

Fiche

Actually, when there is a work of art, there is inevitably a debate because the public cannot remain indifferent and will give their opinion, their reactions. This is sometimes a source of conflict or at least of intense arguments to know whether or not this can be seen as Art or seen as the work of a phony, a forger who calls himself an artist. This debate is at the core of humanity. From cave paintings to contemporary art, from the Scriptures to what we have called the "nouveau roman", from the first daguerreotypes to contemporary video installations, art has always been questioned and we have as many definitions as we have readers or viewers which makes it valuable, showing the universality of Art. Hence with these examples, we can wonder if Art is really what divides people or if it is the personality and the character of the artist that condemns their Art without any possibility to defend themselves.

Controversies

Artists often find themselves at the core of controversies and polemics. Every time one of their works of art challenges or questions the codes and the aesthetic of their time or every time it tackles the notion of decency, an artist becomes controversial. We can even imagine that artists sometimes actually hope for controversy, trying purposely to shock their audience as if it was a guarantee of a certain legitimacy. At least, it is a way to give some publicity and to make their subject known and discussed and thus a way to draw people's attention to something that would not have been noticed under other circumstances. Artists aim at arousing emotions in people's minds and hearts, rejecting any form of indifference. The notion of art in itself is often called into question and it is not unusual to see some spectators or readers being puzzled, intrigued or even nonplussed and baffled having in mind this sentence: "is this really art or is this person making fun of us?"

The positioning of artists

Some want to create controversy or polemics like Banksy who himself orchestrated the destruction of his masterpiece, *The Girl with a Balloon*, during an auction. Others may refuse to abide by non-aesthetic criteria to conceive their work of art the way Oscar Wilde did in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*. He wrote what he had kept his values of Dandyism without paying attention to the proprieties of his time. Eventually, others may try to avoid debates by self-censorship or by being unaware of the consequences and the impact of their artwork: this is what E.M Forster did when he refused to publish his novel *Maurice* during his lifetime because it was about a love story between homosexuals and he judged that it was not decent to do so.

Censorship

As we can see, controversy and censorship seem to be the two sides of the same coin. Many novels were censored and forbidden in many countries because they did not respect the model the society had established. This was the case of *Brave New World* that was forbidden in Ireland because of the content of the novel dealing with eugenics and a dystopian reality that was at odds with the Catholic values of Ireland.

Many works of art were considered to be scandalous and outrageous by critics or by some temperance societies who judge art on a different scale, in the light of their own limits and notions of decency. It is all about being politically correct and giving a good image. This can be found in the United States labeled as "banned books weeks" or with trigger warnings posted at the entrance of some exhibitions. This is quite interesting because it enables us, whatever our age, our origins, or gender, to think about the notion of decency, of respect, of virtues, of values and of political correctness.

Debates that made art move forward

Whatever the case, such ruptures with a certain classical code produced great artistic movements and revolutionized the way we now consider art. They made art move forward and further, but at the time when it happened, it was seen as a lack of respect and they were immediately condemned for having endangered society. We can take the example of pre-Raphaelites who used the codes of classicism to subvert them and to be at odds with the norms, the standards of the Royal Academy. Millais, Rossetti, Waterhouse and their peers used their Greek models to give something new to the British academics and aesthetics and it was first seen as a mockery, as an attempt to mock the institutions but they appeared to be very innovative and state-of-the-art.

Being vanguard, pioneering, a trailblazer and ahead of our time is not directly perceived and we need time to understand the tremendous changes, the huge breakthroughs these artists undertook by turning traditional rules into something different and placing them at the cutting-edge.

The historical and political background

Misunderstanding and polemics appeared when *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee was published during the period of segregation in the USA. Some people did not understand why a white attorney was defending a colored man accused of having killed a white girl.

This defense of equality, peace and goodwill did not fit in the racial hatred that prevailed at that time.

Sometimes, the controversy exploded within a community, which was the case with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It tore the Afro-American society apart. Some saw in this novel an anti-slavery and abolitionist story. This novel helped colored people during the Civil War and paved the way towards the end of the war and slavery. However, others who discovered the novel years after in the late twentieth century/early twenty-first were outraged, being of the opinion that this book, written by a white woman, undermined the black character making him look like an obedient and passive man (Tom). was all about cultural appropriation because it seemed unacceptable that white people speak on behalf of another community, which is another form of racism for them.

The historical and political background is essential in understanding why some works of art can be rejected. We have seen it in the USA but it was also the case in South Africa when authors like Nadine Gordimer or Andre Brink referred to Apartheid in their novels. However, the population was too much involved and too scared to react positively; and for these reasons, the books were forbidden and censored because Apartheid was not to be questioned – that is to say, it was an organized policy – as it could lead the black community to revolt and to demand their rights.

One of the latest novels having made the headlines because of its explicit content was *American Psycho* written by Bret Easton Ellis. It tells the story of a trader, Patrick Bateman, who turns out to be a serial killer and each crime is described in detail. The author's aim was to denounce the shallowness and the vacuity of an entire generation who lived by cocaine, making easy money at a time of great prosperity in the 80s. However, this novel sickened many people and critics who were scandalized and disgusted by so much violence and by the way Ellis described each scene with minute details as if the act of murder was something trivial.