

Can Art be Offensive? To Whom? A View of Artistic Obligations

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Abstract

All over the world, there are artists of varied fields. These artists express their skills, thoughts, philosophies, and beliefs through their artistic works. Humans are not a homogenous group who share common and basic beliefs and philosophy of life. Consequently, any work of art is mostly not going to be liked by all. To address the need the question; can art be offensive and to whom? requires us to first examine the works of art and the persons who appreciate them as a means of examining how artworks could be considered offensive to people. This article uses textual and content analysis as a means of examining some of the legal and cultural implications of art products and how injurious they can be to societies and individuals. From examples drawn from the analysis, it is surmised that artists should know they do not operate in an abstract world but a world of culture, religion, and preferences. It is thus recommendable that artists take due cognizance of the communities in which they operate and act accordingly to avoid damaging criticism, threats of death, and lawsuits.

Keywords: Artistic freedom, Religious offences, Cultural implications, Art products, Artists.

Introduction

Artistic freedom remains one of the highly contested and discussed areas in the academic discourse communities. In the real world of artistic practice, public opinion, and censorship of artistic practice based on age,

religion, and sex remain critically some of the reasons informing the ideation, production, and exhibition of some artistic products across the world (Pollock, 2023; Mihai, 2022; Jonson, 2015). The power of art in shaping society, and guilefully criticizing individuals, political structures, and institutions is enough reason why people look askance to art forms including; mockumentaries, satires, and agitations for propaganda. Be as it may be, it is important to explain that where the artistic freedom of the artist begins, there lay the societal and individual sensibilities. It is within this context that this article examines the issue of whether art can be offensive and to whom.

The Religious Offences

One of the critical points of focus of most artists is how not to be religiously offensive even as they strive to express their artistic thoughts and ideals. All over the world, including Ghana, there have been instances where people have witnessed a near clash between artists and religious freedoms. In an examination of art and offence, Prof. Claudette May Datuin in a seminar asked, "What in art gives such remarkable power that it can offend? What makes people susceptible to being offended?" In a report by Imelda Cajipe Endaya (<http://www.artesdelasfilipinas.com/archives/111/trying-to-understand-why-art-can-offend-and-why-artists-should-continue-to-be-free>) on that same seminar titled, *Trying to Understand Why Art can Offend, and Why Artists Should Continue to be Free*, Endaya examines that one of the artworks that offend people is their religion. In an art exhibition in the Philippines, a country with a high percentage of Catholics, there was an image of a cross, a phallus, and a condom.

This was probably an appeal for more liberal approaches to the use of contraceptives which the Catholic Church is known to strongly oppose. Endaya shares, "Before the forum, I told Mideo Cruz that I was offended specifically by the oversized crimson phallus placed on the crucifix, and the Jesus image with eyes blackened with dripping ink. The stretched condom hanging on one side of a crucifix was just as odious". Artistic freedom wielded by artists if not checked could spark some level of animosity and resentment. Sometimes too, artists are just caught unawares. That is, they do not know that their artistic expression through whatever media could be very damning or offensive to others. It could also be interpreted in ways that the artist did not intend it to be. Elizabeth B. Coleman (2011) explains that:

In 2007, Bill Donohue, president of the United States of America Catholic League, objected to a plan to exhibit *My Sweet Lord*, a sculpture of a crucified Christ figure depicted naked and made from chocolate by the Canadian artist Cosimo Cavallaro, at a New York art gallery in the week before Easter, likening it to hate speech. He added that it was 'one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever' and that to 'choose Holy Week is astounding'. Interpreting blasphemy as a form of hate speech is common. (p. 67)

The forms of artistic expressions that affect various religions in the world and its adherents are minimal with African traditional Religion (ATR) but the same cannot be said of Christianity and Islam. Actually, the Islamic world was so much offended about the work of Ahmed Salman Rushdie when he hinted in his book, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) that the Holy Koran contained some satanic verses. In 1989, a respected leader of the Islamic world, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of the Islamic Republic of Iran, issued a 'Holy' Fatwa on Rushdie. Rushdie was expressing his artistic work or thoughts, but he was also religiously sacrilegious and probably insensitive to the millions of Muslims whose faith he besmeared with impunity (Sing, 2022; Aljahli, 2017; Barry, 2016). Rushdie's actions coupled with the pronouncement of the Fatwa, resulted in numerous bombings, murders and killings across the world. With his works burned and his life under threat, Rushdie went into hiding. In the year 1997-1998, a bounty on his head was around \$600, 000 for anyone who will kill him (Palmer, 2010; Tamney, 2002).

Even though Rushdie had tried desperately to redeem his image, the danger was already done and he indeed was irredeemable. Regrettably, he himself realised too late the danger and explains, "The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history (Rushdie, 1990, p. 17). Other artistic works are cartoons and films and how they are made to represent people. For instance, in Ghana as in many parts of the world, editorial cartoons are used to communicate on a broad area of issues. These are often targeted at politicians, religious leaders and many others (Abdel-Raheem, 2021; Ojo, 2015; Eko, 2007). Not too long ago, a Danes newspaper brought rage upon itself, the whole country and the world for its depiction of the Holy Prophet Muhammed in ways that clearly suggested he was a terrorist. At the wake of this, Art Spiegelman (2006), revealed, the consequence were

grave, more than 100 dead and 800 injured as millions of offended Muslims protest around the world; flags and buildings burned; cartoonists in hiding with million-dollar price tags on their heads; editors fired and arrested; legislation to put stricter limits on free speech or revive blasphemy laws proposed in the U.N., the E.U., and beyond; boycotts of Danish goods costing over € 50 million in lost revenues (pp. 44-45).

Furthermore, Omoera (2024, p. 28) claims that the relatively recent uproarious and violent reactions of audiences, especially in the Middle East, to the showing of an alleged anti-Islamic film are a pointer to the power of film as a work of art. It is interesting to note that it was only the trailer of the Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, also known as Sam Bacile produced film shown in California that led to the unprecedented violent attack against the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, in which some of the officials died. Because the audiences perceived the film as insensitive to their religion and derogatory to Prophet Mohammed, there were also protests and demonstrations in Cairo, Egypt, Tehran, Iran, and the Islamic world. What kind of moral obligation filmmakers and artists owe society has sparked an interesting debate among film scholars, critics, and audiences (Omoera, 2024)

The power of the art can be seen in both its good and its destructive nature and it is only important for the artist to regularly consider context, content, settings and religious sensibilities. The reason why artworks offend people is that some people never really weigh the consequences and some artists are not also up to the task. They are simply not well trained. As Adeleke (2003), rightly observes that most of the semi-professional film producers sell emotional films full of violence and bawdy-house literature to their audiences largely made up of teenagers. Many of the productions present offensive scenes such as murder, pornography, love and horror (p. 53). What then happens is that everybody in the name of artistic freedom has been producing something in the name of art. Even though this artist may have a few following, it does not mean that all other human beings will like the work or will not be offended.

Politics and the Works of Art

Historically, a lot of us would have heard of jesters and court singers that either mocked or praised the deeds of deserving kings or enemies of the state and society at large. These songs or other forms of proverbial expressions remain one of the most artistic or aesthetic forms of

expressions and only very few are able to use them for criticism without getting some forms of attacks from the persons who feel offended (Perkinson, 2017; Brewer, 2013; Diop, & Salemsen, 2012). According to Shusterman (1984), "artists and art lovers have always been among the most frequent and fervent opponents of censorship, and a dominant theme in their support of freedom of expression is, of course, its crucial importance for art. Art's quarrel with censorship seems as old as its ancient dispute with philosophy; and ever since Plato's proposal to ban mimetic art for its moral and epistemological evils, the champions of art have tried to protect art's freedom and right to exist. Originally, art's apologists tried to refute or extenuate the moral and epistemological censure of art by stressing its cathartic and didactic value. But as art's status grew stronger, the claim was pressed for art's complete autonomy and for total freedom of expression, which its creative nature allegedly requires" (p.171). In the same way that artistic forms of expressions were important tools of exaltation, so too were they used for ostracising society.

Most art works such as those in the audio-visual medium receive a greater number of public view or exposure because of their very nature and from the channels through which they are churned out. Depending on the political temperature of a given time and inferences made on the finished media product, national political leaders can take some offence if there is reason to believe and suspect that their image is being impugned through the works of art or any of the audio-visual media forms. Some works sometimes can be offensive to the national image of a country. For instance, on 28th May, 2011, national security operatives stormed the office of "Nyankonton Films, an Accra-based movie distribution company, and seized video compact discs (VCDs) of a new Ghanaian movie entitled: "Atta Mortuary Man", which was scheduled to be released on 30 May. The combined team of plain-clothes security officers and policemen took away about 13,000 VCDs and accompanying publicity materials. Two film officials, Augustine Abbey, president of Film Marketers and Producers, and George Walker, a film marketer, were invited to the national security offices. They were released after three hours, without charge" (<https://ifex.org/national-security-officials-raid-movie-distribution-company-seize-copies-of-film/>). Ex-President J.J. Rawlings had earlier on made a mockery of a certain Atta known as Atta Mortuary Man. Even though the producer, Eric Asante insisted the movie had nothing to do with politics, he was not entirely free.

It is very important for the artist to study the political climate before producing a work of art. Kumawood filmmakers have the penchant of making films on popular political and legal occurrences without actually weighing the consequences. In the case of Eric Asante, the movie was about a wealthy young man named "Atta" who lived a reckless lifestyle and ended up taking a job at the mortuary. Asante wondered why other movies with perceived political connotations were selling in the market. But to have made a film such as the one they produced and at that political atmosphere is actually a risk. In the case of Nyankonton films, they lost money and their image because of that single act. In Nigeria, artists such as Wole Soyinka and Saro Ken Wiwa had to go into exile at certain times to avoid arrest because they had expressed their political thoughts differently in their art works. Saro Wiwa was later hanged in some unrelated art issue (Okunoye, 2011; Schulze-Engler, 2006; Shusterman, 1984). Giving testimony of some of the unpalatable happenings confronting the world of arts, Okunoye (2011), "a form of exilic writing which responded to the hostile political climate in the country constitutes another major development in Nigerian poetry at this period. With the general clampdown on activists and the murder of leading figures in the prodemocracy struggle, the stage was set for persecuting all 'subversive elements'. The irony is that this turned out to be the period that pro-democracy groups of various inclinations flourished most. With the support of such organisations as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Heinrich Böll Foundation, the groups intensified the struggle against military dictatorship and the restoration of democracy (p. 77). These kinds of happenings are not limited to the eras of military regimes but democratic African states as well.

The Theoretical Leanings and Art

Art practitioners base their works on both theory and practice. Most of these theories dictate whether an art form would be in the form of songs, painting, audio-visual (songs, films or documentaries). Since some of these happenings mirror society, the society negotiates for shared meaning, identity and understanding through what is published in the media forms (Ting-Toomey, Dorjee, 2018; Muhammad, et al., 2015; Page, 2013). It is through these acts of shared meanings that members feel insulted in terms of gender and representations, in terms of religion and identity as well as race. There are also some occasions where some people and members of the larger society also challenged the works of art based

on their theoretical leanings. Artists are 'prosumers' (as they produce, they consume). There are instances where artists have their own works used in some settings and environments that defies the morality underpinning the reasons why they were created. In the words of Imelda C. Endaya (2015), citing Julie Lluch, a fellow Pilipino who is a feminist and art critic, 'I fought endlessly with my husband, threw my slippers at the TV set when sexist ads were shown, smashed precious artwork to pieces because it was sexist, and even challenged a Catholic bishop to debate on women's issues' (p. 22).

In a work of art, the way people from different culture, race or sexes are depicted could be very offensive. In the United States of America, for instance, the challenges of sponsorship of the art is closely seen to have an impact on art freedom and censorship. In the words of Petro (2019), "the 1990s 'culture wars' - congressional and public debates around federal funding for the arts - hammered home the message that 'sponsorship is not censorship' and that 'taxpayers' money should not pay for art that offends'. The implicit threat was that arts and cultural programming that offend legislations can lead to future funding cuts. Today this is a familiar issue at the local and state levels, which often forces institutions to self-censor (pp. 71-72). Given the numerous avenues one can likely encounter, the need for self-check, industry check and state check by ways of liberal censorship can help promote the art sector across the globe (Korte, 2020; Petro, 2019; Fox, 1990). Apart from promoting the art sector, there is need for individuals even in the theoretical leanings to ensure that they do not infringe on the rights of others.

Obligations of the Artist

All artists have it as a moral duty, to do their work as it pleases them. They should, however, be careful not to offend the sensibilities of people. They should also take cognisance of the art laws of their respective countries so as not to violate the national laws that govern artistic works or their exhibition. As shared above with examples from the Rushdie case and of the Dutch or Sam Bacile, it is clear that a whole lot of people suffered and lost their lives because the artist was simply careless or insensitive to the faith of the people. Also, the Christian world was also peeved because of the way the Pilipino artist showcased their work.

Conclusion

The artist can offend a lot of people unknowingly; sometimes it could just be some calculated risk. The artist owes it a moral duty, first to themselves to live and practise according to the moral dictates of the trade, and secondly not to harm the sensibilities of the larger group most of who may not share their views, hopes and philosophes of life. It would be very disheartening to have people lose their jobs as we have seen in Ghana in the most recent past for some utterances they made in the radio station. Salman Rushdie has never also been the same after that publication he made regarding the Islamic faith. He has simply become a fugitive.

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