

ARTISTIC FREEDOM? ANTISEMITISM IN ARTS & CULTURE

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A close examination of art history often unveils antisemitic motifs in art and literature, sometimes subtly embedded, other times expressed more overtly. These works reflected the societal prejudices and resentments of their time. While the anti-Jewish imagery in historical masterpieces may be less immediately recognizable to contemporary audiences, such portrayals were unmistakable to viewers of the past - an example being the depiction of Judas in *The Last Supper*.¹

These depictions not only had a lasting impact on the perception and treatment of Jews but also shaped the cultural landscape. Art operates on multiple levels, as “antisemitic images in art and literature can be particularly memorable since the arts tell stories and resonate in diverse ways.”²

Antisemitism in Contemporary Art: Challenges for Institutions and Public Discourse

Recognizing antisemitic patterns is crucial today for promoting a more inclusive and respectful society. In 2022, the German Research and Information Center on Antisemitism (RIAS) documented 170 antisemitic incidents within the arts and culture sector, with many occurring at documenta fifteen in the city of Kassel. These incidents, such as the antisemitic motifs in the “People-Justice” banner by the Indonesian group Taring Padi, sparked heated discussions in German media, highlighting the need for a more profound engagement with antisemitism in the art world. These incidents have also triggered public debates about the responsibility of art institutions in dealing with antisemitic content and the following months the allocation of public funding in general.³

Looking at the same group two years earlier, a pattern can be seen: With the publication of the “Plea GG 5.3 Openness to the World,” Taring Padi advocated for a

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funding and Responsibility

Public funding plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape and should not be allocated to projects that promote antisemitic content or narratives. The clear application of the IHRA definition can serve as a standard to ensure that funded projects uphold the values of inclusion, diversity, and human dignity regarding Jewish life.

Policy and Educational Initiatives

Adopting the IHRA definition within cultural institutions and integrating it into training programs can build awareness and sensitivity to antisemitism in arts and culture. Initiatives like “Teaching about Antisemitism” should be institutionalized, providing tools for cultural professionals to identify and counter antisemitic rhetoric effectively.

Antisemitic Movements

Movements like BDS often disguise antisemitism as political critique against the policies of the State of Israel. European cultural institutions must counter these influences by addressing the misuse of art for divisive political agendas.

Unified Action and Standards

Establishing coordinated European strategies against antisemitism in the arts, involving ministries at various levels, can ensure consistent application of already established laws and standards. This approach will reestablish a vibrant European cultural sector that respects diversity, inclusivity, and shared humanity regarding Jewish life as part of it.

nuanced approach to the definition of antisemitism, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israeli policies in the cultural sector. The initiative called for maintaining artistic and academic freedom while con-

demning all forms of antisemitism. This plea, signed by numerous prominent German cultural institutions, claimed that artistic freedom in Germany was under threat from the Bundestag's BDS resolution and the use of "abusive accusations of antisemitism." While the signatories emphasized that they rejected the BDS movement's boycott calls, they rhetorically linked criticism of collaboration with BDS-supporting artists to a perceived threat to artistic freedom.⁴

This prompts an important question for lawmakers: To what extent should the state support art and culture that may convey controversial or divisive ideologies? Public funding for such projects inevitably plays a role in shaping society, guided by constitutional principles and fundamental rights. While freedom of expression remains a cornerstone of democratic societies and must be upheld, the use of public funds raises the question of how to balance this right with the values and societal norms that are also reflected in the constitution.

A crucial step in addressing antisemitism in the arts and cultural sector is the adoption and implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism across all cultural institutions in Europe. This definition provides a clear framework for identifying and tackling antisemitism and should serve as a guide for recognizing, exposing, and curbing antisemitic content. Integrating the IHRA definition into training and professional development programs for cultural institutions can sustainably enhance awareness and sensitivity to antisemitism among staff and leadership.

One essential characteristic of the IHRA definition is that it is able to establish comprehensive and binding standards for decision making regarding public art funding. Applied rigorously, it can ensure that funds are not allocated to artists, institutions, or projects that engage in or promote antisemitic narratives or ideologies. Clear and transparent implementation of this policy is critical to preventing the spread of antisemitic ideologies in the cultural sector. Funding decisions must align with a commitment to uphold fundamental values of inclusion, diversity, and human dignity.

Countering Modern Challenges: Addressing BDS and Promoting Jewish Representation

Following October 7, there was widespread criticism of the lack of solidarity from parts of the international arts and music communities. Criticism was directed at the silence of some popular actors in the arts and culture sector who failed to take a stance against the brutal attacks. Instead, since then Europe has witnessed many public antisemitic incidents within the art scene, sparking significant concern and debates.⁵

For instance, at the prestigious Venice Biennale opening in April 2024, artworks have drawn criticism for including antisemitic imagery or narratives. There were calls to boycott the Israeli pavilion, with activists presenting their protests as opposition to Israeli government policies. These actions were part of a broader effort to delegitimize Israel in the international cultural arena, often under the guise of political critique but carrying undertones of antisemitism.

The Israeli pavilion faced targeted disruptions, including protests and public statements that sought to isolate Israeli artists simply for representing their country. This not only placed undue pressure on the participating artists but also sparked broader debates about the role of art—as a platform for open dialogue and cultural exchange versus a stage for advancing political agendas. Some protesters openly used antisemitic tropes, framing Israel and its cultural representatives as symbols of oppression, thereby conflating artistic expression with political ideology.⁶ At the same time, the Israeli artist delegation decided to keep the pavilion closed to criticize the Israeli government regarding its policy regarding the war and insufficient efforts to liberate the hostages.

Antisemitism in International Cultural Events: Lessons from the ESC and Beyond

Another example is the boycott call surrounding the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) in Malmö in May 2024, which was marked by attempts to politicize the event through Israel-related antisemitism. Activists and certain groups advocated for boycotting the ESC, citing Israel's participation as their justification. This reflects a broader pattern in which Israel-related antisemitism disguises itself as political critique but often crosses

the line into delegitimization and demonization of the Jewish state.^{7/8}

Calls to boycott Israel in cultural contexts, such as the ESC, not only target Israeli artists but also aim to isolate Israel on the global stage. These actions often ignore the principles of cultural exchange and dialogue that events like the Eurovision Song Contest are meant to embody. Such incidents underscore the urgent need for organizers of international cultural events to actively moderate political discussions and counter antisemitism as soon as it takes place within the political discussions.⁹

These incidents across Europe underscore how political discourse continues to provide a fertile ground for the propagation of antisemitic narratives. Prejudiced stereotypes in contemporary art underscore the need for greater awareness and accountability in cultural institutions. Such occurrences often provoke public outrage and lead to discussions about the balance between artistic freedom and the responsibility to prevent hate speech, illustrating the urgent necessity of addressing antisemitism in arts and culture on a European scale. The presence of antisemitic content in arts and culture has significant impacts on Jewish communities and Jewish life worldwide. It creates a climate of fear and exclusion, leading to social isolation, psychological stress, and trauma. The normalization of antisemitism in cultural expressions results in an increase in hate crimes against Jews, further marginalizing Jewish artists and creatives.¹⁰

A Comprehensive Strategy to Address Antisemitism in Arts & Culture

In this context, efforts to marginalize the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement must be prioritized. BDS often targets Israeli artists and institutions under the guise of political critique, but its campaigns align with antisemitic rhetoric. European cultural institutions must take a firm stance against this movement and actively minimize its influence. As an alternative to boycotts, cultural programs should emphasize the active inclusion of Jewish art and culture, making diverse Jewish perspectives more visible and fostering constructive cultural exchange. Supporting Jewish artists and narratives can create a positive counterweight to divisive movements like BDS.

Education plays a crucial role in detecting and combating antisemitism. Enhanced educational programs should address both the historical roots of antisemitism and its contemporary forms. For example, the “Teaching about Antisemitism” initiative by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) provides workshops and resources tailored to educators, museum staff, and cultural leaders. These initiatives should particularly target leaders and employees of cultural and artistic institutions, equipping them to recognize antisemitic narratives and imagery while providing practical tools for intervention.^{11/12}

A potential approach could be to institutionalize such programs and make them a mandatory part of professional training and continuing education. By integrating these efforts into the standard curricula of educational, cultural, and artistic institutions, the responsibility to address and counter antisemitism would become a fundamental and systemic aspect of professional development. This would ensure that the knowledge and tools to combat antisemitism are consistently disseminated and applied across sectors, fostering a more inclusive and proactive cultural landscape.

Cultural and academic institutions must also be supported in developing antisemitism-critical prevention measures and emergency response and intervention plans. This includes incorporating expert advice into the selection and hiring processes, and fostering a commitment to address these institutions’ historical ties to antisemitism, particularly during the National Socialist era. Universities and cultural organizations should also enforce strict measures against students or staff who engage in antisemitic speech or actions, including expulsion for deliberate offenses against Jewish individuals or groups.¹³

A coordinated approach to funding education for decision-makers, like top-level officials and elected representatives focusing at policies regarding arts and creative industries, could establish a collective standard and consensus regarding the prevention of antisemitic narratives in publicly funded art-projects. Coordinating this education between European ministries on national, regional, and EU-level, could streamline efforts to create a unified European strategy against antisemitism in the international and the

national art scenes. Most important is not to establish additional administrative burdens but equip decision makers with the tools to rigorously apply existing laws and standards.

In summary, a comprehensive approach to combating antisemitism in arts and culture requires clear and decisive action. This includes strengthening educational initiatives to build awareness and capacity within cultural institutions. Furthermore, Jewish art and culture needs to be promoted holistically, to en-

rich cultural dialogue and foster inclusivity. Ultimately, it means ensuring that public funding is denied by principle to projects that promote antisemitic views or narratives, actively countering the influence of movements like BDS. These measures not only serve to combat antisemitism but also enhance the cultural landscape by fostering open, diverse, and inclusive dialogue. By setting clear standards and taking decisive action, Europe can ensure that its cultural and artistic institutions uphold the values of respect, diversity, and shared humanity.¹⁴

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