Cinema as Philosophy of Art

Temenuga Trifonova

Abstract
This chapter explores the cinematic imaginary of art, specifically the ways in which contemporary cinema uses art to stage debates around truth, authenticity, and aura. Through an analysis of a number of representative films, it demonstrates that whenever art "enters" cinema it automatically introduces into a film's narrative (and often its style) the long-standing philosophical debate around truth and authenticity. Frequently, art and the spaces of art (galleries, museums, artist studios) in cinema are over-determined by the history of the philosophy of art and the main questions that have informed it, including the questions of "truth," "authenticity," "reproducibility," and "value" (e.g., cult value versus exhibition value).

Keywords: truth, authenticity, aura, philosophy of art, heist film

Philosophy (or "theory") of art is concerned with defining and classifying "art" and related concepts such as "mimesis," "interpretation," "aesthetic properties," and "aesthetic value."[1] Generally, formalist theories privilege art's formal properties in defining and evaluating works of art, institutional theories consider the definition of art as a product of an *artworld*,[2] aesthetic creation theories underscore the importance of aesthetic intention in defining "art,"[3] historical theories hold that for something to be considered "art" it must bear some relation to previously established artworks,[4] while anti-essentialist theories view art as an "open concept" that cannot be defined in terms of a static, univocal essence.[5]

The notion of "mimesis," along with the idea of "truth" in/of art, remains a highly debated topic in philosophy of art and aesthetic theory, from Plato's warning about the dangers of mimesis, through Aristotle's affirmation of art's potential to convey universal truths and strengthen moral character through an emotional catharsis, to the Romantics' passionate defense of the power of art

[1] For a survey of major writings on philosophy of art, see Hofstadter and Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art*.
[2] Danto, "The Artworld," 580–581.
[3] Zangwill, *Aesthetic*, 57.
[4] Levinson, "Defining," 232.
[5] Weitz, "The Role," 28.

to produce emotional/moral insights and knowledge about the world that cannot be expressed in propositional terms. In the twentieth century and beyond, art critics and philosophers of art have remained ambivalent about the idea of "truth in/of art," as evidenced by the divergent positions taken by three major studies on this subject: Eric Auerbach's classic study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) sought to demonstrate Western literature's progress, from antiquity to the twentieth century, toward increasingly naturalistic and democratic forms of representation; Jay Bernstein's *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1993) described the experience of art in the age of modernity, in which art has finally lost its truth-function, as one of "aesthetic alienation"; while Lambert Zuidervaart's *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure* (2009) tried to redeem the notion of "artistic truth" from twentieth-century skepticism.[6]

What does philosophy of art have to do with cinema, you might ask. To begin to answer this question we might recall Arthur Danto's observation that, "[w]hen philosophy first noticed art, it was in connection with the possibility of deception."[7] Danto refers to this possibility of deception as "the Problem of Indiscernible Counterparts":

> A philosophical question arises whenever we have two objects which seem in every relevant particular to be alike, but which belong to importantly different philosophical categories. Descartes for example supposed his experience while dreaming could be indistinguishable from his experience awake, so that no internal criterion could divide delusion from knowledge. Wittgenstein noted that there is nothing to distinguish someone's raising his arm from someone's arm going up, though the distinction between

[6] On "mimesis" and related issues, including the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, the ontological status of fictitious beings, and emotional investment in imaginary events, see Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. On the types of knowledge claims art gives rise to, see Freeland, "Art and Moral Knowledge."
[7] Danto, "Art, Philosophy," 1–2.

> even the simplest action and a mere bodily movement seems fundamental to the way we think of our freedom [. . .] In all these cases one must seek the differences outside the juxtaposed and puzzling examples, and this is no less the case when seeking to account for the differences between works of art and mere real things which happen exactly to resemble them.[8]

Deception and illusion are constitutive not only of philosophy – "A problem is not a philosophical problem," argues Danto, "unless it is possible to imagine that its solution will consist in showing how appearance has been taken for reality"[9] – but also of modern art, "for when art attains the level of self-consciousness it has come to attain in our era, the distinction between art and philosophy becomes as problematic as the distinction between reality and art."[10] And if we go back to the early years of cinema we would recall that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, cinema's status as an art was premised precisely on its unique power to represent alternate realities, identities, and temporalities; in short, its power to deceive[11] – consider, for instance, horror films in the fantastic tradition exploring the themes of the doppelgänger, the ontological confusion between life and art, and between original and copy, and the unreliability of perception and memory.[12]

It is not surprising, then, that whenever cinema takes an interest in art, it is almost always in connection with the possibility of deception. Like art documentaries, from those seeking to capture the dynamic explosiveness and ineffability of artistic creation (e.g. Kevin Macdonald's 2016 *Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang* and Andrey Paounov's 2018 *Walking on Water*) to

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Danto, *Connections*, 6.

[10] Idem, "Art, Philosophy," 1–2. On modern art's self-consciousness, see Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* and Greenberg, "Modernist Painting."

[11] For a detailed analysis, see Trifonova, *Warped Minds*.

[12] For instance, *The Student of Prague* (Stellan Rye and Paul Wegener, 1913), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Lucius Henderson, 1912), *The Golem* (Paul Wegener and Carl Boese, 1920), *The Other* (Max Mack, 1913), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), and many others.

those bent on exposing the artworld's collusion with market capitalism and neoliberalism (e.g. Ben Lewis's 2009 *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* and Nathaniel Kahn's 2018 *The Price of Everything*), most fiction films set in the artworld promote either the *idea of art as truth* (where the notion of "truth" is itself internally divided between its association with the ineffable, the transitory and the contingent on one hand, and with the essential, the immortal, and the indestructible on the other hand[13]), or the opposite yet complementary *idea of art as deception*, which can be traced back to Plato's critique of art. The mutual imbrication of art, truth, and deception provides the matrix for films as different as Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), in which clues in a painting lead to a tragic story about lost love, obsession, and voyeurism, and Ron Howard's *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), in which the truth about the foundations of Christianity turns out to depend on the "correct" interpretation of clues in Da Vinci paintings. As we shall see by looking at a number of films set in the artworld – *The Thomas Crown Affair* (John McTiernan, 1999), *Headhunters* (Morten Tyldum, 2011), *The Best Offer* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2013), *Trance* (Danny Boyle, 2013), *Nocturnal Animals* (Tom Ford, 2016), *The Square* (Ruben Östlund, 2017), *The Burnt Orange Heresy* (Giuseppe Capotondi, 2019), and *Velvet Buzzsaw* (Dan Gilroy, 2019) – when art appears in cinema, whether it is in the form of particular artists, artworks, art practices, or in the form of the spaces of art (galleries, museums, and artist studios), it never does so as a neutral subject; rather, it seems to automatically introduce into the narrative, and often into the film's style as well, questions about truth, authenticity, "cult value," and "exhibition value" (Benjamin) with which philosophy of art has traditionally concerned itself.

[13] In the words of Baudelaire, the work of art has to answer to two different aesthetic ideals; it must be both antique and modern at the same time: "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of the art. The other half is the eternal, the immovable." "La Modernité," 797–798.

Films set in the artworld tend to be variations on the same general theme: the conflict between reality and illusion, authenticity, and forgery. Perhaps no other genre makes this clearer than the art heist film. Regardless of how central the art robbery is to the main plot – some films focus on the preparation for the robbery, its execution, and its consequences (*The Thomas Crown Affair*) while others foreground the symbolic function of the stolen artwork (John Crowley's *The Goldfinch*, 2019) – the function of an artwork in these films, its raison d'être, is to frame the central conflict in terms of an opposition between reality and illusion, authenticity and forgery, truth and falseness. The artwork is thus used as *a representational tool*: a representation (an artwork) is used to "represent" the conflict in the film. By using art to stage long-standing philosophical debates cinema carves out for itself a privileged place supposedly "outside" such debates, creating the illusion that the questions that continue to trouble art are "resolved" by cinema since by dramatizing these questions cinema demonstrates its "awareness" of them. This allows cinema to occupy, however tentatively, the "superior" position philosophy of art has traditionally occupied (or believed itself to occupy) with respect to art. Ironically, as we shall see, even as films set in the artworld question, mock or condemn the ontologically ungrounded nature of art – which remains forever torn between truth and illusion – many of them end up affirming art's Janus-faced nature as, in fact, the only guarantee of truth. As soon as art "enters" cinema it brings with it the threat of inauthenticity, deception, and illusion; yet, this threat is ultimately revealed as indispensable to any notion of truth in the realm of lived experience, regardless of whether "lived experience" refers to romantic feelings (*The Thomas Crown Affair, The Best Offer, The Burnt Orange Heresy, Nocturnal Animals, Headhunters*) or to moral/ethical integrity (*The Burnt Orange Heresy*, *Velvet Buzzsaw, The Square*).

In Norman Jewison's *Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), millionaire businessman-sportsman Crown organizes a $2 million bank robbery, but McTiernan's 1999 remake raises the stakes by having Crown leave the Metropolitan Museum of Art (after orchestrating an impressive Trojan horse robbery) with Monet's $100-million-worth *San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk* (1908). When Crown donates a Pissarro to fill the space left by the Monet on the museum wall he attracts the suspicion of Catherine Banting, an insurance investigator appointed to the case. Sensing that Crown is motivated by the thrill of risk-taking rather than by greed, Catherine convinces the chief detective leading the NYPD team to place the tycoon under surveillance. After a pre-credit scene, in which Crown's session with his therapist (played by Faye Dunaway, who appeared in the original film[14]) establishes him as a lone wolf with trust issues, the film follows Catherine and Crown's cat-and-mouse game as they try to outsmart each other without allowing themselves to fall in love. What makes this otherwise formulaic romance intriguing is that the film posits the authenticity/falseness of art (paintings presented as authentic turn out to be fake, or vice versa) and the authenticity/falseness of romantic feelings as two sides of the same coin: the authenticity of an artwork is used as a *sign* of the authenticity of romantic feelings. Every plot twist in *The Affair* revolves around love and art as two parallel and mutually determined sign systems: as long as Crown's feelings for Catherine or her feelings for him remain suspect, the authenticity of the artworks that keep swapping hands and places cannot be verified. It is only in the final robbery sequence, which has Crown, disguised as Magritte's immediately recognizable anonymous-looking man in an overcoat and bowler hat, cleverly evade the Met police by blending into a crowd

[14] The casting of the same actors in many of the films set in the artworld – Claes Bang is an art curator in *The Square* and an art critic in *Heresy*; Rene Russo is an art insurance investigator in *The Affair* and an art gallery owner in *Buzzsaw*; Zawe Ashton is a wannabe art curator in *Buzzsaw* and an art gallery assistant in *Nocturnal Animals*; Jake Gyllenhaal is a novelist previously married to an art gallery owner in *Nocturnal Animals* and an art critic in *Buzzsaw* – could perhaps be seen as a comment on the incestuous nature of the artworld.

of Magritte's *Son of Man* (1964) lookalikes, that Crown's feelings for Catherine are finally confirmed as "true": once Crown disappears the museum's fire sprinklers wash the paint off of the *Pissarro* that Crown had earlier donated to the museum, revealing underneath the *real Monet* he stole at the beginning of the film.

Surprisingly, even as the film's high production values and artworld setting acknowledge the commodification of art – the replacement of the bank robbery in the original film with an art robbery in the remake clearly spells out the difference between "real money" (the familiar image of hundreds of bills in a suitcase) whose value, no matter how great, remains the same, and art as a repository of speculative value and thus worth infinitely more – the film also posits art as a kind of *ur-value* that determines other values (such as the value or authenticity of romantic feelings or a character's moral integrity) while remaining itself "outside" the realm of commodity capitalism. This ambivalence underlying the film's image of art as, at one and the same time, thoroughly commodified and outside commodification, is evident in the figure of Crown himself. Although there is always something revolting about excessive wealth there is nothing vulgar about Crown: his main reason for stealing is not greed but the old-fashioned thrill a gambling addict feels at the sight of the casino roulette. That Crown is not your run-of-the-mill thief but a "real art lover" is hinted at in an early scene, in which Crown is sitting alone in the museum, admiring van Gogh's *Noon: Rest from Work (After Millet)* (1890). When a museum guard jokes that everyone else is lining up to see the Monet, Crown responds that he prefers "his haystacks." We are meant to see Crown as a true "art connoisseur" with a personal taste that does not necessarily overlap with the public's taste, someone for whom the value of art is personal ("*my* haystacks") and thus unquantifiable. The ambivalence of Crown's character – a man whose appreciation of art's exhibition value has allowed him to amass a fortune, which, in turn, allows him the luxury to

appreciate art for its cult value – is just one instance of the multiple reversals of an artwork's cult and exhibition value in *The Affair*, whose narrative revolves around one major question: what is for sale, and what is not. Although the very presence of Catherine, an art insurance investigator, foregrounds the exchange/exhibition value of art (her profession exists because under capitalism art is a hot commodity) the film also draws on a long tradition of art as a metaphor for romantic love. Ironically, Crown's ostentatious gestures of stealing very expensive paintings, only to return them later, draw on art's exchange value to signify that which supposedly has no exchange value – romantic love. The film playfully turns on its head the assumption, central to discourses of art forgery, that "the original" is always to be found underneath "the copy/forgery" when the painting *Poker Sympathy* (Cassius Coolidge, 1903) turns out to *conceal* not a real but a *fake Monet*. It also invites us to witness the swapping of an artwork's *exhibition value* (the original Monet hanging in the museum) with its *cult value*: when Crown returns the stolen, real Monet to the museum it remains for a brief period of time invisible, covered by a fake *Pissarro*, i.e. the *Monet*'s "*exhibition* value" remains, paradoxically, *hidden*, becoming visible again only when Crown sets off the museum sprinklers. Ultimately, as formulaic as *The Affair* is it also succeeds in popularizing philosophical questions about reality and appearance, original and copy, cult value versus exhibition value, offering a playful lesson in philosophy of art that takes us from Plato's writings on "truth" and "art" as "mere imitation" to Benjamin's reflections, in *The Work of Art* essay (1936), on the decline of aura and the substitution of "cult value" with "exhibition value."[15]

In *Headhunters*, too, the artworld – framed in the familiar terms of truth/authenticity versus illusion/falseness – provides a symbolic frame within which to explore a married couple's feelings, whose authenticity is judged in terms of the authenticity of an artwork. A successful headhunter

[15] Benjamin uses the term "aura" to describe the cult value of an artwork, which relates to the physical presence of the art object in time and space and thus to the object's history. Benjamin, "The Work of Art."

(Roger Brown) for the company Pathfinder uses his position to lure in wealthy executives, learn about their assets (art), and schedule appointments for them with other clients, during which he breaks into their homes and swaps their artwork for a counterfeit. Roger's wife (Diana), an art gallery owner, introduces him to a former executive (Greve) for a Danish GPS tech company, and shares with Roger that Greve has asked her to authenticate a lost Rubens painting that he inherited. While stealing the painting from Greve's home Roger discovers that his wife is having an affair with Greve. The rest of the film follows Roger and Greve as they pursue each other relentlessly until Roger eventually kills Greve – who, it turns out, was still working for his Dutch company and trying to steal corporate secrets from Pathfinder – and repairs his broken marriage.

Headhunters reverses the value of authenticity that *The Affair* assigned to artwork and personal feelings. When, early in the film Greve fabricates an emotional backstory for the Rubens involving a German officer's forbidden love affair with a Jewish woman, thus foregrounding the painting's aura at the expense of its exchange value, Roger and Diana's marriage is shown to have a mere "exhibition value" (their feelings are not sincere) as becomes evident when Diana literally exchanges her husband for Greve. However, the later revelation that the Rubens is a counterfeit immediately triggers an inverted reaffirmation of the authenticity of Roger and Diana's marital love, which is now presented as *not* exchangeable: "It was a mistake. It's you that I want," Diana tells Roger. Thus, when the artwork is assumed to be authentic the authenticity of the marriage is put into question, but as soon as the painting is revealed to have been forged the authenticity of the marriage is reaffirmed.

At first glance, *The Best Offer*, set in a generically European world of high-end art auctions and focusing on the misanthropic director of an esteemed auction house (Virgil Oldman), seems to have nothing in common with art heist films like *The Affair* and *Headhunters*. Virgil is hired by

a mysterious young woman (Claire Ibbetson), a severe agoraphobic who has never left her room, to auction off the collection of art and antiques left to her by her parents. Virgil's initial resentment for the woman gradually melts away as he finds himself drawn to her reclusive ways. A side story involves a young mechanic (Robert) helping Virgil reassemble some odd mechanical parts he finds among Claire's belongings, while also giving him advice on how to get closer to her. Eventually Virgil falls in love with Claire and convinces her to move in with him. He is so smitten with her that he shows her his spectacular secret collection of women portraits acquired through an ongoing scam with the help of his aging artist friend Whistler. One day Virgil returns home to find Claire and his collection (worth millions) gone, except for an automaton constructed from the mechanical parts Virgil gave to Robert, which plays a message (from Robert) that "there is something real in every forgery." Virgil now realizes (to his surprise though hardly to ours) that feelings, like art, can be forged and that he is the victim of an elaborate scam by Robert and Claire.

Like *The Affair* and *Headhunters*, *The Best Offer* uses its artworld setting to interrogate the authenticity of romantic feelings, exploring the nature of "forgery" both in its figurative and art-historical sense: Virgil's magnificent collection of women portraits is the result of years of forged appraisals of artworks, while his romance with Claire, in the course of which he "forges" the woman of his dreams, unaware that she is playing him all along, can be read as a version of the Pygmalion myth, refracted through the real historical figure of Jacques de Vaucanson, an eighteenth-century French inventor-artist famous for his impressive automata. But, as Virgil tells one of his clients, all forgers inevitably betray themselves since they are irresistibly tempted to modify the original, thereby revealing their own artistic sensibilities: this is true not only of the art forgers Virgil prides himself on being able to expose, or auctioneer forgers like Virgil himself, but also of Virgil the man, whose "artistic sensibility" and non-existent relationship to women not only

finds expression in his forgery of the real Claire into the ideal woman of his dreams, but also makes him vulnerable to Claire's emotional counterfeit. Paradoxically, like in many of the other films analyzed here – note the similarities with *Nocturnal Animals*, in which, too, art becomes the vehicle through which something real ("authentic feelings") emerges – *The Best Offer* exposes various kinds of forgery only to find the greatest truth (Virgil's love) at the very heart of forgery.

Trance follows another, this time younger, art auctioneer (Simon) who gets mixed up with a gang that he helps steal Goya's *Witches in the Air* from his auction house. When later the gang leader discovers that the package Simon helped them steal contains only an empty frame, he hires a hypnotherapist (Elizabeth) to force Simon to remember where he hid the painting. Although not explicitly concerned with authenticity and forgery in the artworld, *Trance* uses art in ways similar to *The Affair*, *Headhunters*, and *The Best Offer*, specifically by drawing a parallel between the interpretation of artworks and the unreliability of memory and feelings, although it is not the stolen painting but another Goya painting – *Nude Maja* (1795) – that serves as the criterion for evaluating the authenticity of romantic feelings, which, in this case, hangs, rather absurdly, on the representation of pubic hair: the authenticity of Elizabeth's feelings for Simon depend on whether her shaved pubic hair matches or not Simon's recollection of his own analysis of the art historical role of pubic hair in *Nude Maja* (which serves as evidence of the painting's modernity).

The Burnt Orange Heresy, an art scene noir that also explores emotional forgery in terms of art forgery, and vice versa, opens with James Figueras, a charismatic (former) art critic, lecturing to American culture buffs in Milan about art and authenticity. The sequence, which shows James concocting a story about a painting and seducing his largely female American audience into believing every single word of it, dramatizes popular film's anti-intellectualist tendencies: films set in the artworld suggest repeatedly that art criticism is nothing but pretentious mumbo jumbo.

When a charming young woman (Berenice), a former small-town teacher from Minnesota on a European tour, sneaks into one of these lectures James realizes he has met his match. Once James and Berenice become lovers, they travel to the Lake Como estate of a powerful art magnate, who entrusts James with the task of stealing a painting from the studio of Jerome Debney, a famously reclusive artist whose work is worth millions. The story sticks close to the Thomas Crown formula of two lovers playing a cat-and-mouse game with each other and with the spectator as they (and we) try to guess whether or not they are faking their feelings. As in the other films considered here, faking love is intimately connected to forging art: when, at the end of the film, James finds himself forced into a corner his only means of escape is to pretend to be an artist and pass off a painting he painted himself as an original Debney. After all, if art is nothing but clever gibberish anyone can be an artist. Insofar as it satirizes art as whatever the gatekeepers of the artworld (critics, curators, historians, and gallerists) say it is, the film offers an art history lesson on institutional theories of art.

In *Nocturnal Animals*, a successful but disenchanted Los Angeles gallery owner (Susan) unhappily married to a businessman (echoes of *Headhunters*) unexpectedly receives a gift from her first husband Edward, whom she has not heard from in twenty years – the manuscript of his yet unpublished novel. As she begins reading, the film dramatizes scenes from the novel, a brutal crime thriller about a family man (whom Susan imagines as Edward himself), his wife and their teenage daughter terrorized by a gang of violent young men on a road trip through the desert. The film continues the "tradition" of exploring artistic forgery in terms of emotional forgery, and vice versa; however, this time truth and falseness are aligned with particular types of art and art discourses rather than being properties of individual artworks: the LA artworld is presented as inherently false (with Susan's professional success in it, coupled with her personal unhappiness,

as simply another "proof" of its falseness) and juxtaposed with the supposedly "authentic" world of the struggling *literary* artist (Edward). Ironically, it is precisely through art – albeit through a different art, literature, which is here (naively) positioned as a matter of individual talent rather than an institution with its own internal logic and dominant discourse similar to the "artworld" – that Susan begins to shed her "fake" art persona and becomes emotionally vulnerable. By reawakening Susan's real feelings, which have presumably been supressed by years of living in the "fake" artworld, only to crush them – setting up a romantic rendezvous and then not showing up – Edward finally takes his revenge on Susan, both for leaving him and for never believing in his literary talent. Significantly, and unlike *The Affair*, *Headhunters*, and *The Best Offer*, *Nocturnal Animals* presents forgery, both in its art historical and figurative sense, not as the result of certain actions – forging artworks or faking feelings – but as a property of certain discourses, specifically art institutional discourses, or "the artworld" more generally.

The story in *Velvet Buzzsaw*, an artworld satire with horror and supernatural elements, revolves around the usual artworld suspects: art critic Morf Vandewalt; his seasoned art curator friend Gretchen; up-and-coming curator Josephina; and art gallery owner Rhodora Haze. When Josephina stumbles upon the paintings of deceased outsider artist Ventril Dease she decides to put them on the market against his express wishes; before long, Dease becomes the artworld's new darling. Although most artists would die to enjoy this kind of universal critical acclaim Dease spends the rest of film taking methodical revenge, from beyond the grave, for this disrespectful treatment of his work: all who profit from his work (art critics, gallerists, and dealers) meet a horrible though always inventively staged death (paintings come to life and literally attack their victims). Like *Nocturnal Animals, Buzzsaw* sets up an opposition between "real" art and "fake" art, aligning the former with "outsider art," depicted as "naturally" expressive, i.e. not requiring

special training (Dease uses real blood in his paintings to deal with his trauma of abuse by his father, whom he eventually murdered) and the latter with the kind of elitist, pretentious art courted by the artworld.[16] Like *Heresy* (as well as *The Square*), *Buzzsaw*'s satire of the artworld can be said to have a pedagogical function: when a gallery owner mistakes a pile of garbage bags for a brilliant art installation, or when a group of kids on a school trip to the art gallery mistake the dead body of a curator lying in a pool of blood next to an art installation called "Sphere" as part of the exhibit, the film is not just poking fun at the difficulty of telling art from life, but also commenting on the status of art in the post-conceptual condition.

While the accuracy of the film's portrayal of an art critic's life as one of luxury and prestige is questionable, the more relevant question here has to do with the possible reasons for the film's depiction of art (and of the artist) as powerful in a very real way. How do we account for the fact that even as it mocks the irrelevance, vulgarity, willful esoterism, and navel-gazing of the artworld the film also insists that art *is* powerful and dangerous, even physically so (witness the series of violent "death-by-artwork")? While *Nocturnal Animals* also explores the question of art's power or relevance – the question whether art can make one *feel* something, anything – it does so in a personal/psychological key. The genre of satire, however, has the power to translate such private, psychological questions into broader questions about the role of art in a neoliberal society, one in which profit determines the "value" of art. *Buzzsaw* does this through the structuring absence at the center of the film – Dease – about whom two facts are significant: he is an outsider artist, and he is dead. It is not just that through Dease the film perpetuates the myth of the tormented artist, whose art is considered more "authentic" not because it is particularly original or technically accomplished but because it expresses his traumatized personal experience (where trauma is

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[16] In yet another film that centers around this dichotomy, *Junebug* (Phil Morrison, 2005), an art dealer in outsider art tries to convince an outsider artist in a small Southern town to represent him.

assumed to be more "valuable" than other kinds of experience), or that the film dramatizes the revenge fantasy of every living artist spurned by the establishment – although it certainly does both of these things. More importantly, however, Dease's double absence – his outsider *and* posthumous status – can be seen as an attempt to imagine a place *outside* the artworld, outside the "fake" art market. What is at stake here is not how to tell an original work of art from a copy/forgery, or art (illusion) from reality, but how to tell "true art" (true illusion) from "fake art" (fake illusion). The criterion for doing so, *Buzzsaw* suggests, is not internal but *external* to the artwork: it is a matter of the status of the artwork vis-à-vis the artworld, its place "inside" or "outside" it, and of the artwork's social and political meaning and use.

Indeed, films like *Nocturnal Animals*, *The Burnt Orange Heresy*, *Velvet Buzzsaw*, and *The Square* are no longer concerned with distinguishing art from reality, deception from truth, but rather with distinguishing "real art" from "fake art." They introduce audiences to what Peter Osborne calls "the post-conceptual condition, or the logic of *high* capitalism."[17] Osborne defines contemporary art as "post-conceptual art," a term that, contrary to the term "postmodern," "is not to be understood in either a merely chronological or even an exclusively temporal sense [although its referents can be chronologically charted]."[18] The defining features of the post-conceptual condition, derived from the critical legacy of conceptual art, are the lack of any limitations on art's possible material means, the absence of clearly definable criteria for aesthetic evaluation in accordance with which particular objects can be classified as "art," and the impossibility (or irrelevance) of historical periodization.[19] Insofar as it is not conditioned by, or explainable through,

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[17] Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-postconceptual-condition. Borrowing the title of his book from Lyotard and Jameson, Osborne argues that capitalism appears far from entering a phase that could usefully be described as "late."
[18] Ibid.
[19] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 48.

a pre-existing idea of art, post-conceptual art "is not the name for a particular type of art so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general."[20]

It is this post-conceptual territory that *The Square* explores. The opening sequence, in which a journalist (Anne) interviews Christian, chief curator of a modern art museum in Stockholm, about the challenges of running a museum – is a veritable lesson in post-conceptual art and relational aesthetics. When Anne asks Christian to explain to her the catalogue description of the museum's exhibition of post-conceptual artist Robert Smithson,[21] Christian struggles to respond. Eventually he points to her bag: if we were to move your bag from "here" (outside the space of exhibition) to "there" (inside the space of exhibition), he asks her, would that transform the bag into a work of art? This question, along with the catalogue references to "space and non-space," "site and non-site," "exhibition and non-exhibition," foregrounds the power of institutional discourse to define the nature and boundaries of art, a subject the film continues to explore by raising questions about "authenticity" (e.g. the question about the difference between "art" and "marketing"), which double as moral and ethical questions pertaining to Christian's personal and professional integrity. In line with the other films examined here, even as *The Square* satirizes art in the post-conceptual condition – its lack of an essential, definable nature and its imbrication with the laws of the market – it continues to use art as a criterion for ethical and moral evaluation by rendering the question of the social function of art synonymous with the question of Christian's moral redemption.[22]

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[20] Ibid. 3, 51

[21] *"Exhibition: Non-Exhibition*, an evening conversation that explores the dynamics of the "exhibitable," and the construction of publicness in the spirit of Robert Smithson's *Site/Non-Site.* From non-site to site, from non-exhibition to exhibition, what is the topos of *Exhibition: Non-Exhibition* in the moments of "mega exhibition"?

[22] The connection the film draws between the personal and the political is especially evident in rehearsal scenes ─ scenes in which characters practice alone a speech they will deliver later publicly ─ which feature both in *The Square* and *Heresy*.

While in *The Affair* "authenticity" and "truth" were still embodied in something real and tangible (e.g. a real Monet versus a fake Monet), in *The Square*, *Heresy*, *Buzzsaw*, and *Nocturnal Animals* they are relegated to the realm of intentions, beliefs, attitudes and moral choices; in short, what Nicolas Bourriaud calls "relational aesthetics." Although Bourriaud is not explicitly referenced in the film, the artwork "The Square" is a perfect example of Bourriaud's "relational art," an artistic practice that aims to promote new emancipatory social relations.[23] "The Square," of course, references another controversial artwork, Malevich's "Black Square." As similar as the two artworks appear to be, however, their respective aesthetics – relational aesthetics and Suprematism – could not be more different. Compare the artist's statement accompanying "The Square," proclaiming the square "a sanctuary of trust and caring" within which "we all share equal rights and obligations," with Malevich's description of "Black Square" in his 1927 book *The Non-Objective World*: "In the year 1913, trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square." Relational art's self-proclaimed ethical ambitions could not be further from Suprematism's credo of "art-for-art's sake," the search for a new painterly language made up solely of shapes and colours. *The Square* offers a critical commentary on the pitfalls of relational art, whose emphasis on "interactivity" and "process," taken to its logical extreme, removes the artwork from lived experience, rendering it as abstract as Suprematist art, which insisted on the supremacy of colour and shape in painting and refused to be "distracted" by representing real scenes or real people.

As an instance of relational art, "The Square," the promotional campaign for which consists of a video showing a sweet, Scandinavian looking little girl getting blown up to pieces, seems to be successful. Its success is measured by the liberal outrage it triggers both in print and

[23] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics.*

online media: at the end of the film, Christian, having resigned from his curatorial post, is seen giving a press interview during which he struggles to defend himself both from angry audience members who support his resignation (where is your solidarity with the most vulnerable members of society, a woman in the audience chastises him) *and* from journalists who view his resignation as a form of self-censorship. And yet, even as "The Square" appears to have attained the goal of relational art – raising awareness, sparking public debate – the film comes down squarely on the side of the visceral, unapologetically aggressive, unmediated by pity or indignation antagonistic aesthetic of Oleg's "monkey-man" (which it shares with Dease's "killer paintings") and thus on the side of critics of relational aesthetics like Claire Bishop.[24] Relational art like "The Square" turns out to be so worked out conceptually in its attempt to collapse the border between art and lived experience – to be "true" – that it ends up hermetically sealed from any notion of artistic truth.

Like *Buzzsaw*, which aligns art with inauthenticity and "outsider art" with truth, because of its lack of sublimation or even aggression (Dease's paintings literally kill people) and because of its location outside the art establishment (whose attempts to appropriate it are brutally punished), *The Square* is also preoccupied with the difference between "real art" and "fake art" and with art's growing social and political irrelevance. It is because art's power or relevance seems to be dwindling that the desire to regain it takes either the form of fantasy (a dangerous art that can literally kill you, as in *Buzzsaw*) or the form of "relational art," whose relevance is measured in similarly literal terms by the number of clicks, likes, and comments in response to the social media marketing campaign for "The Square."

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[24] According to Claire Bishop, relational art and aesthetics ultimately enhance the power and status of the curator. Bishop, "Antagonism."

Insofar as films set partially or entirely in the artworld continually stage debates about truth, authenticity, deception, and illusion, and explore the philosophical problem of the "value" of art – both its "vulgar," material value (how much a certain artwork is "worth") and its immaterial, i.e. political, moral, metaphysical, or spiritual value – they can be seen as instances of a cinematic philosophy of art. We can distinguish two versions of this cinematic philosophy of art: 1) films that, like philosophy, associate art with the possibility of deception and use art as a way of introducing the "Problem of Indiscernible Counterparts" into the narrative; and 2) films that dramatize what Peter Osborne calls "the post-conceptual condition", in which the main philosophical question is no longer how to distinguish art from reality but, rather, how to distinguish "real art" from "fake art". Thus, while some films (*The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Headhunters, The Best Offer*, *Trance*) still construe this dichotomy in traditional art historical and Platonic terms[25] – in terms of the difference between a "true original" and a "copy"/"forgery" – other films (*Nocturnal Animals*, *The Burnt Orange Heresy*, *Velvet Buzzsaw*, *The Square*) reframe this dichotomy in terms that go beyond art history, beyond the issue of technological reproducibility for instance, and touch upon questions of ethics, moral integrity, and social or political responsibility. These films no longer ask whether a given artwork is an original or a copy, but rather whether the social, political, or moral function and role of a particular artist, artwork or art practice is authentic, true, or morally desirable: here, descriptors like "true" and "authentic," along with their opposites, no longer pertain to the artwork itself, but rather to the attitudes, ideas,

[25] *The Goldfinch* (2019) also explores Art, Beauty, Love, and Immortality in explicitly Platonic terms: consider, for instance, that the most important part of Theo's apprenticeship at Hobie's antique shop involves learning to distinguish authentic antique restorations from forgeries patched together from parts of different antiques to create fake antiques that look real. Also, we find out that precisely at the time of Theo's unfortunate lapse into shady dealings in antique forgeries, the *Goldfinch* painting, supposed to represent Truth, Beauty, Immortality, was stolen (by Theo's friend Boris) and replaced by a school textbook. A coincidence? Hardly.

beliefs, and intentions surrounding the artwork and endowing it with a particular meaning or importance. We cannot but wonder to what extent cinema's growing preoccupation with art's social and political (ir)relevance might disguise cinema's own anxieties, anxieties that cinema disavows by regularly taking stock of art's precarious place in the neoliberal landscape in films like the ones discussed here.

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Bio

Temenuga Trifonova is Associate Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at York University. She is the author of *The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary European Cinema*, *Warped Minds: Cinema and Psychopathology*, *The Image in French Philosophy*, and the edited volumes *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* and *European Film Theory*.