

Paul Nicholas Matczuk

ENG 1003 Academic Research

Doc McGinnis

February 12 2019

Literary Review

### Meta-Intolerance: Censorship and Self-Censorship

This is a look into the vast smoky hall of censorship; all of the things we don't say or do, all of the edits and self-corrections to avoid the 'profane'. This is a brief exploration of political sensibility and freedom of expression, beginning with an examination of one's personal limits. The reader must first consider where their own lines are drawn, study your own tolerance. "As Noam Chomsky said, "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all." Can we be open and tolerant of oppositional beliefs?"<sup>1</sup> These articles declare that we are not tolerant, easily offended and over-sensitive. What we find appropriate, in good taste or beautiful<sup>2</sup> is defined by a much more narrow margin than we, in the Liberal West, like to believe.

To narrow the topic regarding "freedom of speech and the thornier issue of self-censorship"<sup>3</sup> these articles focus on the arts. Accordingly, the arts carry a tremendous responsibility, "[the] power to surface critical issues, to ignite conversation, even controversy"<sup>4</sup>. Art "has the capacity to transform and arouse intense emotion; it can be loved but also hated [...] it can challenge social attitudes"<sup>5</sup>. More dangerously, "images, words and gestures [...] bring chaos and disease to the population in the middle of which they made their appearance"<sup>6</sup>. This power to challenge and illicit change in a tenuous, frenetic world is being stripped of the power to offend.

---

<sup>1</sup> Philips, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits", *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1 2016 p. 219

<sup>2</sup> Philips, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits" p. 217

<sup>3</sup> Philips, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits" p. 221

<sup>4</sup> Philips, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits" p. 217

<sup>5</sup> Mintcheva, Svetlana, "Self-Policing and Self-Censorship", *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1 2016 p.207

<sup>6</sup> Groys, Boris, "Hurting the Feelings of Others" *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1 2016 p. 214

Beyond the individual and into the bigger, greyer area of society, art is scrutinized in a moral monopoly. The morality and judgement of a provocative work can make it dangerous (or morally offensive). This morality is imposed by the institutions (galleries, publishers) that reflect the relationship between art and society, bound by extreme secular and political influence. This manifests in censorship. For the artists themselves, self-censorship. To offend often results in work hidden from sight. Thus, creative freedom is at stake; the artist must set self-imposed limits on expression. The result is a redefinition, often unconscious correction to the creative result. One must ask, “How do cultural institutions confront the risks of displaying work which could provoke passionate opposition, threaten an institution’s livelihood or even its very existence?”<sup>7</sup> The answer, according to Mintcheva, is how much fear is involved: fear of persecution by authorities, fear of economic reprisal, fear of terror. Fear silences, blinds and binds expression, controlling it. The fearless often pay a great sacrifice.

This truth of this sacrifice is demonstrated with Pussy Riot. They are an all-girl, girl-power Russian punk rock band. The fearless artists involved were persecuted and prosecuted for a guerilla performance on hallowed ground (circa 2012). Despite social media and huge public sympathy world-wide, the state decreed the performance ‘profane’ therefore illegal<sup>8</sup>. Pussy Riot challenges political and secular climates without fear or shame. This brazen challenge to orthodoxy cost three band members two years in prison. Pussy Riot has not been silenced as a result, and frequently come under attack (actual physical attack) from the public who are ‘offended’ by their expression (or lack of self-censorship). The fact that they are from Russia, known for the common practice of censorship is moot, this is a half-truth. Controversy in the arts is not a Slavic monopoly, the practice extends far beyond Russian borders. It is paradoxically heightened in the West, where free speech is a so-called fundamental human right.

It is important, however, to remember that “no image or text has magical power [...] they are not supposed to be able to change the world with their mere presence”<sup>9</sup>. The art itself is simply an object, the reaction to that object is where lies the volatility. The power of art is now carefully balanced against the viewer’s hyper-sensitivity.

---

<sup>7</sup> Mintcheva, Svetlana, “Self-Policing and Self-Censorship”, p.207

<sup>8</sup> Groys, Boris, “Hurting the Feelings of Others” p. 212

<sup>9</sup> Groys, Boris, “Hurting the Feelings of Others” p. 214

If then, expression can be dangerous, self-censorship is now crucial to the artist due to “meta-intolerance – that is, intolerant of any view that is judged intolerant”<sup>10</sup>. Images and words are held in the purgatory of censorship. The artists themselves are overpowered by the weight and politics of controversy. Expression has become a commodity and is therefore controlled.

How do we free our minds from the tyranny of state, church and self? Does the responsibility of expressing the disappearance of expression fall on the arts, or the artists themselves? The very same people guarding themselves with self-censorship must find a way to end the culling of personal expression, given the power of art to illicit social change.

We all must ask ourselves, “Do we place limits on what can be seen and discussed? What is the line and how far is too far?”<sup>11</sup> By what measure is art or expression judged profane? Why is it so important that we remain acutely aware of the sensitivities of others?

Is art (and by extension, freedom of expression), ultimately, controlled by fear? The artist is under duress. When art challenges belief it becomes dangerous, when art challenges the state, it becomes a threat. What must be considered carefully is that meta-intolerance affects not only the arts, but every aspect of our lives. From the education system to the workplace, you must censor yourself very carefully to not hurt anybody’s feelings. The repercussions of doing so are wildly unpredictable, potentially catastrophic, at the very least, unpleasant.

---

<sup>10</sup> Philips, Lisa, “Examine Your Own Limits” p. 221

<sup>11</sup> Philips, Lisa, “Examine Your Own Limits” p. 219

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Groys, Boris, "Hurting the Feeling of Others." *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1 (Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA, USA. 2016). 211-215.

Mintcheva, Svetlana, "Self-Policing and Self-Censorship." *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1 (Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA, USA. 2016). 207-210.

Philips, Lisa, "Examine Your Own Limits." *Social Research* Vol 83. no.1 (Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA USA. 2016). 217-221.

## Works Cited

Groys, Boris. "Hurting the Feelings of Others." *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA. USA. 2016. 211-215. Print.

Mintcheva, Svetlana. "Self-Policing and Self-Censorship." *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA. USA. 2016. 207-210. Print.

Philips, Lisa. "Examine Your Own Limits." *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Academic Studies Press, Brighton MA. USA. 2016. 217-221. Print

## References

Groys, B. (2016). Hurting the Feelings of Others. *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 211-215.

Mintcheva, S. (2016) Self-Policing and Self-Censorship. *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 207-210.

Philips, L. (2016) Examine Your Own Limits. *Social Research* Vol. 83 no.1. Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press, 217-221.