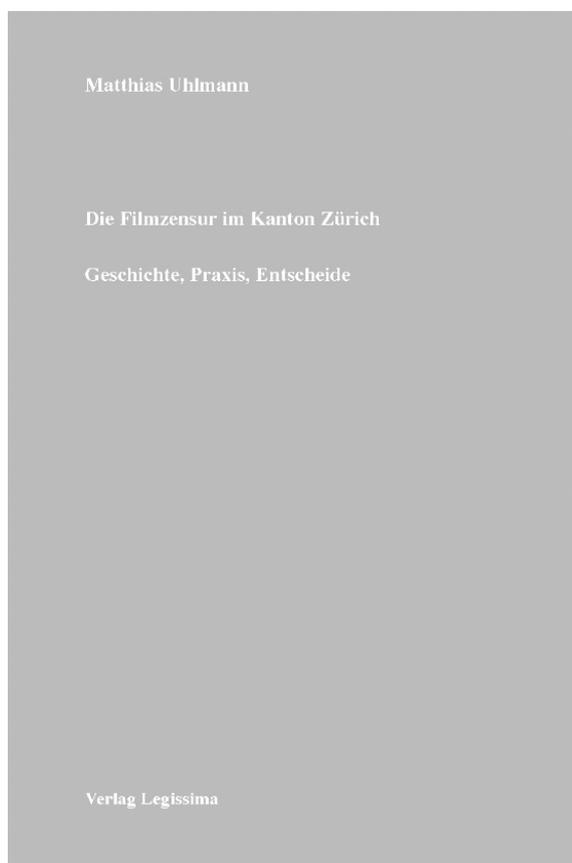


Book Review

Die Filmzensur im Kanton Zürich



Matthias Uhlmann, *Die Filmzensur im Kanton Zürich: Geschichte, Praxis, Entscheide* (Zürich: Verlag Legissima, 2019), xxvi, 938 pp., ISBN 9783033070301

Reviewed *by*

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Matthias Uhlmann's book is a meticulous investigation of the history of film censorship in the Canton of Zurich, Switzerland, from its beginning in the 1910s until its repeal in 1971. The book is based on his Ph.D. dissertation with the same title that he submitted in 2017 at the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich.

In over 900 pages, Uhlmann discusses 100 prohibitions and more than 250 cases of films that were released only after having been cut. More than 3,000 illustrations, on 480 pages additional to the 938 pages of the book, many of them in colour, a film- and a name index turn the book into an encyclopedia and work of reference that is situated at the crossroads of film and law studies.

As Zurich cantonal censorship decisions are only sparsely documented at the state archive

of the Canton of Zurich, Uhlmann had to research in archives all over Switzerland to recollect for the very first time the official sources of the Zurich film control commission (*Filmkontrollkommission der Zürcher Polizeidirektion*). Together with newspapers reports the book gives a very detailed insight to the establishing of censorship in the Canton, its practice and changes over the years as well as to the mentality of its decision-makers.

The book is divided into eight parts. The introduction follows a very instructive overview of the institutional character of censorship in Switzerland. The next two chapters cover cantonal censorship until the beginning of World War II, respectively the years during the war. Uhlmann's main interest, however, is the postwar period until 1971 that is analysed in part five to eight.

Uhlmann starts from Annette Kuhn's approach that censorship should be contextualized in its social and historical-cultural conditions and investigated focussing also on the productivity of its effects.¹ For Uhlmann, the cantonal censorship, therefore, had different characteristics. It was active in prohibiting entire films or in imposing cuts. It was reactive because its decisions caused public discussions. Finally, censorship was productive not only in the sense that it fulfilled a public service but also influenced the film production

and distribution in Switzerland. Either filmmakers produced their films along with censorship guidelines or benefited from the public's attention if a 'scandalous' film passed the institution without obligations. The cultural-political dynamics of censorship lead Uhlmann in the following to situate his study in the discourse of a cinema's public sphere (*Kinoöffentlichkeit*), an approach adapted from Jürgen Habermas by Knut Hickethier in 2002 and further elaborated by Harro Segeberg and Corinna Müller in 2003:

[...] *Kinoöffentlichkeit*, first, embraces all aspects of topography, economy, film-programming and reception that allow and regulate the production, distribution, and reception of films. Second, *Kinoöffentlichkeit* includes all cultural institutions reflecting or commenting on, or regulating cinemas and/or films. Third, it includes cinemas' potential as well as actual audiences, forasmuch they can be researched.²

Understanding cinema's public sphere as a complex, dynamic and multilayered concept, censorship, according to Uhlmann, is not an 'arcane' administrative practice but about historical film and cinema events (*Film- und Kinoereignisse*).

The book contains case studies of film classics such as *Die Sünderin* (Willi Forst, DE 1951), *Viridiana* (Luis Buñuel, MX/ES 1961) or *Tystnaden* (Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963), that all were affected by censorship decisions in some way or the other. However, Uhlmann's holistic and chronological approach steers clear of discerning acknowledged classics and 'flicks' that are usually attributed to the (s)exploitation genre.

This allows the discussion of films such as *London in the Raw* (Arnold L. Miller, UK 1964), a British follower of the Mondo Cane documentary style that renders impressions of London nightlife and curiosities. It was censored for depicting a hair transplantation from the front to the back of the head. The chronology of censorship decisions also permits to remember the work of the forgotten Swiss producer and filmmaker Werner Kunz, who became notorious not only in 1950s Switzerland for his nudist films (*Naturistenfilme*), e. g. *L'Île merveilleuse* (CH 1954) or *Wir fahren zum Naturisten-Paradies / Nous irons à l'Île du Levant* (CH 1957). Kunz' films were regularly the bone of contention of the Zurich commission and even occupied the cantonal government.

The book's voluminous character makes it impossible to resume its content in a few paragraphs. Instead, I will limit to significant changes in the cantonal censorship.

Among European nations, it is a Swiss particularity of having popular votes on changes and introductions of laws. Almost fifty years after the first cinema regulation of 1916 (*Kinoverordnung*) that was revised in 1922, the Canton of Zurich proposed a new Film Act to the local public in 1963. The modification of the censorship practice followed the sign of the times. In the sixties, more films with sexual content were reaching Swiss cinemas. 'Cinematic maturity' (*Kinomündigkeit*) was the buzzword of the public discussion about how to proceed with censorship in the canton. The new Film Act reacted to a changing youth culture that was becoming more independent and self-assured. Its result was the lowering of the legal film viewing age from eighteen to sixteen years.

It was again a popular vote in 1971 that resulted in the establishing of the cantonal censorship law from 1971 that abandoned censorship in the canton. On the occasion of the sex education film *Das Wunder der Liebe – Sexualität in der Ehe* (Franz Josef Gottlieb, GER 1967) Zurich students initiated a popular vote for the end of film censorship. It was argued that it was not longer plausible why a group of cinema amateurs (the commission) spoke for the public and made judgments about an important art form: 'The paternalism of art is joined by the paternalism of the individual.'

Moreover, cantonal censorship was mainly targeting sexual content in the films but failed to criticize militarism, racism and the glorification of violence (795). After three years of heated discussion and preparation of the popular vote, the ‘fossil from the stone age of cinema,’ the Cantonal censorship, was repealed, and the decision if a film was worth to see or not was put in the hands of the mature viewer.

Paul Morrissey’s *Trash* (USA 1970) was the last film that was prohibited by the Zurich censors at the end of March 1971. However, the ban only lasted two days until the new film law came into effect at the first of April.

One last word on the illustrations in the plate section at the end of the book. In contrast to many books on film censorship, Uhlmann’s publication does not limit itself to exemplary illustrations but includes the “deleted scenes” of the censored films. This enables the reader to understand, respectively to see, what images actually were censored.

While some of the images are very graphic, one is surprised and even a little bit amused about the material considered disturbing in a specific time period. In this sense, the book is an interesting visual journey

into the changing of moral standards in Switzerland.

The fact that the illustration part prevented the book from being published by a reputable publisher gives the book an additional interesting censorship history of its own. Uhlmann’s book is sold through his own publishing house.

Die Filmzensur im Kanton Zürich is an indispensable and important work of reference for anybody who is interested in Swiss cultural history or in the history of ‘disreputable’ film genres. Its encyclopedic character makes the book a recommendation to film historians and to legal practitioners who want to delve into the history of Zurich’s censorship practices.

Notes

- 1 Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988), 4.
- 2 Kathleen Lotze, Review of Corinna Müller and Harro Segeberg, eds., *Kinoöffentlichkeit (1895–1920) Cinema’s Public Sphere (1895–1920)* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008) *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 31:2, (2011): 293–297, DOI: 10.1080/01439685.2011.573985.

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