The Basis for Banning or Censorship of *Ship of Theseus*

S. by Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams

        Throughout history, books that describe even the slightest controversial topics have often been challenged and faced with censorship and bans. Some, such as Mark Hemingway, argue that censorship is necessary for the protection of children and citizens, (“In Defense of Book Banning.” The Federalist.) Oftentimes, books are banned to maintain order in a society by eliminating revolutionary ideas that challenge political and governmental norms. V.M. Straka, the fictitious author of a collection of politically controversial novels, including *Ship of Theseus*, invites censorship for subversive political beliefs. Straka was a literary creation by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, and is not a real author; However, his life, status and demeanor are shaped by the descriptions that Jen and Eric, two college students researching his work, and FXC, the translator of Straka’s books, provide about him. The details of these descriptions reveal more and more about Straka as the reader continues the novel. The mystery of Straka originates from his anonymity. It seems that the authorship of his novels was forced to remain anonymous due to his radical ideas that created many enemies and critics of his works. *Ship of Theseus* by V.M. Straka would have likely been challenged, censored, banned or even refused publication for reasons similar to real novels in history because it fits the pattern of anti-authoritarian themes also represented in real novels. Its highly controversial political messages promote rebellion against corrupt dictatorships and monopolizing corporations.

        The term censorship itself can refer to several different types of restrictions on literary material. The American Library Association defines it: “a challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials. A banning is the removal of those materials.” (American Library Association). Censorship according to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, is “to examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable.” Thus, a censored book may still be available to read, but certain sections that are considered offensive may be deleted. A challenged book may have been attempted to be removed. The banning of a book is the successful elimination of the book. The reasons for a book to be censored, challenged or banned, include, but are not limited to, sexual references, unpopular political views, rejection of certain religious beliefs, or excessive violence (“Common Reasons for Banning Books,” by Butler University). Censorship may exist in an institution as small as a school library, or as large as an entire nation. For example, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was banned nationally across Germany but starting this year, it “will be reprinted in Germany for the first time since WWII.” (Helen Regan, *Time*). Likewise, *Animal Farm* was banned in the USSR during the 1940’s for containing anti-Communist ideas that challenged Stalin’s dictatorship in the Soviet Union. (Stephen Croome, prweb). These two instances were both universal bans. On the other hand, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury was challenged at a Texas high school in 2006 for containing material offensive to Christianity, an instance of local censorship. (Kelley, Jonathan. "Censorship of Fahrenheit 451.").

        Upon examination of FXC’s footnotes and Jen and Eric’s notes in the margins of *Ship of Theseus,* there is no direct statement declaring that the novel had been banned, challenged or censored. However, had Straka been a real author, the content in *Ship of Theseus* might have been restricted in some form because of its antagonistic disposition which correlates to Straka’s alleged affiliations with rebel groups and the crimes that Straka allegedly committed. In the real world, it is likely that if *Ship of Theseus* was published in a country that took offense to its content, it might have been refused publication. *Ship of Theseus*, along with other Straka novels, may also have been challenged because it contains similar political themes present in many other real novels in which such challenges emerged in dictatorships, such as *Animal Farm,* which was published during Stalin’s dictatorship in the Soviet Union.

        Similar to the novels previously mentioned, within the fictitious world that Straka and his literary works exist, it appears that *Ship of Theseus* was or would be severely criticized by opposing authors and political figures, which would likely result in a ban or challenge. One source of controversy in *Ship of Theseus* is the actions and thoughts of the main character, S. S was hired against his own will to assassinate the “Agents” who protected Vevoda, the leader of an enormous worldwide corporation. His corporation ruins the lives of indigenous people who live on the island from which he mines obsidian, while his factories provide military weapons to ruthless war lords. In the novel, Straka portrays S as the rebellious hero who attempts to overthrow the leader of this evil industrial empire.

        Thorough investigation of the information in *Ship of Theseus* given by FXC and Straka himself reveals Straka’s personal and political stances including his resentment of the effect of corruption on people through increasing power and his resentment of the oppression of indigenous groups by these corrupted individuals. As though Straka’s description of the miserable conditions that the natives of the obsidian island live in is not enough to show Straka’s sympathies towards oppressed indigenous groups, FXC adds, “Straka was never more outraged than when he was contemplating the … condescension imperial outsiders have shown throughout history boasting of cultural and spiritual superiority while bringing their ‘inferiors’ little but death, disease, and despoilment. Many current leaders of revolutionary movements have cited this novel as inspiration” (Straka, 353). The destruction of beautiful lands in return for raw materials and wealth in *Ship of Theseus* represents one of the greatest evils that Straka knows. At the same time, Straka’s passionate stand against the destruction of indigenous cultures has apparently motivated the actions of revolutionaries. Thus, *Ship of Theseus* would have likely been banned by government of countries at risk of undergoing revolution against a corrupt leadership. If Straka had attempted to publish *Ship of Theseus* in a country controlled by dictatorship, it may have been refused publication.

Straka’s resentment of the effect of power on the individual is demonstrated through the description of Vevoda’s clients and the characterization of Edvar VI, the son of Vevoda. The room in which Vevoda’s clients gather is described as full of “Untrammeled debauchery, spiced and thickened with sotto voce discussions, suspicious glances, and disappearances into tents to conduct business of the commercial, political and carnal varieties.” (Straka, 429). The words ‘carnal’ to describe the clients’ businesses and ‘debauchery’ to describe the clients themselves indicates Straka’s disgust at these people. Near the end of the novel, when Edvar VI gives a speech to a crowd of mercenaries, his unfiltered speech reveals the depth of his greed for power and money, upon which FXC explains that “there is no greater sin, in the worlds of Straka’s stories, than acquiescence to the limits that power (whether political, economic, or social) imposes upon the individual.” (Straka, 440). Edvar VI indulges in this very sin, letting the temptation of power taint him. Edvar VI and his group of clients represent the type of people Straka despises in his real world: the heads of large corporations, tyrants, corrupt government officials and greedy mercenaries. His harsh criticism of these individuals might have caused *Ship of Theseus* to be banned or challenged in the countries that support these figures.

        Eric and Jen also provide clues that indicate Straka’s political stance. Eric makes a list of all the crimes that Straka has been accused of, which explains Straka’s need for secrecy and anonymity. The crimes that Eric lists are all actions taken against people and organizations whom Straka deemed as corrupt, evil, or who possessed enough power to take advantage of common people. For example, Straka is accused of murdering the “management at Bouchard’s factory in Calais.” (Straka, 10). Throughout the novel, Straka indirectly criticizes the Bouchard Empire time and time again by using “Vevoda” as its pseudonym.  Straka’s alleged bombings of “Corporate Buildings/Factories in U.S., France, Greece, etc,” provide further evidence of his temperament, indicating that he opposes powerful corporations, and in particular, Bouchard’s company. He is additionally accused of participating in labor riots, demonstrating that he is man who fights for fair labor conditions. All of these point to the likely possibility that the Bouchard Empire abused its power, took advantage of citizens and treated workers unfairly. Although many of the crimes that Eric lists may not be true, it is evident that Straka’s motives for these crimes were based on his political beliefs. Based on the type of political issues he fought against, one can conclude that he believed in stopping the practices of corrupt companies and their leaders since the companies’ actions often came at the cost of working-class citizens.

        In a world where Straka would be real, the banning of his books would be due to his promotion of insubordination in a mirror situation happening in his own world. Straka’s political viewpoints in *Ship of Theseus* can be examined through the characters and events that stand for real people and events that have occurred in Straka’s world. The clearest reference in *Ship of Theseus* is the representation of Hermes Bouchard as Vevoda. During the scene of the demonstration at the wharf of B-, Eric notes, “CF. Calais Strike/Massacre of 1912. VMS obviously equating. Not even trying to be subtle.” (Straka, 79). The demonstration on the wharf resembles The Calais Strike and Massacre of 1912 so closely that it is an unmistakable reflection of a supposed real life tragic event. Based on Eric’s notes, and its name, one can deduce that The Calais Strike and Massacre was a labor strike that ended in a massacre of the demonstrators. The demonstration in *Ship of Theseus* is bombed by one of Vevoda’s agents, killing and injuring many. When the rise of Vevoda’s industry is explained, Eric remarks that the story describes “pretty much how the Bouchard Empire grew.” (Straka, 90). Many more parallels between Bouchard and Vevoda and between events in the book and real events in Straka’s life are made throughout the book, reminding the reader of the evils that Bouchard committed.

        Straka’s criticism of powerful individuals in his world suggest that *Ship of Theseus* has been censored, the parallel of themes in *Ship of Theseus* and in a real book that have been banned affirm its potential for censorship.  In years past, especially during times of political change or oppression, books were often challenged for introducing radical sentiments that contravened with a political agenda or an established governmental policy. Such works that were challenged during political tension include *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, a novel famous for being challenged in several countries during World War II.

        *Animal Farm* by George Orwell has been thought to be one of the most controversial books in history due to its allegory of the decline of the Socialist system in the Soviet Union during Stalin’s authoritarian reign, according to Alex Hippisely-Cox of PRWeb. (Hippisley Cox, Alex. “Banned Book: Animal Farm - Do You Know Why This Classic Book Was Banned?”.) *Animal Farm* is the story of a group of mistreated farm animals, miserable because they are forced to work day in, day out, for their farmer, Mr. Jones. The novel starts with the death of old Major, a pig who envisioned a world where the animals could live their lives as they wish and only work to provide for themselves, goal that can only be accomplished by overthrowing Mr. Jones. As Old Major dies, the animals attack and terrify Mr. Jones, forcing him to flee. The pigs, the smartest animals on the farm, are left in charge of instruction of the others. Initially, the animals work in harmony, yet as the pigs realize their potential for power, they begin to take advantage, allotting more work to the animals and less work for themselves. As the pigs begin to dominate the farm, the animals become suspicious. Soon enough, a fight for leadership starts among the pigs and Napoleon forces Snowball out with dogs that he trained. Napoleon, fierce, ruthless and hungry for power, works the animals like slaves and uses his dogs for protection and to instill fear. (Orwell, *Animal Farm*).

        As with the fight against oppression that prevails in *Animal Farm*, the protagonist, S in *Ship of Theseus* fights against the evils of an overpowering and corrupt company led by Vevoda. Like Napoleon in *Animal Farm*, Vevoda represents an oppressive authoritarian rule. In similar fashion to the gradual rise of tyranny in *Animal Farm*, Vevoda initially begins to take more control over the civilians of B-. His corrupt actions are discrete at first, just like the pigs in *Animal Farm*. However, as his company gains more power and his greed for wealth supersedes any regard for civilian lives, he becomes relentless in his search for materials to build military supplies. As Pfeifer describes, “to men like Vevoda, kindness is a resource to be exploited, like coal or zinc.” (Straka, 81).  In order for his company to continue to grow and monopolize the military market, he invades an island rich with obsidian mountains, terrorizing and killing innocent civilians in fear that they may revolt. His heartless murdering invokes fear in the world and the protection his Agents provide make him unstoppable. In the same way, Napoleon invokes fear in the animals of the farm by killing disobedient animals with his dogs. Both novels condemn the evils that dictatorship produces, namely, the disparity between the working class citizens and the wealthy and powerful upper class.

        *Animal Farm* was banned for political reasons in many countries, including China, Kenya, Cuba, Russia and United Arab Emirates. In Kenya, *Animal Farm* was banned from 1991 until now because the book “criticized corrupt leaders,” while Russia banned the novel from 1943 to the 1980’s for its “critique against Communist Russia.” (“A History of Banned Books.” Shortlist.) Considering the similar political themes that *Ship of Theseus* has in accordance to *Animal Farm*, one can presume that *Ship of Theseus* may have been challenged or banned for similar reasons that *Animal Farm* was. Upon examination of the history of Animal Farm’s censorship, it becomes evident that censorship of this particular book occurred most during World War II based on the statistics given by the American Library Association. ("About Banned & Challenged Books." American Library Association). The novel was “banned in all allied countries during WWII because leaders read the story as a critique of the USSR, which was currently on the team to fight against Germany and the Axis powers.” (Chesire Kitten. *The Anipal Times*). In addition, *Animal Farm* is most often censored, challenged and banned in countries with political policies and ideologies that conflict with the ones presented in the novel. If *Ship of Theseus* was written during a similar political environment, it would also likely have been challenged.

        In Straka’s contentious albeit fictional world, he may have lived during a time of oppression or political reform, which would explain the controversy that surrounds him and his works. *Ship of Theseus* clearly emphasizes the idea of vanquishing tyranny through assassination. If Vevoda did indeed represent Bouchard in Straka’s real world, Bouchard would have likely attempted to ban the book or refuse its publication in his country, along with countries who support Bouchard in order to prevent civilians from being inspired to start a revolution.

        In the same way that *Animal Farm* was banned in all allied countries during WWII, one can presume that Bouchard’s allies would have also taken steps to *ban Ship of Theseus.* Likewise, the numerous enemies that Straka had formed during his career probably consisted of government and corporate leaders that were offended by Straka’s depiction of them.

In conclusion, *Ship of Theseus* fits a pattern of anti-authoritarianism literature that might have joined works such as *Animal Farm* if it were real. Based on the parallel political themes that *Animal Farm* and *Ship of Theseus* share, and the collective evidence in FXC, Jen, Eric and Straka’s words that demonstrate Straka’s political stance, *Ship of Theseus* would have most likely been challenged or banned in numerous places in the world had Straka been a real author.

Works Cited

"About Banned & Challenged Books." *About Banned & Challenged Books*. American Library Association, n.d. Web. 14 Oct. 2015. < <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/about> >

"A History of Banned Books." *ShortList Magazine*. Shortlist, n.d. Web. 01 Nov. 2015. <<http://www.shortlist.com/entertainment/books/a-history-of-banned-books> >.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967. Print.

"Common Reasons for Banning Books," Fort Lewis College, John F. Reed Library*.* Banned Books, Censorship & Free Speech. November 15, 2013. Web. October 14, 2014. <<<http://libguides.butler.edu/c.php?g=34189&p=217686> >.

Hemingway, Mark. "In Defense of Book Banning." *The Federalist*. N.p., 11 Mar. 2014. Web. 29 Oct. 2015. <<http://thefederalist.com/2014/03/11/in-defense-of-book-banning/>>.

Hippisley-Cox, Alex. "Banned Book: Animal Farm - Do You Know Why This Classic Book Was Banne." *PRWeb*. N.p., 19 Sept. 2008. Web. 01 Nov. 2015.

< <http://www.prweb.com/releases/BordersBooksUK/BannedBooks/prweb1347534.htm> >

Kelley, Jonathan. "Censorship of Fahrenheit 451." *FAIFE Book Club*. ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2015. <<http://faifebookclub.ala.org/?page_id=30> >.

Kowalczyk, Piotr. "9 Infographics about Banned and Challenged Books." *Ebook Friendly*. N.p., 21 Sept. 2015. Web. 14 Oct. 2015.

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print.

Straka, V. M., J. J. Abrams, and Doug Dorst. *Ship of Theseus*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2013. Print.

*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2004. Print.