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Rushdie Brings PEN Festival to Close

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)

The [PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature](#) ended Sunday night on a traditional note, with a lecture by the Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie, the target of an ayatollah's fatwa in 1989, about the freedom to write. In recent years the festival has experimented with offerings that blur the distinction between literature and other forms of art or entertainment, and this year was no exception: the 37 scheduled events included one on Wednesday at the Metropolitan Museum in which three writers recited texts over [a live musical performance by the Kronos Quartet](#) and another on Saturday night that had five authors giving a thematic reading called "Messiah in Brooklyn" as they stood amid an installation at a gallery called [the Invisible Dog Art Center](#).

But since its founding 90 years ago, PEN America has aimed to be simultaneously a literary and a human rights group, with a focus on defending the rights of both writers and readers around the world, and Mr. Rushdie's talk managed to address both sets of issues. "Originality is dangerous," he said, a statement as much political as esthetic. And there was this, to conclude his remarks after pointed observations critical of limitations on thought and expression not just in China but also in the United States: "Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it's a revolution."

Not that there weren't also moments of levity. In the question and answer period that followed the main address, the novelist Gary Shteyngart, born in what was then Leningrad and raised in New York, began his task as interlocutor with a jocular query. "An Indian and a Russian walk into a bar. Which one is inherently more free?"

Mr. Rushdie wasn't sure how to answer that one, but in response to other questions, he lamented both a certain human tendency to value material well-being over intellectual freedom, China perhaps being the prime example, and the headlong flight of post-Communist societies to intellectual pap. "It's not inevitable that right will triumph," he said

after Mr. Shteyngart told of his recent trip to Beijing, in which one Chinese contact acknowledged limitations on his freedom of expression but pointed out that he owned a Buick Skylark and Mr Shteyngart didn't.

Earlier in the festival, a pair of panels had attempted to confront some of the same tensions. The premise of a Thursday evening discussion called "The New Censorship" was that "as corporations move to the forefront in the quest for control over information and its flow, the battle over censorship has changed, and its newest champions are found not in the statehouse, but in the boardroom." But the contradictions embodied in that thesis and the situation it describes, perhaps inherent, soon became apparent.

The Puerto Rican writer Giannina Braschi, the panel's first speaker, offered a critique of 21st century capitalism in which she condemned "corporate censorship" and control. "Nobody owns a work of art, not even the artist," she maintained, adding that "I write my thing and it belongs to the people." But it was also noted that her latest novel, "United States of Banana," was published by [Amazon Crossing](#), which offers translations of foreign-language books but comes from the online book-selling giant that traditional publishers and some writers see as wanting to dictate and control the financial terms of the book trade and destroy competition. She didn't see it that way, saying that without Amazon, her book may not have been published at all.

In fact, some of the most compelling personal testimonies during the festival came from three writers who have spent much of their careers battling long-established forms of state-sanctioned censorship: Gabriela Adamesteanu in Romania; Mahmoud Dowlatabadi in Iran; and Ludmila Ulitskaya in both the Soviet Union and today's Russia. On Thursday Mr. Dowlatabadi, for example, told a story of being jailed by the Shah's secret police in 1974; on inquiring of his captors what offense he had committed, he was told none, but that because many opponents of the regime had been arrested with his novels in their possession, that automatically made him a dangerous element.

A Saturday afternoon panel called "Life in the Panopticon: Thoughts on Freedom in an Era of Pervasive Surveillance" also seemed to promise a different look at contemporary problems of self-expression and the free circulation of ideas. The original panopticon was conceived of by the 18th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham as a device that would allow a hidden observer to monitor all the members of any closed system without himself being detected — an apt comparison for our age of data mining for both national security and commercial purposes.

The panel's moderator was Julian Sanchez, a research fellow at the Washington-based Cato Institute, a libertarian advocacy organization whose donors include some of the country's biggest corporations. His opening remarks and subsequent questions focused on the emergence of "the surveillance state," largely glossing over the role that corporations play in the creation and maintenance of schemes of surveillance, and so it fell to other participants, like Catherine Crump of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Scottish science fiction novelist Ken MacLeod and Ms. Adamesteanu, to bring corporations into the discussion.

But Mr. Sanchez also noted that discussion of the politics of surveillance often resorts to "a language borrowed from fiction," notably the adjectives Orwellian and Kafkaesque. Because "we are in the grip of the Orwell metaphor" of Big Brother watching us — and as Mr. MacLeod added, us watching Big Brother on reality television—we tend to think of surveillance as something palpable and centralized, rather than the amorphous system it has become. Because "technology has torn down the walls of the Panopticon," the time is right for a new, perhaps even more ominous metaphor, he suggested.