



# **THIS IS ENGLAND**

**2025**

Festival du court-métrage  
britannique de Rouen

## DOSSIER PÉDAGOGIQUE



### **GILBERT & GEORGE DAYTRIPPING FOREVER!**

Réalisé par : Iain B. MacDonald

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## **GILBERT & GEORGE DAY TRIPPING FOREVER!**

Directed by *Iain B MacDonald*

STARRING <i>Gilbert &amp; George</i>	DUBBING/HELPER <i>Sue Polino</i>	DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY <i>Tom Webster</i>	COMPOSER <i>Steven Eggle</i>	EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS <i>Guy Harding Iain B MacDonald Tom Webster</i>
SPONSOR/COSOURIST <i>Adrian Sney</i>	EDITOR <i>Guy Harding, ACE</i>	PRODUCERS <i>Charlie Shearman - Ciar Lily Strommen</i>		

Painting by Simon Mond

A DANBURY DIGITAL & ANALOGUE PRODUCTION

**DANBURY**  
DIGITAL & ANALOGUE

# Topics and Issues

## Collège

### Classe de sixième

#### Repères culturels

- Axe 1. Personnes et personnages
- Axe 2. Le quotidien : vivre, jouer, apprendre
- Axe 3. Pays et paysages
- Axe 4. Imaginaire, contes et légendes
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#### Repères culturels

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- Axe 5. Des langues, des lieux, des histoires
- Axe 6. Le Royaume-Uni

### Classe de quatrième

#### Repères culturels

- Axe 1. Sport et société
- Axe 2. Voyages et explorations
- Axe 3. Villes, villages, quartiers
- Axe 4. Inventer, innover, créer
- Axe 5. Langages et messages artistiques
- Axe 6. L'Irlande

### Classe de troisième

#### Repères culturels

- Axe 1. À la rencontre de l'autre
- Axe 2. Travailler hier, aujourd'hui,

demain

- Axe 3. Voyages et migrations
- Axe 4. Langages et médias
- Axe 5. Formes de l'engagement
- Axe 6. Les États-Unis

## Lycée

### Classe de seconde

#### Repères culturels – LVA, LVB et LVC

##### **Axe 1. Représentation de soi et rapport à autrui**

Axe 2. Vivre entre générations

##### **Axe 3. Le passé dans le présent**

Axe 4. Défis et transitions

##### **Axe 5. Créer et recréer**

Axe 6. Les pays du *Commonwealth* : héritages, unité, diversité

### Classe de première

#### Repères culturels – LVA, LVB et LVC

##### **Axe 1. Identités et échanges**

##### **Axe 2. Diversité et inclusion**

##### **Axe 3. Art et pouvoir**

Axe 4. Innovations scientifiques et responsabilité

Axe 5. L'être humain et la nature

Axe 6. Les aires anglophones américaines

### Classe terminale

#### Repères culturels – LVA, LVB et LVC

Axe 1. Espace privé et espace public

Axe 2. Territoire et mémoire

##### **Axe 3. Fictions et réalités**

##### **Axe 4. Enjeux et formes de la communication**

Axe 5. Citoyenneté et mondes virtuels

Axe 6. Le Royaume-Uni et ses nations

**NB:** développement compatible avec  
les programmes d'**Histoire** :

- Terminale générale
- Terminale technologique

## About the film

"Gilbert & George Daytripping Forever!" follows the artists Gilbert and George as they embark on another adventure to Southend-on-Sea and explore the meaning of their art and their lives.

### Full Cast & Crew

Ian B. MacDonald  
Lily Streames  
Charles Charman-Cox  
Gilbert  
George

Director  
Producer  
Producer  
Key cast  
Key cast

## About the director



**Iain B. MacDonald** is an British and Irish director and producer whose career is marked by a diverse range of projects across drama, comedy, and documentary.

MacDonald began his career focusing on arts documentaries. One of his notable early works is GILBERT & GEORGE DAYTRIPPING, which profiles the renowned British artists Gilbert & George. His transition to scripted television came with the award-winning series BODIES, a medical drama that garnered critical acclaim. He further showcased his versatility with an adaptation of Jane Austen's MANSFIELD PARK and the political thriller THE LAST ENEMY starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

In 2004, MacDonald gained recognition in the film industry by winning the Best Short Film Award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival for BILLY'S DAY OUT. This was followed a few years later by an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Directing in a Comedy Series for his work on Showtimes's EPISODES.

Since relocating to Los Angeles in 2015, MacDonald has expanded his portfolio to include a variety of television series. He directed multiple episodes of the U.S. version of SHAMELESS, contributing to 17 episodes and serving as a producer on 38 more. His other notable projects include WAYNE, SHANTARAM and POKER FACE. In POKER FACE, he directed two episodes and served as an executive producer for the series.

Beyond his directorial work, MacDonald is also a co-founder of the Essex International Film Festival, reflecting his commitment to supporting and promoting film and television arts.

### **Director Statement:**

GILBERT & GEORGE DAYTRIPPING FORVER! is the last film of a trilogy about the legendary artists Gilbert and George. Comprising a day trip to Southend-on-Sea in Essex, the artists talk about life, their art and the universe.

# Daytripping Forever!

*A fine example of oxymoronic film title.*

## Definition:

*An oxymoron is a figure of speech that combines two contradictory terms or ideas, creating a paradoxical effect. Oxymorons are used for emphasis, humor, or to provoke thought by juxtaposing words that seem to conflict, such as “deafening silence” or “bittersweet.”*

## Oxymorons are also common in movie titles:

1. **“Bitter Sweet”** (1933) - The title is an oxymoron, combining the opposing flavors of bitterness and sweetness, metaphorically reflecting the contrasting emotions of joy and sorrow in the story.
2. **“True Lies”** (1994) - This action-comedy directed by James Cameron and starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis uses an oxymoron in its title to hint at the film’s central theme of a double life, where a seemingly ordinary man lives a secret life as a spy.
3. **“Pretty Ugly People”** (2008) - The title is an oxymoron, suggesting a deeper look into how beauty and ugliness are perceived and valued in society, focusing on the characters’ inner beauty and personal growth.
4. **“Walking Dead”** (2010-2022) - Although primarily known as a TV series, “The Walking Dead” concept, including movies planned around its universe, embodies an oxymoron in its title, combining life (“walking”) with death (“dead”), reflecting its central theme of zombies or the living dead.
5. **“Rush Hour”** (1998) - This title is an oxymoron because “rush hour” often implies a time of day when traffic is at its slowest due to congestion, yet the term suggests speed (“rush”). The film uses this oxymoronic phrase to highlight its protagonists’ fast-paced, action-packed misadventures in contrast to their often stalled, comedic situations.

## **ACTIVITIES:**

Below, you'll find 10 films to match with their synopsis. (cards to cut and shuffle)

After matching the pairs, explain what you think of the tension created by the oxymoronic title and your expectation about the films.

Think of a good oxymoronic title of your own and imagine what kind of story you can spin from it.

When ready, pitch your film and justify your title (oral presentation)

## Oxymoronic titles to play with:

**True Lies** 1994

Director James Cameron

A fearless, globe-trotting, terrorist-battling secret agent has his life turned upside down when he discovers his wife might be having an affair with a used-car salesman while terrorists smuggle nuclear war heads into the United States.

**Eyes Wide Shut** 1999

Director Stanley Kubrick

A Manhattan doctor embarks on a bizarre, night-long odyssey after his wife's admission of unfulfilled longing.

**Dead Man Walking** 1995

Director Tim Robbins

A nun, while comforting a convicted killer on death row, empathizes with both the killer and his victim's families.

**Back to the Future** 1985

Director Robert Zemeckis

Marty McFly, a 17-year-old high school student, is accidentally sent 30 years into the past in a time-traveling DeLorean invented by his close friend, the maverick scientist Doc Brown.

**Mr. Mom** 1983

Director Stan Dragoti

After he's suddenly laid off, a husband switches roles with his wife. She returns to the workforce, and he becomes a stay-at-home dad, and he has to take care of three young children, a job he has no clue how to do.

**Urban Cowboy** 1980

Director James Bridges

Bud is a young man from the country who learns about life and love in a Houston bar.

**Birth of the Living Dead** 2013

Director Rob Kuhns

A documentary that shows how George A. Romero gathered an unlikely team of Pittsburghers to shoot his seminal film: Night of the Living Dead (1968).

**Wrong Is Right** 1982

Director Richard Brooks

A TV reporter finds himself in the middle of an Arab leader buying two portable nukes, terrorists, arms dealer, a reporter/CIA spy killed, a US president ordering a K-I-L-L etc.

**Little Big Man** 1970

Director Arthur Penn

Jack Crabb, looking back from extreme old age, tells of his life being raised by Native Americans and fighting with General Custer.

**Slumdog Millionaire** 2008

Directors Danny Boyle & Loveleen Tandan

When a teenager from the slums of Mumbai is interrogated about his suspicious performance on a quiz show, he revisits various events from his past to explain how he knew all the answers.

# About Gilbert & George

## A MEETING WITH GILBERT & GEORGE By Armelle Leturcq

Through the power of images and strong visual messages, Gilbert & George have greatly impacted the art world since the 1960s. Over the years, the iconic duo has invented new ways of creating and showcasing art, becoming their own live sculptures and constantly striving for complete freedom as artists and human beings. Unapologetic, rebellious, and wildly curious, Gilbert & George are celebrating fifty years of work with an exhibition collecting their “Beard” pictures and touring worldwide from New York to Paris. We sat down to chat with the duo at Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, where the exhibition takes place until January 20th. ... read more here: <https://www.crash.fr/a-meeting-with-gilbert-george/>

## THE GILBERT AND GEORGE CENTRE (*hundreds of pictures to describe, study and analyse*)

Gilbert and George are two men who together are one artist: Gilbert & George.

The vision of Gilbert & George is their art, of which they are the embodiment. Therefore Gilbert & George are the art of Gilbert & George. The art of Gilbert & George is based upon feelings, thoughts, and intellect. Gilbert & George are a total modern independent visionary artist, alone.

... everything here: <https://gilbertandgeorgecentre.org/>

## Let's talk about Art

### ART TERMS:

Tate Galery website:

- Browse 461 art terms.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms>

MoMA website:

- Art terms: Learn about the materials, techniques, movements, and themes of modern and contemporary art from around the world. (showing all 350 art terms)

<https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/>

### **ACTIVITY:**

Browse those two websites and find 10 words and phrases you find useful to talk about art in general and contemporary art in particular.

Create a matching exercise similar to the one about oxymoronic titles and have your classmates do it.

## Why Everybody Hates Contemporary Art – and Artists?

By Ana F. Martín / Sep 8, 2021

What a statement. Unfortunately, it is not far from the truth. Of course, that “everybody” doesn’t include those within the art world, but rather the rest of the mortals who are supposed to experience and appreciate art and the work of the artist. And they are pissed. To be quite honest, I don’t blame them. It seems contemporary artists and art institutions have done everything they could to purposely exclude people who don’t belong from being part of the conversation with the undeniable help of the education system.

Contemporary art is difficult to classify. On one side, we still have artists who use classical artistic expressions in the creation of art, such as painting and sculpture. But new media art, produced using technology such as sound art, light art, or interactive installations, is also an important part of contemporary art. It might not be as popular in museums yet, maybe due to the elitism that is at the core of what is considered fine art that belongs in a museum exhibit and what isn’t, but it exists and I would dare to say it is the future of art —I might be a bit biased as I have a BA in Art & Technology.

So contemporary art is broad in its form, but the key to its confusing nature for regular audiences is in its content and the attached value. Let’s look at a very recent example: [the invisible sculpture by Italian artist Salvatore Garau](#), auctioned for \$18,000. This artwork is literally made out of nothing, being the audience’s responsibility to shape the sculpture with their own imagination as per the artist’s intent. For someone who doesn’t belong to the art world, this of course feels like a joke, especially when asking for that amount of money that is what we align to its value. Who can blame them? I have studied art, I am —supposedly— an artist myself, and I also find it ridiculous. Conceptual art is not new, it started in the XX Century, with its peak during the 1960s thanks to [the Fluxus movement](#), with important artists such as Yoko Ono —yes, she was a conceptual artist before John Lennon. But it is also true that conceptual art has always struggled with popularity due to its very abstract nature. Some people never understand it, and those who do, don’t see the point. It is an art movement that belongs to the artistic elite.

However, news media love to report on these things. They know they are going to create controversy among regular people, even though this type of art was not made for them —which I find very problematic in itself, but we’ll get there. Like it happened with the [banana on the wall](#) back in 2019. Just to refresh your memory, another Italian artist, Maurizio Cattelan, exhibited a banana on a wall with duct tape he titled Comedian. Indeed, comedy. But it became newsworthy and even more of a joke when it was actually sold for \$120,000. A work that, only in the materials used, would cost \$1. What that amount is saying is that the artist’s concept and idea are worth \$120,000. And that, to common people, is not only a joke, it’s an insult.

It is no secret that the art world has become the largest money-laundering system we have nowadays in our society. It has been for years. Millions of dollars get exchanged almost tax-free in the shape of art auctions and museum donations, everybody knows it and yet keeps doing it. I wrote this once and I’ll write it again: art is no longer art under capitalism. Art

has nothing to do with beauty or aesthetic experience, however problematic those concepts are, as I also wrote before. But art should not be a commodity either at the service of criminal activities. This creates an image in the collective mind that art is a frivolity, something reserved for a corrupted elite. And, unfortunately, the new game player in the art town, NFTs, is not making this go away, with a digital artwork turned into [an NFT created by Beeple sold for \\$69 million](#) at a Christie's auction in March 2021.

Are we surprised people hate contemporary art and artists? I am not. In fact, I understand it. Because art has never been made for regular audiences. The art spectator is very specific, not everybody can become one. Because where will the distinction be otherwise? Should art then be for everyone? Would it be art if it was? What would happen to the economic benefits of art? Would its monetary value decrease and its artistic value increase? Would we stop using monetary value and artistic value as synonyms meaning "good"? How much does the education system have to change in order for common people to feel comfortable experiencing modern and contemporary art?



Piero Manzoni's 1961 artwork **Merde d'Artiste** (Artist's shit). *Image retrieved from Wikipedia*

I'll start with the last question because I think it's one of the keys to unravel the rest. The artistic education given today is quite outdated in my opinion. Unless you decide to study art as a specialization in university, the notion of art you will have is based on history: these are the characteristics of the renaissance, the gothic, the neoclassic style, etcetera. We are told that art is highly-skilled figurative representation. I know this because I thought so too and I have had conversations with many different people who agree that art is whatever was made before the XX Century, meaning not abstraction. And why is this idea so implemented in our concept of art? I think —and I repeat it's my opinion and what I have been discussing for some years now— art history is taught as a tale of great human —well, men—achievement without a deep connection with its socio-political and socio-economic historical contexts. This is quite evident when people are confronted with modern art, that expanding almost all the XX Century when abstract art in all its forms started to become the norm over figurative, classical “fine” art. Generally, we fail to understand modern art because we don't really comprehend as we should the historical context of the late XIX Century —industrialization, early capitalism, big cities, countryside exodus, machinery, technological advances, new social classes, early mainstream media—and its consequences into the XX Century —wars and destruction never seen before, early globalization, communications, alienation of society, disassociation. Modern art was a reflection of all these extreme, fast changes society was experiencing, and contemporary art is in a way following those because they are still part of today's society. If we don't understand our past, we can't understand our present. And this is true for art as it is for our own life.

In an ideal world, we would all have a good and accessible education, not only in the arts. But that's not good for business. Art institutions are mostly private, so they benefit from people who want to get educated properly in the arts, whether as an artist or as a critic or historian, therefore creating a new social class bred into cultural capital that would distinguish and elevate them from the rest. They will be the ones to perpetuate the extreme capitalist practices that dominate the art market. Of course, there are small artists who don't make millions. But they are in the shadows, and some of them are adapting to what the general public likes in art, with a surge in figurative representation. Is that bad? Absolutely not. Everyone is entitled to create whatever they want. But I think that doesn't help the audiences move forward in their understanding and experience of art. Abstract art, in all its complexity and complications, allows us to stop, to think, to connect, to feel, and to understand a part of ourselves and our society. But we don't want to think and be challenged. And that's a problem that goes beyond art into how we confront the world.

Art —as it is today— is not universal. And its intrinsic association with excessive amounts of money and its secluded, elitist nature have made the public weary and suspicious of contemporary artists and their modes of expression, creating a tense relationship that feels difficult to save. Artists and art institutions are failing to communicate effectively contemporary art to the general public, and the general public is also failing at putting effort into understanding the new language of art to break away from classical concepts. So we have entered into a situation in which we are content with not being important to each other. And that's a huge mistake. Because art has a role to play in society. And, seeing the way things are nowadays, we all need it more than ever.

<https://medium.com/counterarts/why-everybody-hates-contemporary-art-and-artists-5500174b65d8>

### **ACTIVITIES:**

Write a 200 word summary of this long article.

Write what you think about Piero Mazoni's 1961 artwork (200 words)

# More about Contemporary Art

Video corner:

Oral comprehension:

## A Beginner's Guide to the Contemporary Art World!



YouTube CityCode Magazine 6 juin 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmgIub4olRg>

## 3 Minute Wonder: Marcel Duchamp - Fountain



YouTube Tate 4 mars 2010

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIApXD-TdDs>

installed for one day in a public toilet, Liverpool

- pick up the characteristics of contemporary artists.
- pick up characteristics of contemporary art.
- What should people do to appreciate contemporary art?
- What are they looking at?
- What reaction do you find the most interesting?
- What would you have said?

**ACTIVITY:** Choose one work of art from **The Gilbert & George Centre** and present it to the class. (oral presentation)

You can use what lies below to structure your presentation.

Describe (What do I see?)
Landscape, portrait, people, still, animals, religious, historic
Foreground / background
Time of day / season
Place or setting / inside or outside
Abstract / realistic
Horizontal / vertical
Old vs. modern / historic vs. contemporary
Action - what is going on?
Story?

Analyse (How is the work organized?)
<b>Line:</b> strong, dominant, thin, directional, broken, outline, structural, curved
<b>Color and value:</b> warm, cool, light, dark, solid, transparent, bright, dull, monochromatic, realistic or abstract
<b>Texture:</b> smooth, rough, coarse, soft
<b>Space:</b> perspective, foreground, middleground, background, point of view
<b>Form:</b> 2D vs 3D form on flat surface, sculptural form
<b>Composition:</b> contrast, emphasis, rhythm, pattern, movement, balance, unity, repetition

Interpret (What is happening?)
The artwork is about...
It makes me think about...
The artist is saying...
<b>Mood and feeling:</b> calm, violent, sad, joyful, angry, hopeful...
The artists wants you to see...
The artists wants you to think about...
The artwork reminds me of...
If I could ask the artist a question, I would ask...
<b>Symbols</b>
<b>Metaphors</b>
<b>Context</b>
Relationships between all the individual parts of the work

Judge (What do I think about it?)
The best part of the work is...
The strengths of the work are...
The weaknesses of the work are...
The artist communicates ideas by...
I learned...
I like because...
I dislike because...
I would(n't) choose to hang this work in my room because...
This work has survived the test of time because...

## Arts / Politics / History

### To go further:

*Two documents to spur reflection on how arts and politics are connected.*

*They can be used with the help of the history teacher of your class.*

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## When the Arts Are Attacked, Democracy Is at Risk

by **Patrick Fisher**, CEO

at the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

**April 14, 2025**

### A Call for Courage in a Time of Crisis

I'm deeply concerned that our democracy is eroding—slowly, but deliberately—under the current federal administration. And if that's true, we must ask ourselves: What are the warning signs we'll wish we had paid more attention to? How many red flags will we overlook—or worse, comply with—before resistance is no longer possible?

This is a time for courage. I call on artists and arts organizations to be bold in their resistance, but I also call on the broader public to stand with them. We must defend individuals and institutions that speak out against injustice, or whose values, identities, or very existence are under attack. And I urge policymakers to do the same—not to remain silent when it matters most.

The arts are not simply a mirror of society. They are a force for truth. In times of censorship and repression, the arts help us see what's really happening. They give voice to the silenced. They document injustice. They spark change. That is why, throughout history, authoritarian regimes have treated the arts as a threat—and targeted them first.

What can you do? At the end of this piece, you'll find suggestions for how to take action. But first, we have to ask: How did we get here?

### **A Pattern We Can't Afford to Ignore**

Around the world and throughout history, when authoritarianism rises, the arts are among the first to be attacked. Why? Because creative expression disrupts control. It sparks dissent. It gives people the imagination to see alternatives to the status quo. Repressive governments know this. That's why they try to erase art that challenges their narrative—and elevate content that reinforces it.

Some of the most chilling examples from history include:

- **Nazi Germany (1933–1945):** Hitler’s regime aggressively controlled the arts, branding modernist, expressionist, and avant-garde works as “degenerate art.” Thousands of artworks were confiscated or destroyed, and many artists were banned from exhibiting. The state promoted a narrowly defined aesthetic focused on nationalism, racial purity, and militarism, even organizing a 1937 “Degenerate Art” exhibition to publicly shame and delegitimize dissident art.
- **Francoist Spain (1939–1975):** General Francisco Franco’s dictatorship suppressed regional languages, music, and literature—particularly Catalan and Basque cultures. Artists and writers who opposed the regime were exiled, imprisoned, or silenced. Censorship permeated all cultural output, including theater, music, and film, which were only permitted if they reinforced the state’s Catholic and nationalist ideology.
- **China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976):** Spearheaded by Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution decimated China’s intellectual and artistic communities. Universities were shuttered, books were burned, and traditional art forms were condemned as “bourgeois.” Artists, writers, and scholars were publicly humiliated, imprisoned, or killed. Only government-approved “revolutionary” art glorifying Mao and the Communist Party was allowed.
- **Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979):** Pol Pot’s regime sought to erase Cambodia’s intellectual and artistic heritage. Among the estimated 2 million people who perished were countless musicians, dancers, visual artists, and writers. Cultural institutions were dismantled, and nearly all pre-revolutionary art was destroyed, as the regime viewed artists and intellectuals as existential threats to its radical agrarian ideology.

These were not just attacks on culture. They were efforts to control thought, erase dissent, and consolidate power.

And it’s not just history. In the United States today, we’re seeing tactics and threats once used by dictators to silence dissent and shrink the public imagination put into motion once again.

### **Defending the Arts as a Pillar of Democracy**

The suppression of the arts is often one of the first signs of rising authoritarianism. Recognizing these early warning signs can help societies act before repression becomes irreversible. Presently, we are seeing some alarming trends:

- **Increased Censorship and Content Restrictions:** Governments banning books, shutting down exhibitions, and controlling what can be performed in theaters. In Florida, for instance, the state has enacted extensive book bans, targeting works that address race, gender, and LGBTQ+ issues under the guise of "parental rights." Additionally, President Trump’s proposal for a "Golden Age of American Arts and Culture" includes banning drag performances at the Kennedy Center.
- **Defunding or Closing Arts Institutions:** Public funding is being stripped from theaters, museums, and arts organizations that foster free expression. In March 2025, President Trump issued an Executive Order to dismantle the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a key agency for supporting the arts. Then, on April 2, it was reported that the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is recommending extreme cuts to staff and programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This follows President Trump’s previous

unsuccessful attempts to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

- **State-Controlled Cultural Narratives:** Regimes funding only state-approved art and restricting independent voices. Earlier this year, President Trump appointed himself as President of the Kennedy Center’s Board of Trustees, firing the president and reshaping the institution’s leadership. This raises concerns about political influence over one of the nation’s most prominent cultural institutions.
- **Vilification of Artists in State Media:** Artists are targeted for subversion, with their work questioned and criticized publicly. President Trump recently condemned painter Sarah Boardman’s portrait of him at the Colorado State Capitol, calling it "purposefully distorted" and implying it was politically motivated.
- **Surveillance and Harassment of Artists:** Governments increasingly track, threaten, or physically harm artists and cultural workers.
- **Criminalization of Artistic Expression:** New laws that classify art as subversive or obscene, leading to arrests and imprisonment of artists.

## What’s at Stake

You don’t have to like the art that’s under attack, nor do you need to even be involved in the arts to be invested. But, if you care about democracy, this should matter to you. Because when the government controls what can be written, shared, or expressed—democracy is in danger.

When artists are silenced, so are the truths they tell. When institutions are defunded, so is the public’s access to knowledge, history, and possibility. When governments decide what kinds of stories are “acceptable,” they are not protecting the public—they are manipulating it.

And when creative expression is criminalized, it’s not long before other freedoms follow.

We must also acknowledge this: in its nearly 250-year history, the United States has never fully lived up to the ideals of democracy it proclaims. Black men were denied the right to vote until 1870. White women couldn’t vote until 1920. Black women—systematically disenfranchised—weren’t fully protected until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And even today, many people with felony convictions or who are incarcerated still cannot vote.

Democracy in America has always been aspirational, never perfect. But that does not mean it’s not worth striving for. In fact, it is precisely because the promise of democracy remains unfulfilled that we must fight to protect it—and recognize that the arts and human expression are essential to that pursuit. I want to acknowledge and thank Joseph Hall, my friend, peer, and the Co-Executive Director of Kelly Strayhorn Theater, for reminding me of that.

## The Role of the Arts in Authoritarian Systems

The arts have long been at the forefront of social and political resistance. Work created by artists and presented by arts organizations can expose corruption, challenge propaganda, and serve as a rallying cry for change. In authoritarian settings, where governments seek to control narratives, the arts disrupt and reframe the conversation. Consider the following historical examples:

- The Soviet Union (20th Century): Artists and writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn used literature to reveal the realities of Stalinist repression. Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* exposed the horrors of forced labor camps, fueling global awareness of Soviet atrocities.
- Apartheid South Africa (20th Century): Musicians like Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela used their art to challenge racial segregation. Makeba's song *Soweto Blues* became an anthem of resistance, while artists like William Kentridge used visual storytelling to critique state violence.
- Latin America's Military Dictatorships (1970s-1980s): Chilean folk musician Víctor Jara was brutally murdered by the Pinochet regime for his politically charged songs that supported democracy. Meanwhile, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina used public performances and visual symbols to demand justice for the disappeared.
- China's Tiananmen Square Protests (1989): The Tank Man photograph by British photographer Stuart Franklin remains one of the most iconic images of resistance. Artists have continued to depict this moment through visual art and performance pieces, despite heavy censorship.
- The Arab Spring (2010s): Graffiti artists in Egypt, such as Ganzeer, transformed public spaces into canvases of dissent, using murals to depict police brutality and the aspirations of revolutionaries.

These examples illustrate how the arts act as both chroniclers and catalysts for change. This work is deeply risky, yet it carries enormous power in mobilizing social change and inspiring movements that defend human rights and dignity.

## A Time to Act

Even if you don't personally feel a strong connection to the arts, recognize that they represent the core values of democracy: freedom of expression, the right to challenge power, and the ability to imagine a better world. Defending artistic freedom isn't just about protecting individual artists—it's about safeguarding the principles of democracy itself.

When authoritarian regimes target the arts, they are sending a signal that broader freedoms are under threat. The suppression of creative expression is often one of the first steps in a larger campaign to eliminate free speech, independent thought, and the public's right to protest. A society that silences its artists is a society in peril. Conversely, a society that champions the arts affirms its commitment to truth, freedom, and the protection of its citizens' rights.

History has shown us time and time again that when the arts are censored or suppressed, other fundamental freedoms

follow—freedom of the press, the right to protest, the ability to engage in open dialogue. Art challenges us to think critically, to question authority, and to resist complacency. It is a pillar of democracy that must be protected at all costs.

Now is the time for us to act. As citizens, artists, policymakers, and community members, we must stand united in defending artistic freedom, because when the arts are free, democracy thrives.

## What You Can Do

### For Arts Organizations:

This is a time to be bold. Resist in ways that are rooted in your mission, values, and creative voice. Create good trouble—the kind that honors truth and invites dialogue, imagination, and disruption.

#### Consider actions such as:

- **Declare your space a sanctuary for artistic freedom.** Libraries and bookstores across the country are publicly affirming their role as safe spaces for banned books—arts organizations can do the same.
- **Create Mission-Driven Disruptions.** Host performances, exhibitions, readings, and screenings that center voices that are being silenced. For example:
  - An orchestra presenting work by composers who were banned or imprisoned by authoritarian regimes.
  - A gallery curating exhibitions by artists responding to racial injustice, climate change, or censorship.
  - A theater commissioning new works from queer and trans playwrights as their rights are under attack.
- **Model courage in public statements and partnerships:** Align your programming with statements of values, and collaborate with organizations committed to social justice.
- **Resist quietly or boldly—but resist:** Whether through curatorial choices, public events, or institutional policy, choose resistance rooted in your mission.

### For Supporters of the Arts:

When public funding is under threat, the role of the public's support becomes more vital than ever. If you believe in freedom of expression and the importance of the arts—now is the time to show it.

#### Take these steps:

- **Support the organizations that inspire you:** Donate to arts institutions whose mission and work resonate with your values. If public funding disappears, private action must fill the void.
- **Champion socially engaged artists:** Seek out and support artists creating work that speaks to social realities. Buy their work, attend their shows, share their stories.
- **Be vocal in your advocacy:** Speak up online and in your community. Share articles, tag policymakers, and remind others that art matters. Public support helps neutralize political attacks and demonstrates that the arts are not fringe—they are foundational.

- **Push for policy:** Let your representatives know that you care about freedom of expression and public funding for the arts. Call, write, and vote with the arts in mind.
- **Show up:** Attend exhibitions, performances, readings, and protests. Your presence reinforces that this work has meaning and value.

### Demystifying the Arts

an arts & culture column

from **Patrick Fisher**, CEO

at the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council

April 14, 2025

Article with pictures here: <https://www.pittsburghartscouncil.org/blog/when-arts-are-attacked-democracy-risk>

#### Question Time:

*“History has shown us time and time again that when the arts are censored or suppressed, other fundamental freedoms follow—freedom of the press, the right to protest, the ability to engage in open dialogue.”*

Patrick Fisher mentions fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of press, the right to protest and the ability to engage in open dialogue.

- What do you think about it?
- Are those freedoms fundamental to you?
- Can you think of others?



Comment on those two pictures.

## "Degenerate" Art

*Nazi leaders sought to control Germany not only politically, but also culturally. The regime restricted the type of art that could be produced, displayed, and sold. In 1937, Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels made plans to show the public the forms of art that the regime deemed unacceptable. He organized the confiscation and exhibition of so-called “degenerate” art.*

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

### Key Facts:

- The Nazi regime led extensive efforts to control and shape German society and culture. It deemed a variety of modern art and artists to be sick and immoral. The regime called this art "degenerate."
- In 1937, the Nazis confiscated thousands of modern artworks from German museums. They displayed many in the “Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich.
- The Nazis destroyed several thousand confiscated works of art. They sold many of the most valuable works to enrich the regime and prepare for war.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/degenerate-art-1>

## Nazification of German Culture

When the Nazi Party assumed control in 1933, its leaders began a campaign to align German politics, society, and culture with Nazi goals. This process of Nazification was widespread. The effort became known as Gleichschaltung, the German word for “coordination” or “synchronization.”

The Nazi regime disbanded organizations of every kind. It replaced these groups with state-sponsored, Nazi professional associations, student leagues, and sports and music clubs. To qualify for membership, a person had to be a politically reliable citizen and able to prove “Aryan” ancestry. All others were excluded from these groups and increasingly from the rest of German society.

In September 1933, the Nazis created the Reich Chamber of Culture. The Chamber oversaw the production of art, music, film, theater, radio, and writing in Germany. The Nazis sought to shape and control every aspect of German society. They believed that art played a critical role in defining a society’s values. In addition, the Nazis believed art could influence a nation’s development. Several top leaders became involved in official efforts on art. They sought to identify and attack “dangerous” artworks as they struggled to define what “truly German” art looked like.

## Nazism and Art

The Nazis linked modern art with democracy and pacifism. Reception to modern art in Germany had varied under past governments. When Kaiser Wilhelm II ruled (1888–1918), the country had a conservative social climate. Avant-garde art was not widely appreciated. After World War I, Germany was ruled by a democratic government known as the Weimar Republic (1918–1933). The country saw a more liberal cultural atmosphere. Styles of modern art like Expressionism were more warmly received. Nazi leaders asserted that avant-garde art reflected the supposed disorder, decadence, and pacifism of Germany's postwar democracy.

The Nazis also claimed that the ambiguity of modern art contained Jewish and Communist influences that could “endanger public security and order.” They claimed that modern art conspired to weaken German society with “cultural Bolshevism.” According to Nazi ideology, only criminal minds could be capable of creating such so-called harmful art. The Nazis called this art “degenerate.” They used the term to suggest that the artists' mental, physical, and moral capacities must be in decay. At the time, “degenerate” was widely used to describe criminality, immorality, and physical and mental disabilities.

The campaign to define and control art was shaped by disagreements among leaders. Officials competed for influence within the party and government. In this case, chief Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg clashed with Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels led the Reich Chamber of Culture. As a young man, he had admired prominent avant-garde German artists. He even hoped that a form of “Nordic Expressionism” could become an official Nazi style of art. Rosenberg led a more conservative faction called the Combat League for German Culture. This effort was more aligned with Adolf Hitler's tastes. Hitler preferred more realistic and classical styles of painting, sculpture, and architecture. Goebbels won this clash with Rosenberg by conforming to Hitler's tastes.

### “Degenerate” Art Exhibitions

Within the regime's first months, some officials took it upon themselves to interpret the leadership's vague statements on art. In spring 1933, local officials began opening so-called “chambers of horrors” and “exhibitions of shame.” These efforts aimed to mock modern art. In September, a local exhibition called “Degenerate Art” opened in Dresden. The exhibition then traveled through a dozen German cities. Curators across the country removed avant-garde works from museums and placed them in storage. These initial assaults on artistic freedom were not centrally organized. As a result, Nazi definitions of “good” and “bad” art remained unclear for years.

The regime attempted to clarify what “truly German art” looked like in summer 1937. The first annual Great German Art Exhibition opened in Munich at that time. Hitler reviewed selected artworks the month before it opened. He furiously ordered the removal of many examples of German avant-garde art. Goebbels witnessed this outburst and began making hasty plans for a separate exhibition. He intended to define and mock the types of art that the regime considered “degenerate.” Hitler approved of the plan. The Nazis began confiscating thousands of artworks from German museums.

The “Degenerate Art” exhibition was thrown together in less than three weeks. It opened in a cramped, improvised gallery space in Munich just one day after the nearby Great German Art Exhibition. Minors were not allowed inside because of the art's supposedly harmful and corruptive nature.

The exhibition's organizers arranged more than 600 artworks in intentionally unflattering ways. They crowded sculptures and graphic works together. Paintings were suspended from the ceiling by long cords with little room between them. Many works were even left unframed and incorrectly labeled. Slogans painted on the walls mocked artworks as “crazy at any price” and “how sick minds viewed nature.” The walls also displayed quotes from Hitler and Goebbels. Their words provided the public with the official Nazi Party views on the purpose of art.

Organizers went to great lengths to discourage appreciation of the artworks. Despite this, public attendance exceeded all expectations. It is estimated that more than 2 million people passed through the cramped space in 1937. By contrast, the Great German Art Exhibition around the corner was heavily promoted and held in a spacious new building. Still, it attracted fewer than 500,000 visitors.

The "Degenerate Art" exhibition closed in Munich at the end of November. A traveling version then visited other major German cities.

### **Disposal of Confiscated Art**

The Nazis began hastily confiscating more than 20,000 works of modern art in 1937. At that time, they made no plans for what would happen to the art. A year later, the Nazis passed a law legalizing the sale of confiscated art. They planned a large international art auction in Switzerland in June 1939. The Nazi regime profited greatly from the sale of confiscated works by famous artists like Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Vincent van Gogh.

The Nazis assured hesitant foreign art dealers that profits would not fund Germany's ability to wage war. Publicly, they promised that all funds would go to German museums. They did not keep this pledge. The regime funneled some of its foreign profits into armaments production. In 1939, the Nazis burned more than 5,000 paintings that they could not profit from in the yard of Berlin's main firehouse.

Roughly one third of the most valuable confiscated artworks were ultimately sold to enrich the Nazi regime. Another third of the artworks disappeared. Some have reemerged over the years. With few exceptions, none of the works were returned to the museums from which they were taken. German museums have not received financial restitution. In rare cases, some art from private collections was returned to its rightful owners. Several European and American museums still possess artworks taken by the Nazis.

United States  
Holocaust  
Memorial  
Museum

June 8, 2020

### **Critical Thinking Questions:**

- Why were the Nazis concerned with the production and circulation of music, film, theater, radio, writing, and art?
- What were the Nazis trying to achieve by controlling German culture?
- Why do governments censor art? Why is artistic freedom important in a society?
- What role do the arts and culture play in your society?

DOSSIER PROPOSÉ PAR L'ÉQUIPE PÉDAGOGIQUE LYCÉE