

JANUARY 2010

**ARTISTIC
EXPRESSION**

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**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“THERE SHOULD
BE NO LIMITS
ON ARTISTIC
EXPRESSION”**

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INTRODUCTION

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2009 marked the twentieth anniversary of the fatwa against author Salman Rushdie after the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But twenty years on, free speech campaigners argue that society is more confused than ever around censorship in the arts. Mark Lawson argues that the Noughties were a schizophrenic decade [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. On the one hand violent and sexually explicit films such as *Antichrist* and *9 Songs* pushed the barriers of taste further than ever before; on the other, he argues, moral panics such as those around paedophilia led to censorship of works by respected artists such as Nan Goldin [Ref: [The Times](#)] and Richard Prince. The removal of Prince's sexually suggestive image of a ten year old Brooke Shields from a Tate Modern exhibition [Ref: [Guardian](#)] ignited the controversy around the limits of artistic expression, just as did debates around the novel *Jewel of Medina* in 2008 [Ref: [BBC News](#)] or the Danish cartoons in 2005. These discussions are not just confined to traditionally 'high arts' or politically incendiary material though. Comedians [Ref: [Scotsman](#)] and dramatists have complained about a growing culture of offence and censorship which has been seemingly reinforced [Ref: [The Times](#)] by new BBC guidelines regulating offensive material [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But some critics argue that many artists now revel in being offensive for the sake of it, which not only reinforces unpleasant attitudes towards vulnerable groups, but leads to bad art [Ref: [The Times](#)]. This argument suggests that artists shouldn't be censored, but should exercise better judgement: but some point out that there is a very fine line between better judgement and self-censorship. Does art offer society something unique and is therefore worth defending no matter how shocking? Where does criticism end and censorship begin? Is art a special category separate from usual restrictions, or is it more important to defend the freedom of everyone's speech?



'Edgy' or offensive?

Many are familiar with works being censored (and defended) because they challenge or insult religious groups and cultural sensitivities [Ref: [Index on Censorship](#)]. But artistic expression is controversial in secularist circles too. Comedians have recently come under fire for making jokes about the elderly, the disabled and other minority groups [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Many commentators have expressed discomfort that what passes as 'edgy' and challenging today would've been rightly criticised for its bigotry in the past. John O'Farrell worries that jokes about domestic violence normalise and even encourage the act in reality [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. But others counter that while there is a precious right to free speech, there is no such thing as a right not to be offended. Moreover, Tim Black claims that far from being Mary Whitehouse, today's censorious lobby is a self-appointed 'offencerati' more concerned with taking offence on behalf of others and who often possess many narrow-minded prejudices of their own [Ref: [spiked](#)].

Better judgement or self-censorship?

Even from those who feel art has become too shocking, there is a reluctance to see artistic value defined by the police or state bodies [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Instead, they argue that artists should exercise better moral judgement in who and why they offend. But, says Kenan Malik, the Rushdie affair showed that self-censorship is even more pernicious than its imposed form, as it means the public are not even granted the chance to discuss or debate challenging ideas and opinions, and is a victory for those who hate free speech [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Censored novelist Sherry Jones says she is a victim of a disturbing new trend of pre-emptive censorship, where work is banned or not published before it's even had a chance to cause offence [Ref: [New Humanist](#)]. Stanley Fish, however, says moral criticism is not the same as censorship [Ref:

[New York Times](#)] and that making aesthetic judgement over what to include or exclude is integral to creating (and understanding) great art [Ref: [Routledge](#)]. Other critics point out that controversies over art and child pornography usually, and often deservedly, generate more public censure than state censorship [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The philosopher Roger Scruton argues that the real problem is that art's moral role as a universal civilising influence is no longer taken seriously, and the traditional Western goal of disinterested aesthetic judgement is being replaced by personalised and emotive responses: which inevitably leads to moral outrage when feelings are hurt and sensibilities offended [Ref: [Spectator](#)].

For art's sake?

Much of the current debate expresses an ambiguity around art's function in contemporary society [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. Many defend artistic freedom because artworks contextualise and allow us to reflect on ideas and actions which would be shocking or illegal in real life [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Prince did not take the photograph of Shields, he merely reproduced it, and Spiritual America can be understood as a commentary on the sexualisation of children in a fame and image-obsessed culture. Philosopher Henri Bergson referred to comedy's humanising virtue in allowing a 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart' which allows us to suspend normal moral judgements [Ref: [Authorama](#)]. But if art can only be defended in moral terms, is there a place for work which reflects or depicts immoral acts? When a work features indecent images of a child taken without their consent, or could result in others being physically harmed, should there be some artistic responsibility [Ref: [BBC News](#)]? Does art have a specific moral purpose, or can it be defended for its own aesthetic sake: where our response is simply whether it is good or bad?



ESSENTIAL READING

Q. When is a joke not a joke? A. When it's offence

Ian Burrell *Independent* 7 November 2009

When does art become child porn?

Laura Cumming *Observer* 1 November 2009

Creativity in the decade of censorship

Mark Lawson *Guardian* 17 October 2009

When does cultural sensitivity become a form of censorship?

Julia Farrington *Index on Censorship* 1 June 2009

FOR

Our own worst enemy

Sherry Jones *New Humanist* December 2009

If comedians can't be offensive, who can?

Tim Black *spiked* 28 October 2009

Naked police power in the gallery

Jonathan Heawood *Guardian Comment is free* 1 October 2009

Self-censor and be damned!

Kenan Malik *The Times* 29 September 2008

AGAINST

When the laughing has to stop

John O'Farrell *Daily Telegraph* 8 November 2009

Should Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* be banned?

Bryan Appleyard *The Sunday Times* 12 July 2009

Al Murray's gay Nazi is hateful

Patrick Strudwick *Guardian Comment is free* 27 February 2009

Crying censorship

Stanley Fish *New York Times* 24 August 2008

IN DEPTH

End of the irony age

Tim Adams *New Statesman* 5 November 2009

Censors and sensibility

Richard Woods *The Sunday Times* 4 October 2009

Farewell to judgement

Roger Scruton *The American Spectator* June 2009

Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic

Henri Bergson *Authorama.com*

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BACKGROUNDEERS

The Gillrays that were too rude for the Victorians

Independent 16 December 2009

Pop Life: was I viewer or voyeur?

Judith Flanders *Guardian* 7 October 2009

Brooke Shields photograph at Tate: art belongs in an art gallery

Florence Waters *Daily Telegraph* 1 October 2009

Naked Brooke Shields photo is an image for which you must write your own commentary

Adrian Searles *Guardian* 3 September 2009

BANNED: The most controversial films

Laura Davis *Independent* 6 August 2009

Why the outrage over Lars von Trier's Antichrist is misplaced

Peter Bradshaw *Guardian* 21 July 2009

What DOES it take for a film to get banned these days?

Christopher Hart *Daily Mail* 20 July 2009

Why can't art be allowed to shock?

Sam Leith *Guardian* 19 July 2009

Antichrist: a work of genius or the sickest film in the history of cinema?

Xan Brooks *Guardian* 16 July 2009

In search of The Jewel of Medina controversy

Daniel Kalder *Guardian* 5 March 2009

When Islam meets Bridget Jones

BBC News 20 October 2008

The right to offend

Inayat Bunglawala *Guardian Comment is free* 29 September 2008

The Jewel of Medina: book review

Marwa Elnaggar *IslamOnline.net* 18 August 2008

Art, Beauty and Judgment

Roger Scruton *The American Spectator* 28 July 2007

Illegal Art exhibition

Information on Nan Goldin

Information on Richard Prince

Right to offend?

Floris van den Berg *New Humanist*

ORGANISATIONS

Campaign Against Censorship

Christian Voice

English PEN

Index on Censorship

International PEN

Manifesto Club: petition against Home Office restrictions on non-EU artists and academics

Media Watch UK

Stop Murder Music

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IN THE NEWS

Australia refuses visas to North Korean artists

The Times 9 December 2009

Frankie Boyle hits out at BBC after Adlington joke led to rebuke

Scotsman 27 October 2009

Brooke Shields photograph: Tate Modern caves in

Guardian 14 October 2009

Fake gun art banned

London Paper 7 September 2009

Suicide Madonnas are a shock too far for Israeli art enthusiasts

Independent 4 September 2009

Artist attacks GoMA for 'censorship' of gay life exhibition

Herald Scotland 22 August 2009

Film board blocks release of sadistic horror movie

Independent 19 August 2009

Prophet Muhammed novel is scrapped

BBC News 9 August 2009

Pope condemns Bible 'vandalism' exhibition

Daily Telegraph 28 July 2009

Three jailed for publisher arson

BBC News 7 July 2009

Blogger who wrote about killing Girls Aloud cleared

Independent 30 June 2009

Andrew Sachs row triggers new BBC guidelines

Guardian 24 June 2009

Lars von Trier film Antichrist shocks Cannes

Reuters 17 May 2009

Christian group halts book launch

BBC News 12 November 2008

Radical Islamic clerics warn of further attacks after publisher is firebombed

Daily Telegraph 28 September 2008

Nude self-portrait banned from art exhibition because artist's nipples 'were too erect'

Daily Mail 17 August 2008

Police seize photograph from art gallery

The Times 26 September 2007

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ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

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- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone



**“DEBATING MATTERS
TEACHES A WAY
OF THINKING.
INTELLECTUAL
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ENGAGING WITH
IDEAS”**

TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER