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### Argument Essay

Imagine that you are an artist in the free culture of the United States and you make your entire living by selling your art, which is aimed at entertaining adults. Your art features some provocative themes, such as violence, drugs, or sex but it is only intended to be seen by a mature audience. However, an incident occurs where some young children are exposed to your extremely provocative art, through no fault of your own, and the parents of those children become outraged. They demand censorship of your art in a court trial and your art is partially censored to prevent further problems. A little later, you discover that the forced censorship is ruining the quality of your art and resulting in reduced sales. Your life's work and passion-- which is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution--is being ruined by censorship. This hypothetical situation leads to a very important question of whether provocative art should be censored.

First it is important to know what provocative art means. Provocative art is any art that provokes its audience. It either stimulates, excites, or angers them. Whether a certain piece of art is labeled provocative or not depends on what the audience finds provocative in the first place, it is very subjective. Some people may find any form of nudity or violence very provocative, while others may not think of violence as being provocative but would consider any drug or sexual references to be extremely provocative. With all the provocative art that exists in United States culture, it is no surprise that some art may be considered "overly provocative" for certain people

or age groups. When this provocative art is identified, what should be done about it? Censorship doesn't seem like a very good solution, so there is no need for it.

One problem with censorship is that it can ruin the experience for people that don't mind the provocative art. An example of this in my own life is the censorship of movies on an Indian television station. Certain violent scenes that include blood or gore are cut from movies on this station and this makes for a very choppy and un-enjoyable experience. The audience viewing these films, at least at our house, was mature enough to handle any violence and we were even looking forward to it. This experience really irritated me because the movie's audience obviously expected blood and violence from a movie about war. If the viewers didn't want to see blood, they would not be watching such a movie in the first place. The audience knew exactly what they were getting into but they had no choice in deciding about the censorship. Cutting out scenes was a very harsh thing to do and I can't imagine the creators of this movie being very happy about it either.

Another problem with censorship is that it conflicts heavily with the ideal of free speech guaranteed to all Americans by the First Amendment as part of the United States Constitution. The purpose of the First Amendment is to allow citizens to speak their mind and express their thoughts. This is exactly what some artists try to do through their art. Censorship is a very contradictory solution because it isn't compatible with one of the most important beliefs of American society. The last thing to note about censorship is that it can also hurt the artists financially if they are creating their art for entertainment purposes. When some piece of art, like music, is censored extensively, it becomes less entertaining and desirable. Losing even a small portion of their audience could be extremely detrimental to the artists as it could hinder their profit.

The various negative effects of censorship make it an undesirable solution, there has to be something more effective and less disruptive. That is why I suggest including ratings and labels on every art form to let the audience know about the art's content before they view or listen to it. Some forms of art already use these rating systems in effective ways. One example is the video game rating system used in the United States by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). This rating system is very effective because it puts video games in certain categories based on their content. A specific example is the game *God of War III* and its "Mature" rating. This rating is clearly marked on the video game box and is even mentioned on the TV commercials. When closely looking on the backside of the box, which contains the game CDs, you can see the reasoning for the Mature rating. As stated on the *God of War III* box, the game contains "Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Nudity, Strong Language, Strong Sexual Content" and that is why it is rated Mature. I believe this system is very detailed and provides the player with enough information for them to make the decision about playing the game. With this technique, no further censorship is required because the audience is made responsible for reading this information and deciding if they and/or their children should play the game.

In the United States movies also have ratings and these ratings are determined by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). When a movie is rated "R" for instance, the movie requires that anyone under the age of 17 must be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian. This is as far as censorship should go. Restricting an audience based on their age is fine because parents cannot always control what movies their children may go to see. However, censorship that restricts the rest of the appropriate audience from viewing the content in its original state should not be implemented because, as I have mentioned before, it can ruin the viewing experience for them.

Although rating systems have already been used successfully in the movie and video game industry in the United States, it's still useful to understand how ratings may differ from culture to culture because some art goes international and it is perceived differently across the world. Cultural values and standards are important to consider when attempting to understand how a particular culture rates art. It is true that different cultures throughout the world have varying tolerances of sex and violence in their art. For example, in the United States, Americans are more tolerant of violence than they are of sexual content. However, this is not true for Europe. According to the article "Censors target violent pix", Folker Honge, a top member of Voluntary Self-Censorship of the Film Industry (the official film-rating body in Germany, referred to as FSK), says that "In Europe, the industry is considerably more sensitive to depictions of violence than in the U.S. The reverse is usually true when it comes to eroticism." The article goes on to mention how the movie *Showgirls* was rated R in the U.S. but earned a 16+ rating in Germany. This just goes to show that rating systems should depend heavily on what a culture is willing to tolerate or what it values.

The rating system should also apply to other art forms, such as books, so there will not be a need for disruptive censorship. For written works, the ratings could follow a very similar system to that of movies. For example, the novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier features no violence or drug use but it does contain some sexual content. The novel is a fictitious tale that seeks to explain the real Johannes Vermeer's creation of a 17th-century Dutch painting also called *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The narrator of the story is a girl named Griet and the story follows her as she works for Vermeer. Overall this novel is an entertaining story which contains very little provocative content. However, there are small sections of the novel where sexual scenes are described vividly or are implied through other--nonsexual--actions. An example of a

vividly described sex scene is when Griet and Pieter are partaking in sexual intercourse within an alley (196). This passage from the novel is one of the only phrases in the novel that would not be appropriate for small children but it would still severely affect the rating. Thus, this novel would probably earn either a PG-13 (some material being inappropriate for children under 13) or an R rating.

The same could be said for the book of poems titled *Picture Bride* by Cathy Song. The book of poetry includes themes of abortion, patriarchal society, family, pregnancy and other topics from the perspective of a woman (the unnamed speaker) of the Asian-Pacific culture. The speaker talks about her life experiences and often relates them to other cultures, family members, or even to nature. The book is relatively appropriate for small children, with the exception of a couple of poems, one of which describes breasts. "She was in a good humor, making jokes about her great breasts... flaccid and whiskered around the nipples. I scrubbed them with a sour taste in my mouth, thinking: six children and an old man have sucked from these brown nipples" (5). That description would probably earn this book the PG rating (which stands for "parental guidance suggested") due to there being no explicit sexual content, but a slight reference to it nonetheless.

With ratings and labels--which contain enough useful information about the content--the audience should be able to make an informed decision of whether to view or listen to the art. However, opponents of this idea might argue that ratings don't always work, sometimes children are still exposed to inappropriate art. Opponents may point to a staff report titled *Parents Beware: Retail Stores Ignore Video Game Ratings* by New York City Council Investigation Division in which a study was conducted which showed that minors were able to purchase M-rated video games at 34 of the 35 stores (iii). Yes, I agree with the opponents that ratings aren't

yet fully enforced and children may come across inappropriate content as a result. In this case minors weren't protected from the overly-provocative art. This was because minors attempting to purchase an M-rated video game were asked for proof of age in only three stores. Two of these stores sold the minor an M-rated video game anyway (iii). But the issue comes down to whose responsibility is it to make sure overly-provocative art isn't distributed to children without consent from the parents. It definitely isn't the artist's responsibility, so they should not have to suffer the consequences. They will be doing their duty if they include ratings and labels on their art, from there on it is not up to them to enforce the laws and regulations.

As part of the report the Council Investigation Division (CID) recommended a few things to help with the issue of minors being able to purchase M-rated games. The CID primarily put forth ideas of passing legislation that would aim to help clarify for the consumers what the ratings mean. The CID also suggested that ESRB and the video game industry should be more proactive in its campaign to educate retailers and parents about the rating system. Finally, they stated that "parents need to be proactive and exercise supervision over what their children purchase and play" (iv). The study proves that the rating system isn't the problem, the problem lies in the fact that retailers and parents aren't enforcing these ratings. Censorship is not the answer to this problem because parents and retailers should be made responsible when it comes to instances of minors being exposed to overly-provocative art, the art itself should not suffer as a result. As long as ratings are used clearly and understood well by the general population, the rating system would be more effective than censorship and minimize the responsibility of the artist, allowing them to be free when creating their expressive art.

Ultimately the decision for censorship comes down to the question of whether the American public is smart enough to make its own decisions if provided enough useful

information about the content. I believe the public can make these decisions for themselves and for their children, just as long as ratings are well understood and can accurately tell them what the art contains. No form of censorship is necessary because it is disruptive for the audience and an unnecessary problem for the artist. The rating system has already been used effectively and can continue to be used for other forms of art. If someone doesn't like violence, they can refrain from art that is rated with the words "contains strong violence" instead of relying on the government to censor art. Depictions of violence, sex, and drugs aren't nearly as destructive to American society as the infringement of the First Amendment through censorship.

#### Works Cited

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