

Should art be devoid
of politics?



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There has long been the contention that art, in all its various manifestations, should ideally be apolitical in its content. And this debate on the separation of art from politics has been as old as art itself. And those instances in which an overlapping of the two occur, controversy if not outright censorship ensues. A classic illustration of this phenomenon in recent history is the Iranian theocracy's issue of 'fatwa' (essentially a death sentence) against Litterateur Salman Rushdie, whose novel *The Satanic Verses* was accused of disparaging the Islamic faith. Notwithstanding the veracity of the accusations directed against Rushdie, the controversial novel should not be dismissed as being blasphemous without due critical consideration of its content, for often times, it is the dissenting and disturbing voices that also speak truth to power. In the case of the *Satanic Verses* affair it is theocratic power that was disturbed. But in today's geo-political realities, most of the dissent (whether expressed artistically or not) is directed against political and corporate power. The rest of this essay will explore this theme by bringing to light outstanding examples of such cases as well as suggesting potential avenues in which art can be employed as a means of political protest in the contemporary world.

There is overwhelming consensus among the general populations of the world that the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its continued occupation of the country under dire civil turmoil, is both unwarranted and immoral. This is testified by the massive public demonstrations (in the United States and the rest of the world) that was witnessed as soon as war plans were announced in early 2003. The violation felt by the general public is such that the protests continues to this day, which is most visible in the

blogosphere and alternative media commentary. In this backdrop, some creative artists in the United States and elsewhere have tried to employ various art forms to register their protest. The recently inaugurated play by Karen Malpede, titled *Prophecy* takes the audience into the heart of the Iraq war. It explores the complex web of links between various sections of civil society when a region is militarily intervened. Starring such stalwart actors as Kathleen Chalfant, Andre de Shields and George Bartenieff, the play brings out the far-reaching consequence of any war and underscores the chaos and disruption that attends it. If not directly being didactic about wars of all sorts, the play subtly implies the futility of war.

Indeed, the anti-war message from the theatre community has been so resonant in the last decade that a thematic anthology was published recently. For example, the book titled “ *Acts of War: Iraq and Afghanistan in Seven Plays*”, published by Northwestern University Press, is one such compendium. Alongside Malpede, it features talented playwrights as David Hare, Victoria Brittain, Lydia Stryk, Bill Cain, Noami Wallace and Simon Stephens. More importantly, all these plays have had moderate to outstanding public reception, making the point that there is such a thing as the successful integration of politics into art. It must be borne in mind though that the artists associated with such plays had to endure several threats – in forms that are both overt and covert. Being part of a production team that asks uncomfortable questions of political power can potentially damage one’s career. But the success of these plays suggest that the playwrights’ views are synchronous with that of the general public. Hence, it is fair to say that these artists have done the morally and democratically right thing; and

importantly shown that art forms can be emphatic mediums of dispersing public sentiment.

The same is true with most other art forms as well. Indeed, the Internet has helped the medium of radio reinvent itself, as many independent journalists have collaborated to establish listener-supported radio stations that are free of advertisements and the attendant pressure that the latter brings to the editorial process. Through this medium, a new genre of music has evolved that pertains with subject matters such as poverty, abuse of power, the state of democracy, social injustices, etc. These songs may not have the same popular appeal as those produced by leading music labels, but they exhibit virtues such as honesty and compassion. Again the artists that venture in this direction are attracting the ire of the establishment. The banning of Dixie Chicks' songs from all Clear Channel radio stations due to their open disapproval of it is a case in point.

But of all the forms of art that have taken up war (especially those instigated by the United States in recent times) as their subject matter, the literary art is the most vocal outlet of dissent and free expression. In so far as the non-fiction genre too is considered an art form, a wide range of critical commentary has been inspired by ongoing military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq. The incisive analysis of intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens is a classic illustration. Although the viewpoints presented by them are the exact opposites, they nevertheless contribute to the public's understanding of the situation and to that extent serve a democratic purpose.

So, in conclusion, it is fair to say that the infusion of art into current socio-political issues (the most important of which is American military intervention) has been a beneficial one. It has benefited both the general public and patrons of art equally by making the discourse interesting, perceptive and multi-dimensional. And aforementioned examples of artistic portrayal of ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq go on to prove the effectiveness and relevance of all art forms in helping our society progress. Hence art can be a powerful instrument for progressive social change.

References:

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