



IETM REPORT

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# THE CULTURAL SECTOR

## megaphoning free expression

Report from the working group of the same name as part of the  
IETM Spring Plenary Meeting in Bergamo, Italy, 23 – 26 April 2015



**Speakers:**

**Vahid Evazzadeh** is an Iranian filmmaker and theater director based in Copenhagen. He specializes in training performers and produces artistic, cultural and socially relevant international projects. Vahid is the chairman of The Counter Institute and a member of the Roberto Cimetta Fund board of directors.

**Jumana Al-Yasiri** is a performing arts manager and researcher. She was appointed curator for the urban and world music program of Damascus Arab Capital of Culture 2008 and held the position of Grants Manager at the Young Arab Theatre Fund from 2011 to 2014. Jumana is a PhD candidate in History and Semiotics of Texts and Images. In 2015, she was appointed Middle East and North Africa Theatre Programmer, at the Sundance Institute Theatre Program. She is also a Board Member of the Roberto Cimetta Fund.

**Esther Charron** is president of Pôles magnétiques, holds a Bachelor of Music (piano performance) from Laval University and a master's degree in performing arts management from New York University. She regularly collaborates with CINARS on the programming of professional development workshops, training on international cooperation. In 2007 Esther was a delegate co-producer to host in Montreal the first IETM plenary meeting in America.

**Hanane Hajj Ali** is an actress, trainer, researcher and writer from Lebanon. She is a cultural activist and founder and general assembly member of Al Mawred Al Thaqafy (Culture Resource organization), of ACTON FOR HOPE Initiative, and SHAMS Association. She is a member of the experts' council of Ettijahat. Independent culture Organization [www.ettijahat.org](http://www.ettijahat.org).

**Moderators:**

**Geoliane Arab** is a Cultural Manager & International Developer; Moussem (Belgium), Metro al Madina (Lebanon), Jens Bjerregaard /Aurora Borealis (Denmark).

**Hermann Lugan** is the Deputy Director at Le Phenix, Scène Nationale de Valenciennes (France).

*Today more than ever, freedom of expression is triggering divisive debates about the balance between respecting and provoking social/political/religious sensibilities. In the place of conventional state censorship, a combination of constraints without clear demarcation or legal basis is shaping contemporary censorship.*

*As artists and cultural professionals, what role should we play in shaping the discourse of freedom of expression? What are our mobilization strategies and how can we adapt them to the local contexts?*

# 1.

Vahid Evazzadeh presented an insight that is alternative to the conventional perception of the situation in Iran. His example illustrated one of the today's forms of censorship that is present in many countries but not sufficiently discussed. The matter concerns the situation of artists who are considered to be "supporters of the regime", yet are very critical of it. Their ambiguous position results in them falling victims of a **"double censorship"**: their projects are being both outlawed by the Iranian state and boycotted by international festivals as their authors are known as "supporters of the regime".

Vahid spoke of the story of Ebrahim Hatamikia, an Iranian filmmaker. When Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, Ebrahim was one of the numerous young volunteers who went to war. Having discovered that he was not fond of shooting a gun, Ebrahim gradually decided to shoot with the camera and became an assistant of a famous director who was filming all the important events of the war.

Later Ebrahim became a filmmaker himself. His agenda was aligned with the official message of the state; nevertheless, his works shed light on plenty of nuances and details that have never been revealed by the official propaganda. Particularly critical and even terrifying were the films about the warriors going back home, to the society.

Ebrahim considers himself a supporter of the revolution and believes that, since he proved to be "a soldier of the state of Iran", he has a right to be critical and outspoken.

Consequently, due to this criticism and honesty, his films are being banned by the official censorship institutions.

However, in 2-3 years, after going through a severe censorship process and fighting against all the formal and informal forms of censorship, he ensures his movies are screened, sometimes slightly altering from the original versions.

Iranian cinema is known outside Iran, but Ebrahim Hatamikia and some other filmmakers alike are never screened by Western festivals, because they are not "approved" by the programmers of the Western festivals.

*"In Lebanon, for a very long time, films about anything but war had no chance for a grant."*

# 2.

Artists in post-conflict countries and countries in war experience a trend that also can be considered as an unconventional form of censorship - **not supporting the art projects that do not talk about war**.

According to Geoliane, in Lebanon, for a very long time, films about anything but war had no chance for a grant.

As a result, Lebanese cinematography ended up with a series of movies only narrating about the war and the misery it brought.

Jumana Al-Yasiri underpinned this idea by presenting the example of Syria. Nowadays, Syrian artists are expected to talk about the war, as if Syrian people have no other living

space. "Any Syrian artist can't just simply write a love story - it would not find a space now." Besides the expectations from the local institutions and the outside world, there is also artists' sense of responsibility and feeling guilty.

Jumana also spoke of the dreadfully difficult conditions for the Syrian artists falling victims of the conventional state censorship. A relevant example is the case of Ali Ferzat, cartoonist, who got both of his hands broken just because he was making cartoons challenging the state regime. Alongside with explicit aggression and outright bans, there is also a powerful manipulation of artistic creation coming out of the extremely slow decision making process regarding official requests for the authori-

zation to release and show works of art. The monopoly of film production is in the hands of the Ministry of Culture and the National Film Organisation, which produces 2 - 2.5 films per year.

Usually a film director, who is not explicitly loyal to the regime, is forced to wait for an authorization for an incredibly long time; then, even if the script is approved, the funds are allocated and the film is released, it is often forbidden from being screened.

This manipulation of arts and culture by the Syrian regime is described in the book "Ambiguities of Domination" by Lisa Weeden. A more recent book (2014) about freedom of artistic expression in Syria is "Syria Speaks. Arts and Culture from the Frontline" edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Mawara Mahfoud.

### 3.

The case presented by Esther Charron indicated that even in North America, "the land of liberty", freedom of expression is being restricted by some disguised yet powerful forms of censorship.

Nowadays, in Canada there is a strong obsession with **controlling official communication**. The current right wing government is excessively concerned with **accuracy and appropriateness of the messages** they send to the society.

Due to this obsession, even the title of an arts project - if it is considered provocative and discriminatory - may be a reason for censorship, while the content of the project is not even reviewed.

Esther cited an example of a music group called *Holly Fuck*. After it came to the attention of politicians that the band was awarded a touring grant from the Canadian government, not only was it retrieved from them but the whole touring support program was cut, all of this because their name was assumed to send a negative message about the country's values.

The same Government denied this was done for ideological reasons, giving an overall poor evaluation of the program as the reason for cancelling it.

They then promised to replace by another one, which Canada is still waiting for.

*Even in North America, "the land of liberty", freedom of expression is being restricted by some disguised yet powerful forms of censorship.*

## 4.

Building up on the observation that sometimes **an ambiguous title is enough for a project to be censored**, Hermann Lugan mentioned the incident of the show *Golgota Picnic* by Argentinian playwright Rodrigo Garcia. “If you look at the content of the show, there is nothing problematic for the Christians, but the title is provocative.”

Malta Festival Poznan was forced to cancel the performance due to social protests and the threat to public safety. Accusing the show of propagating anti-Christian ideas, religious rioters made clear that they were going to disrupt the performance. The festival’s director did not want to risk casualties, since the mayor of Poznan denied his responsibility to protect artists and public. Nevertheless, a lot of theater venues all over the country decided to screen the show in solidarity with the artist.

Hermann also referred to the story of *Exhibit B*, a Brett Bailey’s human installation on racism and imperialism in Africa. The exhibition was planned to be opened in London and Paris, but sparked a lot of public anger in both capitals and was canceled.

The local communities decided that this is racism even before seeing the show. To defend their case, the protesters were referring to their **cultural rights**.

Building up on the above examples, Hermann highlighted that there is often a **conflict between values and legitimacies**, as well as a **contradiction between freedom of expression and cultural diversity**.

The notion of cultural rights is defined by the UNESCO Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights: “Everyone, alone or in community with others, has the right to access and participate freely in cultural life through the activities of one’s choice, regardless of frontiers.” That means that everyone has the right to participate in elaboration, implementation and evaluation of the decisions that have impact on the exercise of the one’s cultural rights.

The responsibility of the public bodies is to allow everyone, whose cultural rights have been violated, an access to remedies, in particular judicial remedies.

Therefore, everyone has the right to participate in the definition of what the common culture is. This is an example of how **legitimization of a good purpose - promotion of the cultural rights - affects the exercise of liberty of artistic expression**.

Referring to the case of “Exhibit B”, some participants reminded that the conflict between the promoters of freedom of expression and the protesters often results from inequality of their positions. A claim of freedom of expression often comes from the dominant part of the society, from people in power, while more vulnerable communities are not in a position to accept this insistence of freedom of expression.

Revolving around the difference between *banning* and *boycotting*\* and addressing the question of responsibility of the decision-makers, participants mentioned the cancellation of an Israeli show at Edinburgh Festival last year. The protesters were demonstrating against the Israeli government, but not against the artists. The performance was crossed out of the programme, despite the fact that it was sold out.

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\* Oxford Dictionaries:

- To boycott is to withdraw from commercial or social relations with (a country, organization, or person) as a punishment or protest.

- To ban is to officially prevent (someone) from doing something.

## 5.

As artists, how can we respond to the violations of freedom of expression of this sort?

Hanane Hajj Ali spoke about her way of challenging censorship. “Myself, I am extreme in defending my positions and I pay the price. There are artists who prefer to be perceived as neutral. By definition, an artist is someone who is not afraid of putting himself in danger. If artists do not put themselves in danger, it will be a hopeless case.”

In Lebanon, a country with a troubled and complex history, it is not allowed to approach such subjects as politics, religion, sex. The only solution for artists, according to Hanane, is to take the responsibility in challenging and redefining this reality. Herself, she is working on a provocative project called **Jogging** - a performance about the interrelation between an intimate space of a woman and the public space, where she jogs every day.

Hanane feels necessary to talk about sex, religion and many other aspects that are simply a part of her life. “If a pornographic dream comes to my mind, I will talk about it, why not?” Working on this project, Hanane is ready to face all sorts of severe reactions and difficulties related to finding an alternative space to present the performance in order to avoid censorship.

The situation in Turkey and some examples of a structured struggle against censorship were presented by a representative of Siyah Bant (“black ribbon” in English), an organisation that researches, documents and publishes cases of censorship against the arts in an effort to protect the rights of creative practitioners in Turkey. Siyah Bant collaborates with Arts Rights Justice (ARJ) and Freemuse - organisations that fight against violations of freedom of expression all over the world.

In Turkey there is no law directly allowing the censoring of arts and culture. Nevertheless, the government manages to find some loopholes to censor art works.

The 34th International Istanbul Film Festival removed “Bakur”, a film about the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party, from the Festival programme at the last minute before screening after an intervention by the Turkey’s Culture Minister. The pretext was that the movie did not have a registration certificate. Officially, to participate to the Festival, Turkish filmmakers are indeed requested to register officially, while international participants do not need to obtain any license. However, several local films have been also screened at the festival without any certificate. It was not the first case of outlawing a Kurdish movie, but Turkish artists usually did not express a lot of support. This time, the wave of solidarity of Turkish filmmakers was unprecedented.

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In response to the cancellation of “Bakur”, more than 100 Turkish filmmakers signed a letter against the censorship at the Festival and 23 withdrew their own films from the programme. As a result, all the competitions and the closing ceremony were cancelled.

Discussing solidarity and mobilization, Ester Charron spoke of the reaction of the cultural sector to the decision of the Canadian government to cut the funds for culture. The Government announced it during summer holidays, in the hope that the incident will remain unnoticed by the public. But it got noticed. The artistic communities were very well organised initiating lobbying actions and reaching the media. They managed to refine their message and made it understood. That year culture almost became a central issue in the elections. And the conservatives lost everything in Quebec.

## 6.

Vahid pointed out that social dimension is an important factor to be taken into account, when we talk about censorship and responsibility of artists.

In some countries there is a general consensus that we can say whatever we want, but in a way this consensus **blocks the way to a real social change.**

At the same time, there are places where a little action in culture and arts provokes a lot of reaction and opens up a space for change. "Censorship is becoming very catalyzing in itself. I don't defend censorship, but we have to consider that."

To illustrate these ideas, Vahid talked about the Ebrahim Hatimikima's movie about the veterans of war coming back and suddenly thinking, that while they were defending the country, the rest were having a party, and started taking hostages in the city.

*"In some countries there is a general consensus that we can say whatever we want, but in a way this consensus blocks the way to a real social change."*

"This kind of arts could have really changed the sight".

Another example brought in was about a Danish choreographer who has been creating art about his penis for the last 10 years. As stated by Vahid, with this kind of art the state does NOT need to practice formal censorship since they do not mean much socially. **Projects of this sort result from unlimited freedom of atomizing individualism, but they do not induce any real change and, on the contrary, sustain the predominant social discourse,** while there are many artists that are in need for attention, resources and public space to trigger debates about social, political and economic issues.

Some participants pointed out that, instead of generalizing, mixing and comparing, we should elaborate a more **appropriate vocabulary to name the trends and issues related to freedom of expression.** For instance, the situation of censorship in Norway, certainly, differs from the one in Iran, and comparing the two would lead to diminishing problems in Norway, while, the issues are, perhaps, incomparable and should be denoted differently.

*"Society wants that nothing irregular happens.*

*We should fight against these trends."*

For example, the most essential problem of censorship in Germany is rather an urge to *provoke* censorship than to *figure* it. "In the middle of 70s - beginning 80s, we went on stage and stopped performances, because we didn't accept conventional and bourgeois art anymore." A similar phenomenon happened in the Netherlands in 60s - the so-called Tomato Revolution - when students pelted mainstream theater productions with tomatoes because they thought it was not relevant to the times. Nowadays, students ask whether they may undertake a performance in the University Hall, they do not wish to risk. "This is a young generation of artists, coming from all over the world. Society wants that nothing irregular happens. We should fight against these trends."

## 7.

Geoliane encouraged participants to share their thoughts on the adequacy of the strategies we use to mobilize in support of freedom of expression. There are some standard instruments - open letters, petitions, etc. - but how efficient and powerful are they? How can the existing strategies and tools be adapted to specific contexts on the global level?

Stating that solidarity is one of the most powerful remedies against censorship, Hanane proposed that IETM, in collaboration with other organisations, ask UNESCO to undertake an **international day against censorship**. It should be a day of staging politically and socially engaged performances that would challenge censorship.

Hanane believes that, if this campaign would reach the global scale, local authorities would not dare to apply sanctions against the artists.

Vahid emphasized that the **multiplicity of approaches** is necessary. For example, Iran, Venezuela and other revolutionary states with an anti-colonial agenda get very paranoid and thus oppressive and even criminal, when local artists get support from Western countries. Consequently, it may aggravate the situation of local artists and put them under more pressure. Likewise, funding a local human rights organisation would not lead to a positive result, since such an organisation would be perceived by the local authorities as an international agent and its workers would be repressed.

Instead, it is necessary to **encourage local people to find their own way for engagement**, not necessarily the same as Western democracies use. To do so, it is necessary to foster the exchange of best practices within the cultural sector. An online tool / platform for sharing experiences would be of help.

Vahid also suggested that every organisation-member of IETM mentions freedom of expression in its official mission statement. He cited the example of the Ethical Charter of Roberto Cimetta Fund, to which artists should agree before receiving the fund's grant.

It was also pointed out that a right approach would be to deal with freedom of expression in connection with all other basic rights. "You cannot isolate this issue from other human rights that are being violated on a daily basis."

*by Elena Polivtseva, IETM*