

**MARCH 2016**

**ARTISTIC  
EXPRESSION**

**ANWAR  
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& WILL TURNER**



**MOTION:**

**“ARTISTIC  
EXPRESSION  
SHOULD NEVER BE  
CENSORED”**

**ORGANISED BY**

**Institute of Ideas**



**ANGLO-ISRAEL ASSOCIATION**

**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH**

הספרייה הלאומית  
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## KEY TERMS

[Censorship](#)

[Offensive](#)

[Self censorship](#)

[Trigger warning](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

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Last year the northern Israeli city of Nahariya banned several pop songs from being played at 'Nahariya Village', a series of concerts and other events. The: "List of Banned 'Anti-Educational Songs' for Playing" included 'Blurred Lines', a source of controversy outside of Israel too, due to "the culture of rape in the song", and 'Anaconda', because "the song objectifies the buttocks of women and girls" [Ref: [Ha'aretz](#)]. Nahariya municipality defended the ban, stating that "we want to be responsible for the content featured in an educational setting, as we feel responsibility for what happens there"[Ref: [Ha'aretz](#)], mirroring similar reasons used in several UK universities' ban of 'Blurred Lines' from their student unions [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. But some have been critical of the move to ban songs, with one commentator suggesting that "if you look to pop music for moral guidance, you're an idiot" [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Censoring of art has often been justified on the basis of reflecting social and religious concerns, perhaps most famously in the case of 'The Satanic Verses', a novel by British author Salman Rushdie, which was deemed blasphemous to Islam, banned by various countries around the world, and resulted in a fatwa being issued against the author [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. More recently artists such as China's Ai Wei Wei continue to have their work censored and banned by authorities for either being subversive or for upsetting cultural sensitivities, and his exhibition in Tel Aviv – originally planned for March 2015 - was cancelled, with Ai suggesting that censorship was at play [Ref: [Ha'aretz](#)]. However critics of censorship in any form, argue that allowing art that is "abhorrent, that shocks, disgusts and appals and causes offence" [Ref: [Index on Censorship](#)] is a central part of a thriving democracy, whose "power lies in recognizing that the other has the right to express opinions that are unpleasant and hurtful" [Ref: [Index on Censorship](#)]. Should artists have the right to shock and appal, or are there instances where their artistic license should be curtailed? Can some art be so offensive that banning or censoring is the right thing to do? Or should artistic expression always be allowed free reign, without any restriction?

### Art for art's sake?

As a retort to critics who wanted to see his work censored, nineteenth century writer Oscar Wilde stated that: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. A book is either well written, or badly written, that is all” [Ref: [Genius.com](#)]. For Wilde, art should be judged according to its artistic merit, and nothing more. However, the Charlie Hebdo attack last year in Paris reignited the debate about artistic expression, censorship and offence. In contrast to the UK campaign group Index on Censorship, which ran a selection of Charlie Hebdo cartoons online in order “to show that fear should not be allowed to stifle free expression” [Ref: [Index on Censorship](#)], the Associated Press declined to follow suit, stating that the: “AP tries hard not to be a conveyor belt for images and actions aimed at mocking or provoking people on the basis of religion, race or sexual orientation.” [Ref: [Associated Press](#)] The conflict between these opposing perspectives has recently found expression in domestic Israeli politics. Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev has made clear that “if it is necessary to censor, I will censor,” and that she “will not lend a hand to damaging the image of the state and Israel Defense Forces soldiers” [Ref: [Jerusalem Post](#)]. Critics of her approach point to a host of incidents, from freezing funding to the Arab al-Midan theatre and threatening to do the same to the Jerusalem Film Festival in protest over two films, to the Ministry of Culture withdrawing “its support from a video dance by the choreographer Arkadi Zaides, ‘Archive’, because he used visual materials and the logo of the human rights organization B’Tselem” [Ref: [Ha’aretz](#)]. These decisions are justified on the grounds that “there is a big difference between the freedom of expression – which has to be wide, irritating and provoking

– and the state’s obligation to fund incitement, against Arabs or against the state” [Ref: [Ynet](#)]. In response, Salman Rushie himself suggests that, “original art is never created in the safe middle ground, but always at the edge. Originality is dangerous. It challenges, questions, overturns assumptions, unsettles moral codes, disrespects sacred cows or other such entities. It can be shocking, or ugly, or...controversial” [Ref: [New Yorker](#)]. But how far should art go to be original? The decision, for example, by a Swedish gallery to exhibit a painting made from the stolen ashes of holocaust victims, asks us to assess what we find acceptable in art, as well as questioning the extent to which artists have the right to be offensive [Ref: [New Statesman](#)].

### Decency Vs taste: Blurred Lines?

In Israel, the video of a radical settler wedding where the Dawabsheh murders were celebrated [Ref: [Russia Today](#)] has prompted some to question whether traditional Jewish wedding songs are “anthems of hate and incitement”, and should be abandoned as a result [Ref: [Ha’aretz](#)]. Meanwhile, there are calls from campaigners for controversial books containing sex, violence, bad language and offensive terms to have ‘trigger warnings’ on the covers. For advocates of such measures, it is not about censorship but accepting that art does not have the right to offend everyone, as one commentator points out: “Trigger warnings are fundamentally about empathy” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. But trigger warnings could potentially stifle the creative output of writers if they are afraid that their work will come with a warning on the cover opponents argue, with writer Jay Caspian Kang observing that: “Any amount of guidance will lead to dull conformity” in literature [Ref: [New Yorker](#)]. Such

# THE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED

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concerns are heightened by the news that racial epithets are to be censored from the new editions of Mark Twain's 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' because, "abusive racial insults that bear distinct connotations of permanent inferiority...repulse modern-day readers" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But do we lose something from novels when we seek to censor them retrospectively in such a way? After all, argues one critic, art and literature are meant to push boundaries and make us think: "One thing a novel never is, is simple. That's why we read them, because they are challenging and thoughtful" [Ref: [spiked](#)].

## Art, politics and self censorship

For some, the result of restricting artistic expression is that artists will begin to self-censor. Yossi Klein argues that Miri Regev's appointment and proclamations in defence of censorship will kick-start this phenomenon, stating that "the discussion about the right to free artistic expression won't be conducted between politicians and artists; each artist will engage in it privately. How far do I need to go to satisfy them, he'll wonder. What else do I need to censor?" [Ref: [Ha'aretz](#)] This, critics of censorship fear, is problematic because: "Art can only mirror the culture which produced it. It shows us all of the positive aspects of humanity, but it is also the duty of art to examine the uncomfortable, dark stuff. Sometimes art will be troubling, but then so too will the society it is depicting" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Yet others suggest that self-censorship can be seen simply as the artist being responsible. Reflecting on the Danish Cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, Sukhvinder Stubbs notes that far from being merely art: "Cartoons...can be a powerful means of catalysing and disseminating ideas, be they pertinently

satirical or hideously warped. Cartoons were, for example, used extensively by the Nazis in their anti-Semitic propaganda campaigns" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. If we view art from this perspective, it is not a thing in and of itself, to be judged by its own standards as Oscar Wilde suggests; but instead, has the power to influence; the power to be political. Art with a political message, such as Picasso's Guernica painted in 1937 [Ref: [Pablo Picasso.org](#)], continue to evoke strong feelings [Ref: [Slate](#)], and today, political concerns about the power of art continue to manifest themselves globally. Whilst artist Ai Wei Wei continues to be seen as subversive by the government in Beijing [Ref: [BBC News](#)], challenges to the cultural orthodoxy are also considered problematic in Northern Ireland [Ref: [The Sunday Times](#)]. And in December last year, Israel's Education Ministry controversially removed Dorit Rabinyan's 'Borderlife' from high school curricula in order to maintain, "the identity and the heritage of students in every sector", and to uphold the belief that "intimate relations between Jews and non-Jews threatens the separate identity" [Ref: [Ha'aretz](#)]. So how should we view censorship in the arts? Should artists, musicians, playwrights and novelists have the space to express themselves, even if their work is challenging and offensive to some? Should artists moderate their work in the name of, "discretion, good sense, good taste and goodwill" [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? Or should we resist any attempt to dilute the content of an artist's work?

## ESSENTIAL READING

[Taking the offensive: defending artistic expression](#)

*Index on Censorship* 13 May 2013

[How one book ignited a culture war](#)

Andrew Anthony *Guardian* 11 January 2009

## FOR

[Israel's censorship frenzy is hurting its democratic image](#)

*Ha'aretz* 4 June 2015

[The hysteria over Blurred Lines shows how zealously intolerant we've become](#)

Brendan O'Neill *Telegraph* 13 September 2013

[Censorship and the arts](#)

Julia Farrington *Independent* 31 May 2013

[On censorship](#)

Salman Rushdie *New Yorker* 12 May 2012

## AGAINST

[Is this the most offensive art ever made?](#)

Kamila Kocialkowska *New Statesman* 6 December 2012

[The yellowface of the Mikado](#)

Sharon Pian Chan *Seattle Times* 13 July 2014

[Why other universities should ban 'Blurred Lines'](#)

Daisy Lindlar *Huffington Post* 30 November 2013

[The whole canon needs a trigger warning](#)

Sarah Ditung *New Statesman* 21 May 2014

## IN DEPTH

[Why AP didn't run the Charlie Hebdo cartoons](#)

*Associated Press* 8 May 2015

[In defence of old racist art](#)

David Marcus *The Federalist* 21 July 2014

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## BACKGROUNDEERS

[Religious Jewish wedding songs are anthems of hatred and incitement](#)

Michael Melchior *Ha'aretz* 24 December 2015

[Reality check: Job description- Minister of culture, not chief censor](#)

Jeff Barak *Jerusalem Post* 14 June 2015

[What Israel's new Culture Minister bodes for artists](#)

Yossi Klein *Ha'aretz* 24 May 2015

[Don't let free speech die](#)

*Index on Censorship* 8 January 2015

[Yes to freedom of expression, no to freedom of incitement](#)

*Ynet News* 26 November 2014

[Trigger warnings: A gun to the head of literature](#)

Dr Tiffany Jenkins *spiked* 22 May 2014

[Trigger warnings and the novelists mind](#)

Jay Caspian Kang *New Yorker* 21 May 2014

[Trigger warnings: what we're really talking about](#)

Laurie Penny *New Statesman* 21 May 2014

[Blurred Lines: The most controversial song of the decade](#)

Dorian Lynskey *Guardian* 13 November 2013

[Censorship is stifling Australia's freedom of expression](#)

Steve Cox *Guardian* 14 June 2013

[Nothing, however vile deserves censorship](#)

Nick Cohen *Guardian* 16 September 2012

[Censoring Mark Twain's 'N' word is unacceptable](#)

David Messent *Guardian* 5 January 2011

[National Portrait Gallery bows to censors](#)

Blake Gopnik *Washington Post* 30 November 2010

[Its about discretion and good taste](#)

Sukhvinder Stubbs *Guardian* 3 February 2006

[Whats so controversial about Picasso's Guernica?](#)

David Cohen *Slate* 6 February 2003

[Oscar Wilde famous quotes](#)

*Lit Genius.com*

[Guernica](#)

*Pablo Picasso.Org*

[The Satanic Verses controversy](#)

*Wikipedia*

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## ORGANISATIONS

[Index on Censorship](#)

## IN THE NEWS

[Tel Aviv Museum nixes Ai Weiwei exhibit; Israeli artist says censorship at play](#)

*Ha'aretz* 4 February 2016

[Israel bans novel on Arab-Jewish romance from schools for 'Threatening Jewish identity'](#)

*Ha'aretz* 31 December 2015

[Radical Orthodox Jews stab photo of murdered Arab baby at wedding ceremony](#)

*Russia Today* 24 December 2015

[Israeli city bans Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda,' and 13 other songs from summer teen event](#)

*Ha'aretz* 24 July 2015

[Painting removed from exhibition because of female public hair](#)

*Independent* 8 July 2014

[Council bans gay art from exhibition](#)

*The Times* 8 June 2014

[Scared artists are self censoring says Sir Nicholas Serota](#)

*Independent* 30 May 2014

[Censor cast stricter eye over suggestive dance videos](#)

*The Times* 14 January 2014

[Nude artwork censored in Berlin due to religious sensitivities](#)

*Huffington Post* 15 November 2013

[UCL becomes another university to ban Blurred Lines](#)

*BBC News* 4 November 2013

[Ai Wei Wei under house arrest](#)

*BBC News* 6 November 2011

[New editions of Huckleberry Finn to have offensive words replaced](#)

*Guardian* 5 July 2011

[What the Muhammad cartoons portray](#)

*BBC News* 2 January 2010

[Japanese publisher of Rushdie book found slain](#)

*New York Times* 13 July 1991

[12 die in Bombay in anti Rushdie riots](#)

*New York Times* 25 February 1989

[Ayatollah sentences author to death](#)

*BBC News* 14 February 1989

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### AUDIO/VISUAL

[Radical Orthodox Jews stab photo of murdered Arab baby at wedding ceremony](#)

*Russia Today* 24 December 2015

## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.





**“A COMPLEX  
WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**