

# Maggie Nelson: On Freedom [C1]

Questa saggista americana riflette sul significato della libertà, esplorando l'arte, il sesso, le droghe e le condizioni ambientali con un linguaggio che contrasta con la rigidità delle ideologie egemoniche.

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Maggie Nelson is an American writer and academic who mixes big ideas, especially what it means to be free, with [insight](#) from her own life. Her best-known book *The Argonauts* (2015) is a genre-defying exploration of love, sex and family life. In it, Nelson [brings together](#) the ideas of theorists, especially queer theorists, with intimate descriptions of life with her partner, the visual artist and writer Harry Dodge, and their children. In her latest book *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and [Constraint](#)*, Nelson takes four areas of life, art, sex, drugs and the environment, to explore what freedom means. She writes frankly about her own life, including her sexual relationships and former drug use, as a way of illustrating her arguments.

## A NUANCED APPROACH

In the first section on freedom in art, Nelson looks at how violence and brutality is [depicted](#) in art. How can we reconcile ethical considerations with the artistic freedom to break taboos and potentially offend people? Is it appropriate to remove art from museums if it offends certain groups of people? Is it OK to have misogynist books or films on a university [syllabus](#)? These are issues that Nelson encounters frequently with her students at the California Institute of the Arts, where she is a teacher. Nelson's [thoughtful](#) and [nuanced](#) responses to these questions contrast with the black and white thinking of cancel culture. While she accepts that certain people will feel offended by certain works of art, she herself prefers to consider art as a space that doesn't do [harm](#) to her. She wants [to move away](#) from the "orthopedic aesthetic"—the idea that art is created [to fix](#) something that [is lacking](#) in the viewer. **Maggie Nelson (American accent):** There's a book by Jacques Rancière called *The Emancipated Spectator*. He has a kind of counter-intuitive thesis saying that art is emancipating when it ceases to

want to emancipate us. I found that inspiring as [food for thought](#). In some ways, the desire to emancipate somebody is a desire to do something to them. It's aggressive. It's something called the 'orthopedic aesthetic', which is an idea that there's something wrong with us that we need an intervention [to fix](#). And I've always been highly skeptical of an orthopedic aesthetic, that approach to art.

## OFFENSIVE ART

Nelson explains how instead she appreciates art that is created with care but doesn't [aim](#) to provoke a specific response. She suggests that if we can see an art work as something that doesn't care about us, any sense of personal offense will be less. And the more we encounter "offensive art", the more we can grow resilient, learning to take what we need and leave the rest. But, of course, context is crucial, and Nelson [stresses](#) that reading a particular book or choosing to go into an art museum is different from being forced to look at offensive works of art in the public space. **Maggie Nelson:** If somebody tells me "I feel [harm](#)ed by this piece of art", I don't tell them "No, you weren't." I would [give somebody that grace](#) to say how they feel. Me, personally, I find value in not considering art a space that does [harm](#) to me. I wrote a book called *The Art of Cruelty* a few years ago, that's a kind of tour through some very extreme brutality in art through the 20th century. So I guess I wouldn't be in that business [did I think that](#) art were [harm](#)ing me ... But I do think it's a pragmatic [claim](#) that can be made when people are [fed up](#) with white supremacist art, with misogynistic art, with homophobic expressions, with museums that steal and don't serve their communities. One of the things that I think makes art different — about reading a book or going into a museum — is that typically you've chosen to go experience art, right? And that's a different thing than if I walk down the street and someone's [raining hate speech on](#) me. I think as an avid art goer, one can grow one's resiliency for looking at a lot of things, taking what you need, and leaving the rest and [whatnot](#).

## LIFE MEETS THEORY

The chapter on freedom in sex includes intimate [insights](#) from Nelson's relationship with Harry Dodge, a gender-fluid artist and film-maker. Nelson addresses several issues that are often seen as hot potatoes, especially by feminists. For example, the erotic pleasures of submission. **Maggie Nelson:** Everywhere these days the story we're told is that we fought for sexual liberation, we won all these things, like women could do these different things, queers could do these different things... but that it was a grand disappointment. Everything's worse. Sex remained bad. Maybe liberation was a bad idea. That now we're in the age of the great [come-down](#), kind of [splitting off](#) in two directions. Like one, feminists that might say — you know, correctly —, "There's much more work to do. Let's look at all the things yet to be done and all the injustices yet [to be addressed](#)". The other direction is a much more reactionary direction, which I feel like you see every day in the [papers](#). And it calls itself feminist — I don't really consider it so — that would say, "Oh, women don't really want sexual freedom. They want emotional connection. They want monogamy. They've been led into these horrible corners of sexual liberation that they don't really want and they don't like". I've heard this a lot in the United States with people who call themselves feminists but who are very pro overturning Roe v. Wade and ending legal abortion. I completely think that there's a different story to tell about forms of feminism and trans feminism and feminist and queer solidarity that can lead us to a much better place.

## RESTRAINT

In the third and fourth chapters, Nelson talks about how, in order to achieve freedom, we sometimes need to exercise restraint. In the chapter on drugs, she talks about her own experience of freedom through sobriety. Nelson herself used to drink heavily and use recreational drugs, but then made the choice to become entirely sober. How does this personal restraint on behaviour [fit](#) with her idea of freedom? And how might this model of restraint inform our attitudes to freedom and the environment? **Maggie Nelson:** Something I learned via sobriety was that that vision of a kind of puritanical, constant control [bore no resemblance whatsoever](#) to the

experience of sobriety, which to me was one of the most freeing decisions I ever made in my life, compared to how I lived compulsively drinking alcohol. I remember when I was [hanging out](#) with a lot of junkies in New York, back in my twenties, and I had this day where I thought, “Why don’t we ever go anywhere?” You know, junkies think this a lot. “Why don’t we ever leave New York? Why don’t we go away for the weekend? Why don’t we get in the car? Why don’t we go see the ocean?” And everyone was like, “Yeah, yeah. Lets go, let’s go”. And then as night came, everyone was like “You know? I don’t think we should really go.” It became very obvious that we all didn’t want to go because everybody wanted [to score](#). That is not freedom. This experience of restraint as a portal to freedom is really important, and it was important for me to have a lived experience of understanding of how restraint can serve as a portal to new forms of freedom.

## **RUNAWAY TRAIN**

In the final chapter on the environment, she explores how, in a world in which we can feel like we’re tied to a [runaway](#) train heading for catastrophe, the survival of humankind necessarily means restraining the excesses of the few. Some sectors of western society [claim](#) that having to change our behaviour in order to address climate catastrophe is an unacceptable limitation of freedom. But Nelson argues that restraint, for example in the use of fossil fuels, is the only way to ensure the possibility of freedom for future generations. And she points out that the feeling of being on a [runaway](#) train is nothing new for many peoples, both now and throughout history. **Maggie Nelson:** Many cultures, many massacred, [decimated](#), genocided cultures, native Americans, Black Africans transported in the Transatlantic [slave trade](#)... many cultures have dealt with contemplating the end of their way of life and their people. And not just contemplated it but lived it. And there are ways of thinking, solutions, [fortitude](#), plans for how to survive, how to keep going. There’s a lot for white Europeans and Americans and others to learn from places and from people that are kind of like: “Welcome to the club!”

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# Glossary

- **nuanced** = sfumatura
- **splitting off** = separarsi
- **papers** = giornali
- **slave trade** = tratta degli schiavi
- **give somebody that grace** = dare a qualcuno la grazia
- **fit** = adattare
- **whatsoever** = assolutamente
- **decimated** = decimare
- **syllabus** = programma di studio
- **is lacking** = mancare
- **aim** = mirare a, aspirare a
- **stresses** = accentuare
- **fortitude** = coraggio, forza d'animo
- **depicted** = rappresentare
- **to move away** = allontanarsi
- **food for thought** = spunto di riflessione
- **did I think that** = se pensassi che...
- **whatnot** = e quant'altro, eccetera
- **to fix** = riparare
- **come-down** = declino
- **hanging out** = frequentare, uscire con
- **runaway** = fuori controllo
- **Constraint** = autocontrollo, costrizione
- **fed up** = stufa
- **raining hate speech on** = cadere addosso
- **bore no resemblance** = avere una somiglianza
- **to score** = ottenere (droga)
- **insight** = opinioni, visioni
- **brings together** = unire
- **harm** = male, danno
- **to be addressed** = affrontare
- **thoughtful** = meditato, ponderato