on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

banning bad books: on aesthetic education and censorship

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Artworks are powerful and may convey hateful messages just as effectively as non-offensive messages. In recent years we have seen the importance of interpreting artworks in a context has grown, as has the acceptance of critiquing the social, political and ethical values artworks may embody or convey (whether or not intended by the artist). In this article, I explore two different responses to offensive art: disrupting it and banning it. In general terms, when it comes to public spaces such as art galleries and museums, I am in favour of disrupting but not banning offensive artworks. However, an increased sensitivity to discrimination makes teaching many classical artworks tricky. Should we continue to show and admire ethically problematic artworks, teaching them alongside a critically engaged contextualising attitude that may diminish their aesthetic aura? Or, should we engage in forms of censorship when it comes to particular artworks in schools? Art curators and activists have found ways other than censorship to counter problematic artworks' political and ethical connotations. I defend pedagogical equivalents of such practices that encourage students to engage critically and contextually with artworks. Yet I also defend the need to censor some artworks in schools. I offer criteria for consideration – which I label content, context and presentation – that can be used to determine when there is a case for aesthetic censorship within schools.

Keywords: aesthetic value, art, censorship, content, context, moral education, presentation

Introduction

Artworks are powerful and may convey messages of hope, optimism, hate, anger or despair. They are capable of communicating hateful messages just as effectively as non-offensive messages. In recent years we have seen the tide turn against the aestheticians who defend art as an autonomous realm where the only value that counts is aesthetic value. Their battle cry of 'art for art's own sake' was designed to protect artists' freedom of expression and ability to challenge the social, political and ethical status quo. It is vital that artists are able to push back on social norms and offer new perspectives. Yet, as the importance of interpreting artworks in a context has grown, so too has the acceptance of critiquing the social, political and ethical values artworks may embody or convey (whether or not these are intended by the artist). This increased sensitivity to discrimination makes teaching many classical artworks tricky. Should we continue to show and admire ethically problematic artworks, teaching them alongside a critically engaged contextualising attitude that may diminish their aesthetic aura? Or, should we engage in forms of censorship when it comes to particular artworks in schools and classrooms? In this article, I explore two different responses to offensive art: *disrupting* it and *banning* it.

In general terms, when it comes to public spaces such as art galleries and museums, I am in favour of *disrupting* but not banning offensive artworks.[1] Art curators and activists have found many ways other than censorship to puncture problematic artworks' political and ethical connotations. There is a widespread practice of traffic cones being placed on the heads of statues of historical figures with colonising and racist associations. There is the light projection of different images over the top of artworks, or the contextualising descriptions added to artworks and programmes in museums and galleries. I am interested in what might be the educational equivalent of such practices and how these can be used when teaching art to school aged students. I defend the educational equivalents of such ethically punctuating and disruptive practices that encourage students to engage critically and contextually with multiple and varied artworks. However, I also defend the need to censor *some* artworks in schools, particularly given we are dealing with the compulsory education of minors.

Censorship is "the removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic, or educational materials—of images, ideas, and information—on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of standards applied by the censor" (Reichman & American Library Association [ALA], 2001, p. 2). Those who argue against censorship do not deny that some artworks are hateful, some artists were morally dubious or unethical, or that some artworks are created in unethical ways. Yet the arguments against censorship include that it is self-defeating (most banned books go on to become best sellers); censors cannot meet the high epistemic standard required to prove the falsity of an opinion (since we are fallible and future evidence may come to light) (Joshi, 2024); censorship is self-contradictory and thus irrational (because we require the possibility of arguing against our opponents in order to justify and substantiate our claims) (Shah, 2021); or more harm is caused by not giving people access to a safe and critical space in which to engage with problematic works than leaving them to stumble upon such works on their own later. Yet in our contemporary 'cancel culture', the moralistic urge to censor seems stronger than ever and teachers in some jurisdictions are faced with increasing pressure to avoid controversial topics (Drerup et al., in press). I claim that censorship should be a last resort, but it is more likely to be needed in schools than in public spaces. Even in schools, it should be used sparingly, and only when disruptive pedagogical practices will not suffice. I will detail some criteria for consideration – which I categorise under three labels: *content, context* and *presentation* – that can be used to determine when there is a case for aesthetic censorship within schools.

Disrupting Offensive Art: Puncturing the Aesthetic Aura

Art curators, artists themselves and activists have found creative ways to encourage critical reflection on ethically dubious aspects to do with art, artists and the contexts of their creation and display. As Mary Devereaux claims,

> art has become a litmus test of beliefs about sexuality, public decency, obscenity, and the limits of tolerance. It has also become a battleground on which competing groups fight to define (or redefine) America's view of itself as a nation. (1993, p. 208)

Political vandalism in art galleries and museums is not new. Suffragette Mary Richardson slashed Diego Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* (of a reclining, beautiful naked woman) with a meat cleaver on March 4, 1914 in London's National Gallery in a feminist protest against the ubiquitous male gaze that objectifies women (Bregman, 2022). More recently, in 2022, there were 38 environmental

protests staged in museums that saw food, glue or paint hurled at iconic paintings around the world (Aloi, 2024). Such behaviour attracts attention, while aiming at meaningful change. Aside from protests, art curators and galleries themselves have sought to bring awareness to the ethically complex histories associated with many of their famous works and the artists who created them.

Enter a museum today and we see updated explanatory labels next to displayed artworks. Often, they no longer only say who made the work, when, using what materials and its title. Increasingly they include what some conservative commentators are calling "woke trigger warnings" (Mosbacher, 2022). Art labels and descriptions in curated exhibitions are one way to bridge the gap between our contemporary ethical consciousness, moral standards and awareness of past inequalities and historical artworks that may not reflect these values.

And some kind of amelioration is required. Daisy Dixon (2022) goes so far as to argue that some artworks are capable of performing oppressive illocutionary acts, which may constitute hate speech. Sometimes words can command (for instance, 'attack!' directed to a trained police dog) or discriminate, causing harm, and are not always simply passive or descriptive (Austin, 1962). Yet even in such cases, Dixon is reluctant to resort to censorship as the means by which we should respond. Instead, she defends artistic counter speech such as forms of silencing, perhaps transforming, challenging, calling out, and resistant curation as effective ways of combatting hateful art.

There are a few reasons for her position. She notes that banning artworks is difficult and doing so would also mean we are denied the beauty and genre-defying (and defining) works that make up the canon. Additionally, censoring problematic and hateful art could conceal certain atrocities and make us forget what has happened historically i.e., for instance if we removed all statues that remind us of slavery. Dixon (2022) notes that, "Such erasure could lead to amnesia in dominant groups where dark histories are forgotten or disregarded" (p. 414). She also wants to remind us that the power imbalance between dominant and marginalised groups does not disappear: the targets of hate speech (and those attempting to counter hateful art) usually hold less power and are marginalised. Activists are often arrested for political protests such as defacing valuable artworks: these acts are risky. We must remember, as argued by Berkowitz (2021), that both speech and its suppression are demonstrations of power.

Generally speaking, I am in agreement with Dixon and others who are reluctant to endorse censorship or the banning of artworks in public spaces, art galleries and museums. However, I also agree that punctuating, disruptive and challenging curatorial and presentation choices are important to counter any offensive messages conveyed by the artwork or in association with its creation or the artist. I am interested in the educational equivalents of such practices, that encourage students to read *against* the artwork; to engage with it critically, while still also valuing or appreciating it aesthetically.

In terms of educational aims, many forms of art activism have explicit educational intentions. For instance, artists who form activist collectives aimed at creating educational materials and subversive art such as the *Guerrilla Girls* (https://www.guerrillagirls.com/) from New York who decry the lack of support for women artists or the Dutch activist group, *The Bold and the System* (https://theboldandthesystem.hotglue.me/) who puncture the sexist and colonial narratives associated with artworks displayed in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. Using art and education as their media of choice, they playfully encourage a re-thinking of themes such as slavery and discrimination that

permeate works in the canon. Such sources may be used pedagogically in the classroom by teachers.

There are many additional pedagogical activities that teachers could use in the classroom to encourage students to contextualise and push back on the moral messages of artworks that no longer stand the test of time, yet are important works in the canon. One activity might be about 'first versus second impressions'. An artwork, such as the painting *Spirit of the Dead Watching* by Paul Gauguin, might be shown to the class. The students could be asked to communicate (in writing, speaking, or drawing) their initial thoughts and feelings about the work. The first impression is what the students see and like or dislike about a work upon first seeing it. After being told some contextualising information about the artist and the time and place in which he was painting (Ponnambalam, 2023), students could be asked how they now interpret the artwork with this 'second impression'. Then, a discussion could be facilitated about whether the biography of the artist should be considered when evaluating and interpreting artworks. The classical debate about "the death of the author" (Barthes, 1977) – that the only meaning that matters is that made by engaging with the artwork itself without reading into it any historical or biographical details – is one that could fruitfully generate a fascinating dialogue in class.

It is important to disrupt unethical or offensive art in various ways. This disrupting should be done through subversive and resistant curation, display, labelling and other means in public spaces including art galleries and museums. But it is also important in the classroom or when teaching about art, especially to children. In the school classroom, the methods of such disruption should be age appropriate, and there should be room for dialogue and discussion, for the students to ask and explore their own questions and ideas.[2] I don't think a moralistic condemnation is helpful, especially when it comes to classical artworks that are surrounded by controversies. Rather, the aim is to get students to think critically and engage with the aesthetic *and* the ethical, social and political features of the artwork under scrutiny.

Banning Offensive Art: Educational Censorship

While I defend disruption as the ideal way of handling offensive or unethical art, this approach will not always suffice. The pressure on teachers to carefully consider which artworks they teach their students is mounting (Reichman & ALA, 2001). In terms of censorship, there is a stronger case for censorship in schools than in public spaces. Schools are places where *all* children aged 5–18 must attend and participate in a national curriculum. Such mandatory attendance and participation mean they cannot willingly remove themselves from the classroom whenever they want to, or, specifically, refuse to engage with an artwork on the curriculum that contains challenging themes that might personally confront them. In this way, schools differ from other public spaces where one may enter an art gallery but then walk out again if they so choose. Also, due to the age of school students who are not yet adults, censorship must be enforced at least on the grounds of age appropriateness.

Because school-aged students are under the age of 18, objectively offensive and discriminatory materials that include racial slurs or explicit sexual content should not be made available within school grounds. This includes examples of actual pornography (in the form of porn sites, pornographic magazines and photographs of explicit sex acts) and works (fiction or non-fiction) that (a) explicitly endorse sexist, racist or other discriminatory attitudes that violate protected characteristics (which includes sex, sexual orientation, gender, disability and race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin) and (b) such discrimination is central to the meaning made of the text (i.e., cannot be easily removed or replaced without significant loss of meaning and

interpretation). However, some examples are more difficult to categorise and criteria are needed to support teachers when deciding whether they are appropriate to teach.

The criteria I propose to determine appropriate aesthetic educational classification cover three main features: *content, context*, and *presentation*. *Content* refers to the specific content featured in the artwork. This may include sex, drugs, risky behaviour, slurs and signs (i.e., swastikas), discrimination, nudity, violence (include sexual violence and self-harm), threat, horror, and language. *Context* refers to the context in which the sex, language or violence occurs. This includes features relevant to the artwork's interior logic such as setting or location, how relevant the feature is to the narrative or work itself and how shocking or jarring it is to the viewer. Finally, *presentation* refers to how the feature is presented. This will be specific to the art media and may include how realistic or stylistic the presentation is, how graphic or subtle it is, whether the transgressive or harmful behaviour is glorified, normalised, condoned, condemned, or presented neutrally and matter-of-fact. It will also include consideration of how much of the artwork is dominated by this feature, whether it is handled sensitively and whether it is gratuitous.

Within the category of content, there are three criteria of unacceptable offence: a ban must be considered when the artwork includes (i) explicitly pornographic images or descriptions; (ii) extremely violent images or descriptions; (iii) repeated use of racist, misogynist or homophobic slurs or images.

Within the category of context, there are three criteria of unacceptable offence: a ban must be considered when the unacceptable content included in the artwork (i) is unwarranted; (ii) is jarring or shocking; (iii) is of central relevance to the work.

Within the category of presentation, there are three criteria of unacceptable offence: a ban must be considered when the unacceptable content included in the artwork (i) is realistic; (ii) is endorsed or glorified; (iii) is disproportionate or dominating.

Such criteria will be considered on a case-by-case basis and the context in which the artwork is to be used matters. That is to say, while the criteria are normative, the application to specific examples may differ when being considered for use in, for instance, a primary school class in a conservative religious school as opposed to an upper high school art class in a liberal arts college. It will always be matter of careful judgment whether enough of the criteria have been met to justify a ban. These nine criteria under the three categories of content, context, and presentation, are to be evaluated in terms of age-appropriateness in relation to artworks to be used in school settings.

Content, Context and Presentation: Applying the Criteria to Art Examples

Example one: Huck Finn

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is a classic anti-slavery novel that is often taught to children to exemplify historical wrong-doings and empathy for African American peoples. It makes use of racist slurs that were commonplace during the time of its writing and one aspect of the use of such language is to highlight the immoral and problematic nature of such speech and its accompanying attitudes and discriminatory behaviour. While these are good lessons to learn, arguably in the classroom today it is unhelpful to make the points by using the slurs in question. Times have indeed changed and when it comes to this artwork, replacing the extremely offensive racist word that was used historically with a milder word does not diminish the aesthetic, moral or

educational qualities and value of the work. A new volume of the text has been published that uses the word 'slave' and 'Indian' instead of the original slurs (BBC, 2011). This is helpful because contemporary teachers and their students could not get past the use of a certain word and it was causing problems both in and beyond the classroom with teachers simply not wanting to use the text any longer.

The contextualising discussion provided by the teacher may (and indeed *should*) explain that the word(s) has been replaced and why this matters, why Mark Twain chose the original word, and how, by appealing to his autobiography as well as the text itself, he was anti-racist. By applying my three criteria: content, context and presentation to this example, I reach the conclusion that it is educationally appropriate to use the adapted version of the novel in today's school classroom. The *content* is the offensive word. The *context* is that the theme of the novel is about racism and discrimination, and relevant to the use of this word. Plus, the word was commonly used in a degrading and discriminatory way at the time in which the novel was set and written. The *presentation* takes into account the fact that the author was condemning racist slurs and discriminatory treatment of minorities. The main issue, then, is the content: the word itself. The use of the slur in question could cause harm to the members of the contemporary classroom, particularly to any of the students or teachers with the same protected characteristics and experiences of prejudice, bullying and discrimination similar to or reminiscent of that explored in the novel. The word may be replaced with something that conveys similar meaning without adversely affecting the overall aesthetic and educational qualities of the novel.

I understand why some Twain scholars want to defend the specific word Twain chose to use for all that it conveys as well as its historical significance. However, in this instance, where the word as these defenders themselves note is "surely the most inflammatory word in the English language" (Messent, 2011) is used, it simply interrupts the educative process and derails the conversation. In the contemporary classroom, where minoritised pupils still face discrimination and awarding gaps, they do not need to be confronted with the word itself when learning about their country's history of racism or indeed to have the conversation about racist attitudes.

I also endorse and encourage educators to make use of additional texts that authentically convey the voices of writers of colour and authors from minoritised backgrounds. The telling of *their* story should be encouraged in the classroom and more and diverse voices should be used to convey these ideas of, for instance, historical oppression, migrant lives and the tales of courage and hardship such people endured (and continue to endure). In an effort to decolonise the curriculum, sure, keep the seminal (but new edition version) of *Huckleberry Finn* on the curriculum, but also add some Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and relevant indigenous authors like Sally Morgan in an Australian context. This comparison can open up an important and interesting dialogue about author positionality and who may or should say what, when, and where.

Example two: Romeo & Juliet

However, to offer a second example, when the sex scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is deleted, this is when I think the narrative is unnecessarily manipulated in an effort to sanitise the text for a school-age audience. In fact, there are many examples of teachers' self-censoring in an effort to avoid recrimination and backlash from conservative parents or local religious community groups (Merry, in press; Noll, 1994; Petress, 2005). And, while understandable, this is educationally inappropriate. In part because the censorship occurring here does not seem to be for the benefit of

the students but, rather, to appease certain groups within the community. But by looking to our criteria for age-appropriate classification, we can weigh up the relevant factors.

The *content* is the scene in which a newly married Romeo and Juliet consummate their love and Juliet loses her virginity. The *context* is a love scene between a newly married husband and wife who are keeping their relationship a secret because their feuding families would condemn their union. The scene is pivotal to the narrative and expresses love and devotion. The *presentation* depends on the artwork in question as there are many different versions of this tale. In terms of the Shakespearean play, words on a page may be read out and the age of the protagonists was not as shocking to an audience of its own time as it is to readers today. Certainly, the scene in question *is* controversial because Juliet is so young. Yet, the context is relevant to the conclusion that this scene should not be censored in a play read by high school students. It must be noted that I am referring to a written text, in the genre of a play, rather than a film version featuring an underage actress playing the role of Juliet. If the film version was going to be shown to a class, it would have to feature actors who are not children and who meet the legal age of consent.[3] There is an excellent opportunity here for an important and interesting conversation to be had with the class about the age of consent, which is particularly pertinent given that in 2020 Relationships and Sex Education became compulsory in all English secondary schools (DfE, 2019).

Conclusion

I have defended the claim that it is more appropriate to censor some artworks in the school environment because of the age of the students (who are not yet adults), their vulnerability and exposure: they do not have the choice to avoid or leave a lesson given that schooling up to a certain age (18 in the UK) is mandatory. I proposed nine normative criteria under three categories of content, context, and presentation, to determine which artworks are appropriate to use in the classroom. Ideally, instead of asking each individual teacher to make these decisions and apply the criteria, it would be a good idea if an independent board was set up to do this work. This suggestion is inspired by the model of national screen ratings authorities such as the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC, 2024) in the UK, the independent and not-for-profit board established in 1912 who apply age classification ratings to films, websites and videos[4]. An independent advisory board should be set up that considers aesthetic educational resources, and perhaps in time, could have oversight of all educational resources and curriculum development in a transparent, democratic manner.[5] I would see the aim of the board as seeking to encourage critical dialogue about sensitive topics handled with care in an age-appropriate manner rather than pre-emptively restricting students' access to art.

This approach is necessary due to the fact that more information, images, videos, etcetera is available instantaneously than ever before. Children, from a young age, are being (over-)exposed to violent and sexually explicit imagery and ideas due to the prevalence and pervasiveness of the internet. At the click of a button or smart device, they are able to stumble upon and access everything, including things they are not ready to or do not want to see.[6] Due to the portable nature of such smart devices (particularly smart phones and tablet computers), the distinction between 'public' and 'private' spaces has well and truly blurred. While schools and teachers must do their utmost to protect students from offensive and age-inappropriate content, they also have a vital role to play in preparing students with the requisite critical discernment so that they can handle all that they are bombarded with as soon as they leave the safe protected space of the classroom.

Thus, we need to find ways to teach children and young people how they can and when they should switch off, avoid, reject, or dismiss ideas and images. We cannot assume this will occur naturally or that we can protect them from this exposure through the means of governance, policy, policing, or legislation. Regulation is key, but we also need to think about what we bring into the safe, educational space for critical discussion and educative purposes and how we can deal with sensitive topics in constructive ways pedagogically. Using artworks is a good start, but there still needs to be some restrictions within schools in relation to age-appropriate content, context, and presentation given the impact artworks may have. Having made age-appropriate selections, artworks can generate important and thoughtful conversations about a wide range of topics. Such dialogues should be facilitated professionally and expertly by teachers who have been well supported in learning appropriate pedagogies that are suited to the exploration of such themes in the classroom.

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Recommended Citation

D'Olimpio, L. (2026). Banning bad books: On aesthetic education and censorship. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *9*(23). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2026.23.5

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1. I will add the caveat that this rule is not exceptionless. Appropriate context matters with respect to the display of certain works and I can imagine some individual artworks that may be created whereby I would argue for banning or censoring them if they did indeed count as 'art'.

2. I have published elsewhere on how we might use the Community of Inquiry pedagogy to effectively facilitate philosophical dialogue on sensitive topics in classrooms (D'Olimpio, 2018, 2023).
3. Baz Luhrmann's film version, *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) received a 12 rating from the BBFC. Interestingly, the film was rated as 'M' suitable for mature audiences and not recommended for viewers under the age of 15 in Australia due to 'low level violence, adult themes and low level coarse language' and was given a PG-13 rating in the USA. Claire Danes, who played Juliet was 17 at the time of filming; Leonardo DiCaprio, who played Romeo, was 21 years old.
4. The BBFC were previously called the British Board of Film Censors until 1984. Interestingly, it was only in 2000 when the BBFC wrote down some guidelines and made their classificatory process more transparent (Lamberti, 2012). See Petley (2013) and Brett (2017) for a detailed history of the BBFC's role and its relationship to the UK government.
5. Note that John White (2011, p. 176) argues for a regularly convened National Curriculum Commission to be set up as an independent body to oversee curriculum development and robustly justify the connections between the mandatory curriculum and educational aim(s) that properly aim at students' well-being.
6. The average age a young person in the UK first sees pornography is age 13 and it is accessed online (Gerken, 2025) which has led the UK to recently introduce sweeping age restriction measures in an effort to prevent under 18s from accessing sexually explicit material. See Srinivasan (2021) for a discussion about teaching university students to engage critically with pornography.