

Censorship in arts essay sample



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The term censorship is used to refer to the proscription of an idea or image that is deemed by the government or any authority to be unduly controversial, obscene or indecent. From antiquity, governments have both censored and supported works of art. The United States government hesitantly created the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965 to provide material support for deserving artists. Initially the government did not want to support individuals or groups of individuals because it feared that the works of art they created might end up being construed as national art and it only allowed NEA to be formed after being pressured by activists. The need to cease underwriting vulgar art became apparent in 1988 after an artist named Andres Serrano who was funded by the government through NEA made a picture named “ piss Christ” which depicted a crucifix in a container full of his urine. A year later, an artist called Robert Mapplethorpe who was funded by the same body compounded the situation when he made images portraying sadomasochism, nude children, flowers and homosexuality.

This prompted the senate to call for government action against vulgar art. However, the due process guaranteed by the fifth amendment of the constitution of the United States has suppressed most efforts put forward by NEA towards outlawing obscenity and instilling decency in art. This is probably because the intentions of the artists work may easily be misinterpreted by people calling for actions. If the government or other institutions such as universities among others allowed art work to be censored based on peoples feelings towards assumed moral or religious authority, discrimination against people based on their gender, race or

sexual orientation, fear of taboos or controversial issues etc then no work of art would ever be created. Apparently the United States is a cosmopolitan country and different individuals will have different views upon an artists work and this makes it difficult to censor art work based on people's attitudes. It is therefore incumbent upon the artist to draw boundaries between freedom of expression and social responsibility when developing work of art meant for the public. Freedom of Expression

Although freedom of expression is guaranteed by the fifth amendment of the constitution of the United States, artists must understand that freedom of expression has both explicit and implied limits. The first amendment of the US constitution fosters a mutually supportive relationship between artists and the society. The society gains a lot from free and diverse artistic expressions which address contemporary and past issues by challenging people to rethink their assumptions. The article titled “ Censorship versus Freedom of Expression in the Arts” by Chiang and Posner expresses concerns that the government may illegitimately censor art to avoid corruption of morals and avoid subversion of politics.

Suppressing verbal and non verbal expression i. e. speech/writing and works of art respectively undermines free communication which is fundamental to the preservation of a creative culture and a free society. Indeed, art should be censored because it can and does cause offense. This is exemplified best by the work of art by Francis Goya titled “ naked Maja”. Apparently, the artist wanted to show disdain to those who associated female nude with evil.

However, the artist was summoned by the Spanish inquisition in 1815 to reveal who had authorized him to make the painting which was obviously

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offensive. Goya self censored his work to protect himself from losing the job of a court painter by clothing the female who now became the “ clothed Maja”. Recently in 1991, a group of female teachers in Penn State managed to persuade the authorities to bring down a repainting of “ naked Maja” which made it difficult for them to teach because it was considered to be a form of sexual harassment (Chiang & Posner, 2006, 1).

That notwithstanding, the works of art including dance, theater, literature, painting, music, cartoon, caricature and sculpture continue to be the main instruments of expressing the level of a peoples freedom. They improve people’s lives by providing solutions to various problems facing humanity. Art does challenge people to consider new ideas, envision new possibilities and embrace feelings that can foster social growth. Suppressing ideas as it happens in most societies under the guise of censorship may hinder freedom and encourage conformity which is unhealthy for social growth and evolution.

The source argues that to preserve freedom of expression in arts, an individual should be left alone to decide for himself or herself on what kind of art work to accept or reject and that such a person should not be allowed to suppress the works of art that he or she does not approve. Consider the case of the Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard who caricatured the image of Mohammed. The cartoonist was almost assassinated by an Islamic fundamentalist in his home in Denmark on January 2010. In rebuttal to the argument offered by the article that all censorship is contrary to democratic principles, artist must realize that images send strong messages and that

recklessness can lead to irreversible harm being done to the society or the artist in particular as not all states in the world are democratic.

Although freedom of expression should be protected at all costs, it would be ludicrous to portray absurd images that would obviously spark strife between different factions. Most artists misinterpret freedom of expression by giving whim to every imagination not considering that they live in a world inhabited by real people with real differences and not imaginary creatures like the tooth fairies. Passing on a message should not always involve taking any all symbols out of context considering that the initial intention may be misinterpreted thereby sending the wrong message which could cause undue fear and anxiety that is not beneficial for the progress of society. Apparently, artists should demonstrate maturity and avoid portraying childish fantasies that can be a cause of serious social concern. Social Responsibility

The article social responsibility and art written by Camillo Mac Bica PhD explains that artists ought to become socially responsible in order to avoid the abuse, exploitation and oppression of individuals or groups of persons. There is no doubt that the picture of the "naked Maja" above does encourage the exploitation of women in our contemporary society which is obsessed with nudity. A society that condones snuff films such as "The Family: The story of Charles Manson's dune baggy attack" battalion which depicts the actual murder of the victims and child pornography movies is at the verge of losing freedoms that is so much after safeguarding in the name of freedom of self expression (Bica, 2005, 1). Such movies made by actual murderers desensitize people thereby encouraging pedophiles and

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murderers to give room to their base instincts. This can eventually undermine morals which are the fabric of society.

The difficulty in defining what is socially abusive, oppressive or exploitative does not mean that artists have the right to give way to any of their whims as the example above which is only representative of the tip of an iceberg indicates clearly how reckless actions can harm a society that claims to be civilized. Hence, artists should strive to engage the civil society in debates concerning standards of evaluation and build a consensus. Thus, artists should uphold the right for people to be treated with respect and should therefore refrain from artistic endeavors that are likely to cause oppression by treating people as means instead of ends. Conclusion

Drawing a line between what is socially acceptable and what is not is difficult and certain social values may hinder the development of work of art. Some forms of art do not portray their meaning directly and members of the public are certain to interpret them as pornography where nudity is involved. For instance, collages made by David Wojnarowicz depicting erotic and deathly images were barred from public view although the intention of the artist was to reflect his experiences of unusual hardship when he was a boy. Such experiences according to the artist were never portrayed anywhere else in art from members of the mainstream heterosexual, white, Christian, male dominated society. The government should not censure such works without proper selection criteria. The artist was not involved in the murders or the sexual activities but only wanted the society to shift focus and solve the problems in question. In censoring artistic work, the government and other authorities must be able to distinguish between doing from portraying.

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Works Cited

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