

Prompt: What are the limits of art? Should art have boundaries? Are there things art ought not to include/represent?

Gurting my Gojo

Exhibit A, a fallen angel suspended between light and shadow. Observe how every feather, every contour of muscle, the projection of heaven's light on his clear skin glows with impossible beauty. Gaze into him and you become unbearable with *his* sorrow, heart throbbing with *his* anger. The white dip of paint in his tearful eyes scream to me, louder than any mimicking voice could ever accomplish. I heard the words of rejection in the heavenly court, felt God's light leave my body as my soul was overflowed with perfect hatred. Exhibit B, a poorly drawn portrait of a man getting skinned by Beabadoobee.

The first thing people often think of when they hear the word "art" is beauty—divine, authoritative, uncorrupted. Paintings hanging in galleries, sculptures chiseled and polished to perfection, music that mirrors our own experiences. All of these things are beautiful expressions of the artist meant to evoke thought and emotion in the viewer. However if art is meant to evoke the viewer, the conjured emotions don't necessarily have to be that of admiration or grace, thus the art itself doesn't have to be beautiful. That notion suggests that there shouldn't be any limits to art as there is no deemed prerequisite for artful expression to only be focused on that which is objectively beautiful. To limit art would be to limit human expression, and just who the hell appointed us as the moral guardians of taste?

Art is a subset of expression—intentional, communicative, and structured in some way—but expression itself is limitless. Humans will always find ways to reveal their ideas, emotions, and frustrations. To limit art is to limit the infinity of human expression, and often

that argument is made out of fear of the potentially “immoral” or “unethical” influence of a piece of art. A film depicts violence, thus it’s evil. A painting shocks, thus it’s corrupting. A novel challenges a religion which is believed by the masses to be holy, political standpoints that have been widely established, societal norms that have existed for centuries, and suddenly we have to toss all copies of the book into a pit of fire out of fear of moral corruption. But what are we really protecting here? Ourselves from uncomfortable thoughts? Our fragile sense of moral superiority? As mentioned prior, art is meant to evoke, and that also includes prodding, disturbing, and sometimes offending the viewer. One might view a piece of media that contains unethical themes and violence to be immoral, but why is that? It all came down to pieces of the art disturbs and offends you, but the act of only focusing on the aspects that upsets you and disregarding the rest itself is unethical. By not viewing the piece as a whole and to limit it based on preconception or biased perception isn’t safeguarding creativity but suffocating it.

As previously established, art is meant to provoke, but how could art accomplish it’s mission when it isn’t even allowed to be viewed? Art is at its purest when it flirts with danger—with discomfort, with offense, with the socially unacceptable. Some of the most revolutionary works in history has been controversial precisely because it challenged the previously established norms and offended the sensibilities of their time. Let’s humor in on the notion that art should have limits. It seems reasonable in theory, Surely art that directly harms people with violent depictions such as child exploitation, incitement to violence, non-consensual abuse should be off-limits. We wouldn’t want to live in a world where “artistic freedom” becomes an excuse for crime and debauchery. Now what I’ve just established is the

almost universally agreed-upon boundary, yet it's only a murky and non-rigorous baseline.

Violence in a movie, grotesque imagery in a painting, controversial satire—how can we know for certain whether these pieces cause legitimate harm to people, or if they are meant to provoke thought, catharsis, or critique? It is unknowable and unbounded. When we try to justify limits with ethics, we're playing a game with invisible rules. What exactly counts as ethical? What counts as moral? Is depicting violence immoral, or immoral only if it encourages real violence? Is satire offensive, or only offensive if the audience misunderstands it? Is shock value inherently bad, or only bad if someone complains on social media? The problem is that we cannot determine the moral effect of art with certainty. Even the clearest “harmful” work can inspire empathy, reflection, or social change; even the most innocuous “safe” work can reinforce stereotypes, normalize biases, or lull people into complacency. We can't predict how someone will interpret a piece, how it will influence them, or what ideas it will spark. Attempting to define a rigorous limit on what is ethical in art is like trying to get closer to an asymptote—possible in theory, yet meaningless in practice.

Maybe the very act of trying to confine art is missing the point. Art is not a moral handbook that we have to confine ourselves to—it is simple and raw human expression. Sometimes it's ugly, sometimes it's shocking, sometimes it offends, sometimes it bores, none of these traits automatically make it bad. The measure of art is not in the comfort of its audience or the approval of moral arbiters—it is in its intention, its depth, and its ability to communicate something beyond itself. If the purpose is expression, reflection, or critique, it is, by definition, art. Satire can offend while critiquing, grotesque images can horrify while illuminating, and shocking performances can disgust while provoking. The heart of the artist

matters more than the presumed reaction of the audience, because audience reactions are infinite and unknowable. In these cases, traditional senses of beauty and grace become irrelevant. Ugly, chaotic, disturbing, grotesque—these are not marks against art, but enhancements just like any other trait. Art is about expression and meaning, not eye-pleasing aesthetics. The mark of art is that it communicates something beyond itself, challenges perceptions, or forces reflection. If it moves, provokes, or inspires—even uneasily—it has fulfilled its purpose.

To define a universal, rigorous line is both impossible and misguided. Trying to do so risks transforming creativity into a bland, moralistic checklist—a place where nothing is dangerous, nothing is challenging, and nothing is alive. Art is risk. Art is chaos. Art is infinite. Trying to pin it down with rules is not just pointless—it's almost comical. These efforts, while often well-meaning, highlight the absurdity of the exercise: expression cannot be limited, reception is unpredictable, and no one can become the moral judge to what is and isn't art.