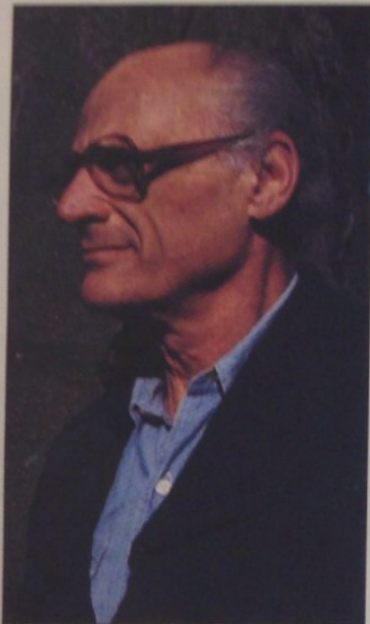


FIRST WORD

IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDERS:

With Congress debating obscenity in federally funded art, what will happen to free expression?

Arthur Miller,
Pulitzer
prize-winner
and a
distinguished
American
playwright



The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has provided some 85,000 grants over the past 25 years. Three or four have been controversial. Not a bad record.

Last year on July 16, as a one-day lobbyist for the Authors League of America, I met with a group of conservative senators and congressmen in Washington, DC. I tried to convince them that the issue was not smutty pictures but whether our government should get into the business of laying down rules for socially good and bad art. Even Plato gave up trying to do this, but it will have a deathless fascination for political leaders to the end of time.

I read a couple of paragraphs to the legislators from *In Russia*, a book I wrote in 1965. I doubted many lobbyists did literary readings for congressmen, so I figured I might get their attention.

In Moscow, while interviewing a tough Soviet Writers' Union apparatchik, I cautiously hinted that a little more freedom from government interference might benefit Soviet art. He replied sternly: "You mean we should spend the

people's money publishing the pornography I have seen on your newsstands, books which interest young people in drug addiction, plays which espouse homosexuality, paintings which even your own critics admit are made only for publicity and money? All this you are telling me will be an improvement for Russia? We do not consider that an improvement."

A senator from a Western state, as soon as he caught the gist of this conversation, took on a wryly fascinated look, and for a short moment I thought I had a convert. And so I added that the Soviets in censoring art were unquestionably being political censors, so why was it different when we did the same thing? It took a moment for him to rally from the damning comparison: "There is a difference," he finally stated, "because the Russians control the entire production of art, while we are only interested in the tiny part of it that the government underwrites." He looked relieved, if not surprised, to have come up with this dubious escape, but I wasn't sure how deeply it really convinced him. Unfortunately, I wasn't thinking fast enough to ask whether, if the government did underwrite all or most American art, would he still favor censoring it.

Another senator was embarrassed by the irony of a Soviet ironpant 25 years ago saying precisely what fundamentalism says today about censoring art. But curiously enough, he added that he had seen a play of mine, *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, a few years back and thought it an "amazing metaphor" for the internal spying going on in the world, not excluding America now and then, and for our relationship to power itself. I thought this was his way of telling me he was indeed troubled by the NEA issue, but that people were really worked up about the NEA and their feelings simply could not be ignored.

It became clear to me that we were all Jesse Helms's prisoners. None of the senators or congressmen referred to their own reactions to this alleged pornographic art but to "their feelings"—that is, the people sending in millions of boilerplate postcards organized by fundamentalist groups.

In talking to congressmen it seemed ironic that by attempting to purify minority art, the kind that aspires to seriousness, we will leave the field more thoroughly cleared for the non-governmentally funded mass junk—the videos, movies, and girlie magazines, and yes, a lot of the TV advertising—on which this country veritably floats. Of course, nobody is ever going to attempt to purify low art, no doubt for the good democratic reason that no politician is crazy enough to mess with the real high-stench garbage that amuses most voters.

It has all gotten twisted. One well-meaning liberal congressman, a supporter of the NEA, penned new language authorizing the NEA to prohibit funding of works that "deliberately denigrate the cultural heritage of the United States, its religious traditions, or racial or ethnic groups."

Now we are into religion and culture and race, areas where Congress clearly has no right to legislate, but this only illustrates where this whole far-Right campaign is dragging us—straight into political censorship. No wonder Plato would not let artists into his ideal society—there was just no easy way to keep them in line.

And there still isn't. Not in a democracy. And Congress ought to give up trying to kid itself—laying down orthodox lines of taste in matters of art means censorship. There isn't a graceful way around this. Let Jesse Helms get elected on an issue that doesn't matter this much to the good name of the United States, still the freest society in the world.

NEA And Political Censorship

by Arthur Miller

The National Endowment for the Arts has given some 85,000 grants over the past twenty-five years. Three or four have been controversial. Not a bad record. (Or, if you like, not a good one when you consider how many controversial artists they could have located if they'd tried harder.)

Senator Helms is up against a tough opponent in his current race for re-election. He may well be genuinely outraged by the NEA's choices, but it certainly won't hurt his chances to have hung a rider onto an appropriations bill saying that no Government money should go to smutty art. (Although I'd find his moral indignation more believable if he came out against Government funded, Carolina-grown cigarettes too, given the number of Americans they kill each year.)

The fundamentalist tom-toms, predictably, started pounding right across the country, and everybody went out and bought a stamp, (liberals are much more conservative about spending on stamps,) and stuck it on prepared statements of moral outrage, and now it may be that the NEA will ultimately go under altogether.

It is very serious business now, other people's morals always are to Congressmen. Some artists and producers won't sign what amounts to a moral purity pledge, or means test if you will, and an unknown number of Senators and Congressman are ready to disdainfully junk the whole idea of an NEA rather than have to continue squabbling about what obscenity is or is not.

On July 16th, as a one-day lobbyist for the Authors League of America, I met with half a dozen conservative Senators and a few Congressmen in Washington to try to convince them that the issue was not smutty pictures but whether they wanted the Government to get into the business of laying down rules for socially good and bad art. Even Plato gave up on trying to do this, but it will apparently have a deathless fascination for political leaders to the end of time.

I read a couple of paragraphs to them from "In Russia," a book I wrote in 1965. I doubted many lobbyists did literary readings for Congressmen, so I figured I might get their attention.

In Moscow, I had interviewed a tough Soviet Writers Union apparatchik to whom I had cautiously hinted that a little more freedom from government interference might benefit Soviet art. "His reply," I read to the Senators from my book, "was not only unexpected, but, I thought, devastating. 'You mean we should spend the people's money publishing the pornography I have seen on your newstands, books which interest young people in drug addiction, plays which espouse homosexuality, paintings which even your own critics admit are made only for publicity and money? All this you are telling me will be an improvement for Russia? We do not consider that an improvement.'"

The Senator from a Western state, as soon as he caught the gist of this, took on a wryly fascinated look, and for a short moment there I thought I had a convert. And so I added

3

that the Soviets in censoring art were unquestionably being political censors, so why was it different when we did the same thing? It took a moment for him to rally from the damning comparison; "There is a difference," he finally stated, "because they control the entire production of art while we are only interested in the tiny part of it that the Government underwrites." He looked relieved, if not surprised, to have come up with this escape, but I wasn't sure how deeply it really convinced him. Unfortunately, I wasn't thinking fast enough to ask whether, if the Government did underwrite all or most American art, he would then be opposed to censoring it.

Another Senator, a very conservative midwesterner, had an even more interesting reaction to my little reading. He was embarrassed by the irony of a Soviet ironpants twenty-five years ago saying precisely what current fundamentalism says today about censoring art. But then, curiously enough, he added that he had seen a play of mine, "The Archbishop's Ceiling," a few years back at the Kennedy Center, and thought it an "amazing metaphor" for the internal spying going on in the world, not excluding America now and then, and for our relationship to power itself. B

I thought this was his way of telling me that he was indeed troubled by the NEA issue, but that—(as he sort of implied by embarrassedly eliding his words)—people were really worked up about the NEA and their feelings simply could not be ignored. B

By this time it was clear to me that we were all Jessie Helmer prisoners to one degree or another because nobody had the

political courage to face down the calculated hysteria being whipped up about a handful of filthy and irreverent pictures. It was very sad, particularly because every politician I spoke to kept referring to "their feelings," not his own.

For one thing, it was clear that in purifying art that aspires to seriousness, we simply leave the field cleared for the non-Governmentally funded junk--the videos and the girls magazines, and yes, a lot of the TV advertizing on which this country veritable floats. But it's usually this way--nobody ever thinks of censoring low art, and no doubt for the good democratic reason that the majority has little interest in high art and no politician is crazy enough to mess with the stuff most voters amuse themselves with--the real high-stench garbage.

One Congressman from the Midwest, a supporter of NEA, had a different angle. Conceding that Helms had managed to speciously capture the moral high ground, he felt it was hopeless by now to mount a pure and principled resistance as he believed Mr. Frohnmeyer, head of NEA, should have done at the first attack. Some compromise was inevitable, so the Congressman, a liberal, was fiddling with new language authorizing the NEA which would prohibit funding of works that "deliberately denigrate the cultural heritage of the United States, its religious traditions, or racial or ethnic groups."

He meant well, no doubt, but his suggestion had brought us pretty far from disgusting photos. Now we were into religion and culture and race, areas where Congress clearly has no right

to legislate, but this only illustrates where this whole far-Right campaign is dragging us--straight into political censorship. No wonder Plato would not let artists into his ideal society--there was just no easy way to keep them in line.

And there still isn't. Not in a democracy. And Congress ought to give up trying to kid itself--laying down orthodox lines of taste in matters of art means censorship. There isn't a graceful way around this. Let Jessie Helms get elected on some other issue that doesn't matter this much to the good name of the United States, still the freest society in the world.

I thought Conservatives, following Reagan, were out to get the Government off our backs. Why can't we express our disgust at individuals rather than calling out the troops to do it?

I thought Helms and his Government-subsidized tobacco grower friends were opposed to government slapping a warning label on cigarette packs, demanding that each individual have the right to decide for himself whether he wants to risk a lung cancer. Why can't individuals decide whether to risk their morals looking at pictures without government interference? Isn't moral and artistic freedom of expression as important to us as the freedom to make a man-killing buck?

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