

## Textuality and History: Response to Poe and Black

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The difference between Professors Poe and Black on censorship is one that merits a great deal more discussion than it normally receives. The two of them are to be congratulated for being willing to take up in public an issue that others are content to address with sniping bullets from behind disciplinary barricades. Many are the well-meaning textualists who have been shot in the back and left for dead in the dark alleys of the MLA convention or some gathering of smug historicist or sociologist radicals who'd rather run a frenchie out of town than let him play craps at their table. And why shouldn't they? Interlopers like Poe say that history is a text, and there's no outside. Why shouldn't they be shot? If the guns are loaded, so are the dice. And it's easy just to let them roll because they always roll toward history and society anyway. Everyone knows those are real things, and real things carry more weight than mere images, references, signs, representations, and the like. Certainly more weight than fetishes, Mothers, and third rate movies. (And believe me these movies are third rate; I made the mistake of inflicting them on friends and almost lost a few.) That, at least, is the Common Sense view of things, and there's no reason why we shouldn't follow Common Sense. Everything in our culture--all the images, stories, movies, representations, etc--tell us to do so.

Professor Black's position is rather less polemical than the one I've just attributed to historians. Indeed, he can't really be accused of being polemical at all. Black is content to present a very intelligent and well-researched account of the censorship process lying behind the movies in question here. He concludes by arguing that an understanding of such processes is necessary in order to understand these Hollywood films. If we were to manufacture a polemic out of his position, it would contend not only that such historical research is necessary, but also that an historical understanding makes a purely textual understanding of the kind Professor Poe offers slightly questionable.

Outside the textual process of fetishization, semiotic oscillation, and figurative maneuver lies a real world of real interests that shape the images which only seem to have a textual life of their own. There is an outside to the text, in other words; indeed, one can even claim--as so many socio-historical critics have done--that there is no inside of the text that is separable from that outside. The text is history or society, and nothing more. Which leads a good textualist to wonder what "history" and "society" are, but let's put that aside for the moment.

Professor Poe wants to be a little more polemical than Professor Black. If Black argues in a straightforward style for the Real (historical agents and interests that shaped censorship), Poe has doubts about the efficacy of the Real as an antidote to textual and desiring forces that exceed the censorial morality summoned to contain them. Textual logics tell us something about repressed social logics. All we have to do is look in the right places. Censorship, which Black thinks was successful in taking the stuffing out of Hollywood movies, leaves marks where it did its work, and a reading of those marks illuminates things that cannot ultimately be made to disappear. Censorship only draws attention to them by pushing them noisily into the corners (of texts). In other words, even if the kind of social censorship (primarily of sex and ideas) that Black describes is successful (and I think he quite rightly demonstrates that it was), censorable material remains to be dealt with. In this regard, there is little difference between a censored text and an uncensored one (a point Black himself makes in a slightly different way when he contends that certain films were not that affected by censorship). If anything, the censored text merely underscores other kinds of dangerous material, material Poe convincingly describes.

There are, therefore, two kinds of censorship. One (the social censorship Black notices) worked; the other (the more general psychological and discursive censorship Poe is interested in) can never work fully. The social censorship of unseemly realities and radical ideas can leave Hollywood films looking quite innocuous and sanitized. Incendiary sights and ideas were successfully kept out of sight--and out of minds. This kind of argument leads to a potentially pessimistic conclusion regarding the political efficacy of Hollywood film in general. Film feeds people mindless fare to divert them from the possibility of getting out of line. Black seems to assent to this position in his conclusion when he refers to film as "claptrap."

Poe, in describing an inevitably failed process of censorship, derives more optimistic results. Films contain (and also fail to contain) excesses of meaning that are not only textual but also social in that they feed into desires in audiences for something other than what the films offer them as containment devices. Even socially or ideologically censored films put on display excessive desires that do not fit into the ordered universe of the censored message (or, for that matter, the censored world). Indeed, one could say that the two forces--censorial repression and potentially radical subversive desires--play off

each other and determine each other's shape. The first was there because the second was there before it--and always will be. To read socially censored films, then, is not to provide a record of a successful repression of radical ideas and realities; it is to see how films display desires and energies that permanently threaten the powers that social censorship seeks to maintain, desires and energies that call such censorship forth but which always undermine it, exceed it, and survive it. Censorship by definition as the reaction on the part of systems of domination to resistant forces can never fully succeed. It will always simply create more censorable material.

I'd like to like to add a few thoughts to what Professors Poe and Black have done by making the following double argument. Poe's position places too heavy an emphasis on textuality to the exclusion of history. Black's argument, on the other hand, too heavily emphasizes history at the expense of noticing just how textual history really is.

Let's consider Poe's position first. The question that comes to my mind regarding censorship (both kinds) is why censorship was necessary in the first place. Why particularly was it necessary in the early to mid thirties, the period of the movies under discussion? The era witnessed one of the greatest crises in modern economic history, a crisis accompanied by widescale public dissatisfaction and open class warfare. The reading of the Warners' gangster cycle of the early thirties as giving expression to energies of revolt that were released by the depression seems to me to be accurate. And the cycle of sex films probably can be read in a similar way, as giving displaced expression to desires that were set loose by the relaxing of labor discipline and social control in general. In addition, heightened compensations in the form of sexual and visual pleasure probably helped people through a painful period (and indeed, diverted them from more troublesome activities). While I'm attracted to Poe's sense of the subversiveness of the audience's desire for pleasure in the face of censorial moralizing, I think those pleasures have to be given a double reading in the light of the historical moment. There is a carnivalesque dimension to Madame Du Barry's character, as there is to the Dead End kids, but there's also something troubling about the even censored message of "have pleasure while you can" that attaches to Du Barry's character, especially given what was occurring in the social context. Let's look at the film more closely.

Poe reads the figure of the woman as a fetish, an emblem of simultaneous desire and fear, and as a figure of sexual excess that seems scarcely containable within then existing moral parameters. Du Barry is a paragon of amorality. And her presentation as a series of fetish objects, from foot to hat, was probably hilarious to anyone familiar with Freud at the time. But these points raise two questions in my mind that ultimately come together as one. The first is what does it mean to represent a woman in this way, to assign to her the meaning of sexual excess? Second, bearing in mind that a fetish is defined as something detached from its context and isolated as an object of desire, what

does it mean to make a film in which, as Poe puts it, "pleasure is valued over politics" in 1934? To the second question first.

It's interesting that a film set in an era of a popular revolt against hunger should be made during such a hungry time. It's even more interesting that the ultimate message of the film should be to have fun and forget about politics. Pleasure does have the meaning of utopian aspiration that Poe assigns it, and the carnivalesque does rupture the proprieties that maintain domination. But pleasure can also divert, and one must bear in mind that the carnival was a time of contained rupture, one that did not ultimately touch power for as much as it imaginatively subverted it. I don't usually side with this reading of pleasure and carnival as conservative forces, but because Poe seems to place too heavy an emphasis on the subversive possibilities of both in a film that to me seems at best problematic, I'm going to do so here.

Madame Du Barry seems to me to be about two things--fucking and the difference between the real and the artificial, with the former being shown to be more important than the latter. The two themes (if that's what they can be called) coincide. That Madame Du Barry might prove to be the real thing in a world of artifice is signalled in the credit sequence, which consists of a series of highly artificial portraits of the characters. Du Barry is the only one to break frame, so to speak, by reaching out of her picture, thereby indicating that she is real, not artificial, and that she will be a figure who will break frames (of propriety, sexual morality, politics, etc) that others respect. As Poe notes, the king is then shown standing behind an artificial costume out from behind which he steps, demonstrating that he too has aspirations for a reality that puts aside all the false trappings of court life. And indeed, we soon learn that he aspires to find a real woman who will treat him like a real man. That this ideal woman might be a perfectly silent fuck is suggested by the scene in the false house with the woman who are paid to pretend the king is not a king. They all ask for favors, thus betraying the charade with speech (and betraying the fact that they have interests of their own beyond those of the king). It is important, therefore, that Du Barry appears first not only as a series of fetish objects (hand, foot, hat), but also as a perfectly silent and apparently rather stellar sexual partner. Indeed, her value seems to be that she devotes herself to that activity to the exclusion of all else, even speech (at least initially). If she is a figure of excess, she is also a specular figure of obliging carnality, a mirror of male desire whose highest goal is good service.

I think a reading of the film should pause over these semantic equations. A woman, who is equated with corporeality, is made the vehicle of a meaning that suggests that fucking is more important--more real--than such artificial activities as politics. An ideology of pleasure--the idea that people should concentrate on sex at the expense of concern for the world--dovetails with an ideology of the real--the idea that nothing matters as much as what is before one's nose (or one's penis), least of all ideas of moral responsibility or revolutionary possibility. I think this is why the censored illogicality of the

film's political messages is perfectly in keeping with the film's logic. Indeed, the censored version probably suits that logic better than a more clearly presented political message, since it inadvertently suggests that politics is illogical and artificial, just what the film wants to say in any event. The two ideological strands intersect in the scene in which Du Barry, robbed of the clothes she was about to wear to the court, comes to the court anyway, dressed in her night gown. The king runs off to bed with her. False clothes are not necessary for a real woman; and once again, the real and the pleasurable coincide as the happy couple toddle off for a roll in the hay and leave the artificial questions of politics and war behind for others to solve.

The ideology of pleasure and the ideology of the real also come together in the way the film plays on the difference between the literal and the figurative registers of discourse. The film contains within it a critique of censorship. The stern disapprobation of the courtiers is in some sense a version of the Breen PCA, and part of the argument of the film is to suggest that the real and pleasure demonstrate how impoverished that position is. It's false clothing thrown over the real silent body of pleasure--"the same loud pretending." The highly connotative sexual innuendos in the film, which rest on a very unsteady distinction between the literal and the figurative understandings of certain expressions, perform an anti-censorial function by suggesting real meanings behind very self-consciously artificial or figurative statements (or by juxtaposing statements made metaphorically in one scene with images that display literalizations of the statements in the scene that follows). Thus, when one courtier remarks, "The king is mixing omelettes again," an activity he is literally engaged in for his new mistress, another courtier responds, "Who is she?," thus drawing attention to the figurative meaning of mixing omelettes as having sex. Perhaps the most daring of these wordplays is the exchange between Du Barry and the courtier who accuses her of (figuratively) screwing France: "Madame, what are you trying to do to France?" Given that "France" is the king, her response, "Just what it's doing to me" (i.e. "Fucking it"), stretches the semantic boundaries of propriety. Breen and Company were clearly asleep at the reel (or perhaps the hiddenness of sexual reference was perfectly appropriate to a male dominated construction of gender relations that placed women-as-sex safely away in a hidden place, either the home or the inner chambers of court). This shift of rhetorical registers also associates the woman with literality, with a real that distances itself from the artificiality of discursive figuration, a body without a mind. Her introduction at the beginning of the film as a body without a mouth is replayed in her depiction as a body of literal meaning that eludes figuration. The coy wordplays thus signal an equation of sex and reality, as well as a dissociation of bodily acts that are important and mental concerns that are insignificant.

While I would agree with Poe's reading of Du Barry as a figure for the carnivalesque, therefore, I think we need to reflect on the political significance of that depiction. Clowns have always broken frames for kings, and power has

never suffered. More pertinently, in 1934, the message that fucking is more important than political reflection cannot really be deciphered as monovocally progressive. It probably addressed the kinds of utopian desires that make themselves felt particularly in times of severe deprivation, and we should not dismiss those desires even if they are easily tracked in conservative directions. When there's nothing else in life that's rewarding, good sex makes a lot of difference. The film probably had a certain realism to it, then, not to say a certain symptomatic truth. But the ideology of the real and of pleasure conjoined also construct a kind of populist common sense that has all too often derailed good political possibilities in American history. It's not clear in my mind that Madame Du Barry escapes this ideological position.

That woman, the perennial clown of male fantasy, should be the vehicle for this ideology is predictable. And if I would fault Poe's reading at all, it would be for not taking this fact into account. He does focus on woman, but woman understood as meaning--excess, mother, etc. I agree with his critique of the castration model, and I applaud his adoption of the alternative pre-oedipal reading method. But that method should draw our attention to the representationally mediated play of bodies against bodies, something that is of a different order of understanding than the search for meaning as the depth that lies behind textual surfaces, and what is clearly at stake in the film is the body of woman understood as a pure vehicle of male pleasure. This is not a meaning, nor is it depth. It is a surface event of social life, one that this film puts remarkably on display. In so doing, it points out that social life consists of material needs and desires that are played out on material bodies; they are the stuff that resists the imposition of meaning, understood as transcendental archetypes like the Mother or Castration, on social life. For me, the film's strange radicality resides in the way it displays this basic stuff, stuff that needs to be shaped into the outlines of propriety that are at issue in censorship. If I can't fully embrace the progressive character of the positioning of woman as the figure for the excess that troubles those outlines, I can agree that the fact that this materiality could be figured at all suggests that the lines of propriety were in trouble. But then the censors themselves were perfectly aware of this. They weren't fucking around.

The internal censors Poe describes must therefore be linked to the patriarchal tradition of power and to the larger political context of the specific historical moment of the film. The internal processes enact larger social processes of control of which the PCA was merely a part. That these might begin to shake loose at a time of economic crisis is to be expected, and it is also to be expected that woman, understood as a social, not just a textual figure, should come to represent this threatening breakdown. Reformers had been seeking to impose sexual austerity on working class people for several decades, and this would explain the power of sexuality as a figure for the loosening of social control at the time. That Du Barry should be presented as an emblem of such raunchy rebellious sexuality (I've been deliberately using

the raunchy word fuck for this reason) in the face of such strict moral sanction within the film thus can be linked to a larger social and historical struggle. Negative as her portrayal might be from a feminist perspective, there is nevertheless a positive power in her figure that flies in the face of a particular kind of conservatism. Woman in the film is, as she always has been in history, a weak link in the chain of command, a necessary slave within the empowered male camp who threatens to go over to the other side at any time. Denied access to Reason and susceptible to emotional (and bodily) demands, she represents a possible rejection of the asceticism of economic austerity.

Professor Black's points I find to be thoroughly convincing. There are always external forces at work shaping film texts, as much as there are internal psychological and discursive forces. I think one needs, however, to bring those two concerns together, so that the external forces can be seen as manifesting dynamics similar to those driving the internal forces, just as the internal have to be seen as versions of the external.

If one were able to do a psycho-textual analysis of the external social censorship system, one would probably find that it operated in much the same way as the internal system Poe describes in films like *Madame Du Barry*. Indeed, the censor on the lookout for isolatable shots of naked flesh, or for images of illicit couplings, or for suggestions of troubling ideas is something of a fetishist, in Poe's sense of that term. He desires power; he fears dirt; he wants to cut sadistically into other's pleasures. His willingness to turn a woman into a part object--a foot or a hand--that can stand in for banned sexual possibilities is not that different from the psychological censor that projects the woman as image of feared excess within the film.

That such censorial conservatism operates as both sexual and social repression is amply evident in *Gabriel Over the White House*, where the president's ascent to dictatorial glory parallels a renunciation of sexual hedonism, the putting aside of a sexual woman in relation to whose power the president is depicted as a weak child. A closer look at the process of manning and unmaning in that film might help us get at the way external censors manifest dynamics similar to those driving the internal censors, as well as to understand what it is about women that might be so fear-provoking.

*Gabriel*, in that it is a film that almost directly transcodes external politics into film politics, allows us to observe to what extent the conservative social and historical world out of which censorship arises is itself constituted as a process of censorship. It is a world constructed through representations, discursive figures, images, feared projections, conventional proprieties, fetishes, and the like. It is not that different from a movie, in other words. The film merely gives one further expression to a conservative representational spectacle that is everywhere on display in society. We can use it, therefore, not only to describe the psychological processes of social censorship, but also to describe the process of textual and psychological censorship at work within the conservative ideology that motivated that social censorship. We can, to use

Poe's controversial wording, extend our reach and read the extra-textual social world as a text.

If the president's story in the film can be read as a fantasy of conservative politics during the era, then it is worth noticing the process of substitution that executes the censorship within the film. A better, Gabriel-inspired president substitutes for the party hack. A more homely, wifely Miss Molloy substitutes for the president's whore. This process of substitution parallels the social censor's imposition of substitute statements and images on the dangerous and critical parts of the film, from the working men's slogans to the depiction of the cabinet. In each instance, something dirty, material, and dangerous is repressed, and another, more proper statement or image is put in its place. What I am describing, of course, is a process of fetishization, but what needs to be underscored is that such fetishistic substitution is always, as Poe rightly notes, a way of deflecting something feared and threatening. What is generally kept at bay in conservative moral ideology is materiality, the realm to which workers and women are banished in the white hetero-male capitalist utopia of which conservatives are the strongest defenders.

In *Gabriel*, when the censor annuls illicit sexuality in favor of a more metaphorical substitute, a properly platitudinous marriage, he enacts a process of fetishization that is meant to keep a threatening materiality at bay. It is kept at a distance for reasons of control, both sexual and social. Women and working classes pertain to the materiality of social life so far as conservative white men are concerned, and for this reason lines must be drawn between their to-be-censored dirt (read potentially uncontrollable materiality) and the proper world of conservative platitude, substitute formations that as much testify to an embattled and fear-ridden reserve as to a safe haven. There is a necessary (and telling) parallel, therefore, between the repression of the sexual mistress through her sublation into a wife and the repression of the troublesome working class through its sublation into an "army" of labor, willingly subject to dictatorial discipline. Control is preserved through the establishing of boundaries that are represented as the markers of unbroachable preserves (the door through which no one can go while the president recovers; the state line that keeps the strikers in Baltimore, outside Washington). Substitute formations thus establish a line between the repressed and the agent of repression, and in this way, distinction, separation, and propriety are maintained. Proper order, dependent as it always is on (sexual and class) differentiations, is safeguarded.

At stake here, both politically and psychologically, is identity, the self-identity of individual male rulers and the identity of the entire tribe. Around the issue of identity established through firm boundary markers cluster the figurative values of moral propriety and the literal value of property. The president's entire political program rests on the defense of property or wealth, and it should not be surprising that this defense takes the form of the following of certain moral proprieties. But equally important is the psychology at stake



in all of this. It too demands a certain properness or identity, a safeguarding against the threatening loss of self that is the dissolution into the undifferentiated mass or the uncontrolled materiality of sexuality.

It is of particular consequence, therefore, that the president learns self-control as he learns to control others. Self-control (or self-censorship, if you will) means bringing a threatening and unruly materiality in line, in this case one's own body. By becoming "Gabriel," the president gets his body in order in relation to Miss Molloy, but more importantly, he ceases even to occupy his own body. He becomes pure spirit. That this should be accompanied by a transformation of the threateningly sexual (and bodily) woman (when Beekman first lays eyes on her, he rakes her from foot to head with his eyes), into a caretaking wife-mother figure is important. As sexual power, the woman is associated with a lessening of male power (the president plays on the floor like a boy). But as mother-caretaker, she is also the necessary vehicle for the realization of his true potential. Of President Lincoln's quill pen, the instrument he will use to impose his newly acquired phallic will on the world, Miss Molloy (also known as "Pendy") remarks to the president "You could do important things with that pen." And indeed, he does.

Although the president rises from a kind of childhood to a new manhood, his character remains plagued by passivity. Even when he gains power, it is from someone else--Gabriel--who substitutes for him. And it is Miss Molloy who watches over him in bed. How might we account for this mix of action and passivity? At stake in the film as well as in conservative politics in general is an image of the father as a source of power who must be emulated and of the mother as a perfect caretaker who satisfies the young boy's every wish--who teaches him, in other words, to be like his father. His words become commands that are immediately satisfied (like his father's). Accompanying this fantasy of power, however, is an image of passivity, of being someone else, of being absent from one's own body. Respect for the strict discipline of conservative propriety, of which the father is the primary agent, imposes self-censorship, a denial of one's own desires, a repudiation of one's own uncontrollable bodily processes. To be in control, like the father, is to be in control of oneself; to acquire a phallic conservative identity is to establish boundaries between oneself and anything that threatens to overwhelm that sense of personal propriety. Miss Molloy's shift from mistress to mother parallels his decorporealization, and this trajectory intersects with his acquisition of the patriarchal phallus, the power of command and censorship, the ability to keep at bay anything that threatens one's proper boundaries. Desexualization merely allows the sexualization of the political process now conceived as the source of a phallic male heterosexual identity.

A language that dictatorially controls the world by acting on it directly and a language that imposes the substitute platitudes of conservative moral propriety on the world through censorship can thus both be said to serve the same function. Both turn something threatening and potentially uncontrollable

into something one can master, much as one tries to master one's own bodily functions. That one's own dirt might be at stake in all of this, one's own physical shit, as indeed Klaus Thelewit suggests of fascist male fantasies, is indicated by the fact that the glorious president separates from his own body in the end, leaving behind the dirt of physical existence altogether for the platitudinous heaven of a Wasp ruling class.

Social censorship must therefore, I would argue, be read as one manifestation of a psychological and representational process within the social system of conservatism that is similar to the one Poe describes as the internal censor at work in these film texts. The social censor is a symptom of the internal censor at work in a more general way throughout American culture, especially in the world of conservative politics and morality. As a process of substitution that represses the dirt of the working masses and the materiality of the (female) sexual body, conservative social censorship fetishizes certain very partial ideals of propriety which are emblems of an internal process of masochistic self-censorship and of sadistic social control, one that promotes self-repression as an antidote and an alternative to a more general pleasure that might be possible if materiality and dirt, the masses and the body, were to win out in this particular struggle.

And they do win out--historically, because they represent something that can never be quelled or made to disappear, which is to say, materiality itself, and textually, because they are the motor cause of conservative ideology, the very thing whose repression provides such ideology with its justifying logic and its shape. A marginal figure like Molloy and a marginal event like her marriage must be seen as essential components of the film's message. The logic of public control necessarily dovetails with a logic of familial control. And the fact that it must do so attributes a power to those very personal dimensions of life that conservatives would prefer to keep out of view and to deny any significance. But, as Freud noted, it is in the nature of denial to affirm. That law implies that the censorial structure of signification, whereby what is censored is signified by its absence, in fact engenders an allusive instability of reference. The workers may be silenced, but their march has depicted a danger. Female sexuality may be disciplined, but the foot is still there, sticking through the curtain, suggesting alternative possibilities. Repression always only creates innuendo.

To conclude: if Poe needs to situate his understanding of textual censorship more within social history, it strikes me that Black could benefit from applying Poe's analysis to the social censor he describes. Internal censors are never purely textual; they are always linked to social politics. Social censors are always internal and textual in that they emerge within larger social psychological and representational systems that allow them to act on the world in the way that they do. What we might gain from this exercise is a sense that terms like social politics or history on the one hand and textuality and sexuality

on the other need not stand in such striking opposition. They may in fact be the same thing.

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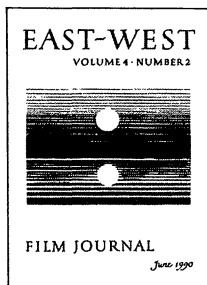
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