Michael Holquist, a Yale literature professor, famously wrote: “To be for or against censorship as such is to assume a freedom no one has. Censorship is. One can only discriminate among its more and less repressive effects” [PMLA, 1994]. Holquist’s much quoted statement is an example of how scholars’ analysis of censorship has changed over the past two decades. Censorship usually has been seen in a straight-forward light, and the subject often seemed banal. Creators create, authorities repress – or so it seemed. As scholarship has evolved recently, however, the subject of censorship has become much more contested, nuanced, and interesting. A marker of changing points of view about censorship is reflected in Nora Gilbert’s suggestively titled Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship [2013].

This new scholarship raises a host of interesting historical questions. Is Holquist right about the ubiquity of censorship? Is he correct in assuming its effects are always “repressive,” or does Gilbert have some grounds for saying certain things are “better left unsaid”? If censorship is, as Holquist argues, all-pervasive, how do we sort out its repressive effects, if that is indeed what they are? More broadly, how do we discriminate among varieties of censorship, or are they all roughly similar? Finally, how do we make judgments about whether censorship may ever be justified? No reasonably hip twenty-first century American wants to be thought of as being in favor of censorship, and yet censorship arguably remains omnipresent, its very insidiousness making it more difficult to discern. It sometimes seems there’s a little of the censor in everyone.
In this course we’ll try to answer these questions, along with others, by looking at the evolution of scholarship about censorship and examining with specificity “censors at work” (to borrow Robert Darnton’s title). By looking at various time periods, different mediums of expression, and particular censorship regimes we’ll gain some perspective on a subject that is much less straight-forward than it often appears.

We have a special opportunity this semester. Robert Darnton, the eminent Harvard historian, and author of the important new book *Censors at Work*, will visit Oberlin on the weekend of Nov. 13. He’ll speak about censorship at the annual Friends of the Library dinner on Nov. 14. He’s graciously agreed to meet with our class.

Any colloquium is only as good as its discussants. It is expected that students will come to class having read and absorbed the assigned material and will be prepared to discuss it in a critical manner. There will be disagreement – that’s essential. Civil disagreement is a sign of engagement and respect for fellow participants. We will be learning together. As the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein said, “I never learned anything from someone who agreed with me.”

There are three writing assignments. The first two are essays of approximately six to eight pages in which you critically engage the material we’ve covered to that point. The final assignment is a special project that addresses a particular censorship episode, using primary sources. In addition to writing a paper of approximately ten pages on that subject, each student will give a class presentation about it. (More details on that later.) Each assignment counts one-fourth of the final grade. Participation in discussion and skill in the presentation will count for one-fourth of the final grade.

All work is governed by the Oberlin College Honor Code. Please familiarize yourself with it. Suspected violations will be referred to the Honor Committee.

Consistent with the Americans for Disabilities Act, I will make all reasonable accommodations. Please inform me of any special needs.
**Required texts**


9.1 INTRODUCTION: “A FREEDOM NO ONE HAS”

9.8 RECENT THEORETICAL WORK ON CENSORSHIP

Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (1991), intro, 3-31


9.15 RECENT THEORETICAL WORK ON CENSORSHIP, II


Darnton, introduction

9.22 CENSORSHIP IN OLD REGIME FRANCE

Darnton, part one

9.29. INDIA: LIBERALISM AND IMPERIALISM

Darnton, part two

10.6 CENSORSHIP, LIBERALISM, AND MODERNISM

Birmingham, pp.

10.13 FIRST ESSAY DUE at 12 noon – NO CLASS

10.20 FALL BREAK – NO CLASS
10.27 THE *ULYSSES* BREAKTHROUGH

Birmingham, pp.

11.3 CENSORSHIP AND COMMUNISM: THE GDR

Darnton, part three and conclusion

11.13 MEETING WITH ROBERT DARNTON (time TBA)

11.17 CENSORING AMERICAN MOVIES

Readings to be announced

11.24 CENSORING AND UNCENSORING AMERICAN MOVIES, II
SECOND ESSAY DUE AT CLASS TIME

12.1 Presentations on semester projects

12.8 Presentations on semester projects

11 August 2015