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Through a screen, darkly: Exploring audiovisual media representations of the art market from 2008 to the present

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, since the 2008 economic recession, the art market has become a global industry worth billions, harnessing the power of technology and social media as well as old-fashioned personal networks. On the other hand, the art market has been criticized due to its relative lack of transparency and raised concern over its ties to antiquities looting, money laundering, and terrorism financing. Amidst these changes, interest in the art market across all levels of society has grown and media depictions of the art market have become prevalent, including films, television programs, and documentaries.

These depictions have many themes. For instance: *Velvet Buzzsaw* skewers critics and dealers alike in the art fair and gallery scene; *Riviera* illustrates the link between the mega-rich, contemporary art, money laundering, and private art foundations; the protagonist of *White Collar* is a skilled art forger and thief recruited by the FBI to solve crimes; *Blood and Treasure* covers antiquities looting in the Middle East; *Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery* and *Driven to Abstraction* are documentaries explore

criminal aspects of the art world; and so forth. There is even an episode of *Drunk History* with a humorous version of the infamous robbery at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, demonstrating how the art market has become increasingly mainstream. This article will explore the ways in which selected audiovisual media depictions of the art market from 2008 to the present overlap with reality, as well as how and why the two differ. While representations of the art market have existed prior to this time frame, I am particularly interested in exploring the tension between insiders and outsiders due to the art market's recent popularity with non-market participants and its fixture as a part of the global economy through the constructed image of the art market in recent representations. Both fictional and non-fictional depictions exude a certain allure, even when portrayals are unflattering; but there are also exaggerated aspects that expose preoccupations with participants' behavior and the market itself. By examining these representations, I aim to illustrate how the art market has permeated global social consciousness and what this tells us about its future and ongoing evolution.

Prologue

The Netflix film *Velvet Buzzsaw*¹ – a parody of the modern art market – is populated by widely recognizable figures: the pretentious art critic, the unscrupulous gallery owner, the mercenary consultant, the up-and-coming artist and his washed-up counterpart, and the young gallery employee who will do anything to succeed. In this world, the vast majority of art market participants are not only greedy but also hypocritical, leading to disastrous consequences. What conclusions can a viewer and art market researcher draw from this *tableau*?

The art market is a multi-layered and constantly growing entity. Among its current and more visible denizens one finds auction houses, art galleries and dealers, museums, and private collectors. But while many are high-profile individuals and institutions, the art market infiltrates all levels of society. Grave-robbers and archaeological looters, fences in financial institutions, members of organized crime syndicates, artists, lawyers, accountants, celebrities, and more are linked – however tenuously – to the supply and demand chains the art market constantly churns out. Moreover, the art world, like any other group, has insiders and outsiders.² These perceive the art market in different ways, which are reflected in audiovisual media representations from the past decade.

Previously, the art market was shrouded in an air of mystery and evoked notions of upper-class salons behind closed doors. Now, the doors are wide open because money – the great equalizer – makes the art world revolve: “That clubby handshake business where everybody knew your name has been replaced by a multibillion-dollar international industry... what was once a quaint cottage industry has become surprisingly corporate.”³ Additionally, increased globalization and the digital revolution have allowed more people to access information than ever before, surmounting geographical and ideological barriers. As a result, “[t]he world’s major commercial and cultural economies are now intertwined to an unprecedented degree,”⁴ allowing regular consumers to access goods that were previously reserved for the cultured and wealthy elite. Even artists are not immune to this shift and its demands on their supply. As collectors – typically extremely wealthy and powerful – drive prices according to their personal tastes, artists are forced to keep up with the cycle of “production and fabrication.”⁵ Media representations provide lay viewers with an intimate portrayal of the art world’s machinations and demon-

1 *Velvet Buzzsaw*, directed by Dan Gilroy (2019; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix), streaming.

2 For purposes of this article, the term “insiders” refers to art market participants and/or individuals and entities familiar with the market’s peculiarities. This includes, but is not limited to, artists, galleries, auction houses, museums, and the like. “Outsiders,” by contrast, are those who are not involved in art-related transactions and do not possess prior knowledge of the market and its unique processes.

3 Artnet Intelligence Report, *Welcome to the Age of the Art Industry* (London: 2019), 28.

4 Artnet Report, 32.

5 *Ibid.*

strate how individuals and institutions are linked along the same chain. This allows multiple perspectives to overlap according to perceptions of realism and subjectivism.

“Ok, let’s start the sting.” (Neil Caffrey, *White Collar*)

Similar to the art market, media has infiltrated global society, influencing people from varying backgrounds and cultures. Both media and the art market rely on content (arguably, quantity over quality) and brand name recognition to attract attention and financial support. However, what goes on behind the scenes is not always as glamorous as the slick product presented for public consumption. Media representations present viewers with an appearance of reality, contrasting “the way things seem with the way things are.”⁶ Thus, they serve as a dark mirror to, and offer an opportunity to explore and comment on, the vagaries of the art world through the lens of creative license. Audiovisual representations in particular are quite effective in juxtaposing the allure of the art world with its unsavory elements. Viewers have their own preconceptions, perceptions, and biases that are either confirmed or challenged by these representations. The effectiveness of a representation lies in how it is able to construct and transmit a plausible theory of the art market even when accompanied by exaggerated elements; for instance, a hyper-focused approach to artist scandals and the heightened prices of artwork.

However, it is important to understand the applicable social, political, and economic context in order to properly situate these representations within a wider discourse. Currently, “factors such as increasing political and economic uncertainty, rapid technological progress, climate change, and social inequality have dominated the headlines on a daily basis. We live in a changing world, fraught with uncertainty.”⁷ This uncertainty provides the backdrop to the art market as it enters a new decade, exacerbated by the emergence of COVID-19 and the resulting global upheaval. It appears that the “strong interdependencies that exist between the art and finance ecosystem and the cultural and creative industries”⁸ are set to continue and indeed, grow further.

“Inside all of us, there are packs of wolves.” (Ramón Fonseca, *The Laundromat*)

Nonetheless, despite its potential for economic growth, certain audiovisual media representations of the art market do not depict it as a positive force. Instead, it is the locus for morally dubious transactions, where a multitude of Faustian bargains take place.

6 Nathan Andersen, Film, *Philosophy and Reality. Ancient Greece to Godard* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 103.

7 Deloitte and ArtTactic, *Art & Finance Report 2019* (Luxembourg and London: 2019), 14.

8 Ibid.

Underlying cultural anxieties are reflected in these media representations, such as concern over the widening gap between social classes while acknowledging the aspirational fantasy wealthy lifestyles present. The representations chosen for this article are precisely those that exemplify the tension between fascination and repugnance since the 2008 economic recession, depicting art and commerce as both sacred and profane within this particular historical and social context. Here, there is a generalized notion of art in its natural state as pure or unsullied, whereas it becomes tainted once it comes into contact with money. The concept of artists as tortured or misunderstood geniuses, such as Vincent van Gogh (who famously died in penury despite the fact that his works are worth millions today), has done little to dispel this myth, although man cannot live on bread – or art – alone, and art has been used as social currency for hundreds of years.

A hallmark of the twenty-first century is the evolution of fine art and luxury goods into a definite asset category with a wide range of financial transactions, as “the art market has become financialized.”⁹ In 2018, the global art market represented a US\$67.4 billion share of the economy. Art and collectible wealth had an estimated worth of US\$1.74 trillion as of 2018, with a growth projection of US\$2.125 trillion for 2023.¹⁰ The role of High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI) and Ultra High Net Worth Individuals (UHNWI) in the art market’s rapid cycle of “production and fabrication” is also key here.¹¹ These circumstances mean that the art market is often seen as a concrete representation of economic disparity and the uneasy relationship between so-called developed and emerging nations rather than an impartial necessity. But is something essential lost during the process of this exchange? Many audiovisual representations seem to think so. Although the global art market can now provide living artists with a path to incredible riches, several representations imply that the process involves unsavory elements.

Currently, “commercialization is the dominant force driving change in the contemporary art market... embedded in, and the result of, wider societal developments... such as neo-liberal policies directed at deregulation and privatization, a waning autonomy of fields of cultural production, and an erosion of cultural hierarchies such as the one between high and low culture.”¹² In layman’s terms, this means that Art (as an overarching concept) has gone from being the purview of a select few to a mainstream activity. But along with this shift, there is a preoccupation that artists and art market participants have become too profit-oriented, as opposed to focusing on creative and aesthetic goals, to the detriment of the art world as a whole. Art market regimes, which govern the way value is established, who possesses the authority and credibility to engage in the valuation process, as well as what criteria and tools are applied, are accordingly in a state of flux.¹³

9 Olav Velthuis, *The contemporary art market between stasis and flux, Contemporary art and its commercial markets* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 26.

10 Deloitte, 46.

11 Artnet Report, 32.

12 Velthuis, 18.

13 Velthuis, 29-30.

“I can make you rich.” (Rhodora Haze, *Velvet Buzzsaw*)

Sociologist Diana Crane explains that previously, the reward system for high culture differed from that for popular culture. In the prior system, high culture members aspired to symbolic rewards whereas popular culture favored material rewards. There was an underlying tension as a result of intellectualism and means of production, where it was commonly held that more complex works were better since they could not be deciphered with ease by audiences and occupied a rarefied position in the art world. Now, the boundaries between high and popular art have eroded and the art world is no longer an insular community whose members hold a consensus of artistic views and conventions. Instead, economic concerns drive artists, dealers, galleries, auction houses and other participants as the monetary value of art works continues to soar. In particular, auction houses have become extremely influential – more so than museums – as they publicize rising prices and establish the value of specific works. Galleries and collectors are also important and serve as gatekeepers, since they provide venues, visibility, and funding for certain artists who rely on the backing of leading tastemakers in the international community to get ahead: “prices now determine reputations.” This is the antithesis of the traditional moral rewards model.¹⁴

Furthermore, wealthy collectors have emerged as a new class within the global economy and are “avid consumers of luxury items of all kinds,” including artworks. These new potentates are referred to as “mega-collectors” due to the scale of their consumption, which rivals that of the American robber barons in the nineteenth century. Notably, hedge fund owners are a force to be reckoned with, as they transpose their stock market skills to art speculation by investing in certain artists and increasing the value of their own collections. They then artificially restrict supply, which leads to even greater demand. Naturally, galleries and auction houses cater to such collectors and readily accept their influence.¹⁵ But this focus on the influx of private money has far-reaching consequences for the market as a whole, particularly regarding contemporary works. As Crane notes, many artists no longer strive to develop an original style, but rather repurpose and appropriate existing works that they know will attract buyers.¹⁶ Olav Velthuis distinguishes business-minded collectors, who acquire art as an investment or status symbol, from traditional collectors who possess an in-depth knowledge of art and engage with its underlying message. This further supports the notion that art is now an industry more than a market or community.¹⁷

14 Diana Crane, Reflections on the Global Art Market: implications for the Sociology of Culture, in *Sociedade e Estado*, Brasilia, 24/2 (2009), 331-362. , 332.

15 Crane, 336-340.

16 Crane, 343.

17 Velthuis, 30.

Like fashion, art has become subject to trends and the “eclectic and often superficial” opinions of designated influencers, heavily focused on branding and commodification.¹⁸ Ancillary participants have also been pushed aside in favor of a one-dimensional approach to art sales, “decoupl[ing] art from the evaluations by cultural experts, conversations among peers, and direct interactions between market participants, which in the past defined a work of art and contributed to its meanings.” The sales process can even be likened to a fetishization of the artwork amidst a “perfect stor[m] of money, marketability, and instant gratification.” Dealers have also been accused of becoming mercenary and aggressive in their pursuit of the next big thing, dropping artists once their work loses popularity and “seducing artists away from their competitors once their careers take off.” Velthuis sees the metamorphosis of small and intimate showrooms to multinational enterprises as indicative of dealers’ desire to monopolize the global market and cater to mega-collectors, often at the expense of encouraging talented fledgling artists.¹⁹

“I’m starting to think that there’s a disgust for the world of money.” (Morf Vandewalt, *Velvet Buzzsaw*)

All these circumstances enable media representations to paint a portrait of the art market as relentlessly profit-driven and lacking in true sustenance, which audiences can relate to as this mirrors their perception of the market from the outside. While the idea of total world domination seems far-fetched, it is clear that recent audiovisual representations do respond to the notion that art market participants are not benign figures and art-related transactions constitute a “competitive spectator sport,” constructing a virtual reality based on these parameters.²⁰ Andrea Fraser summarized the situation as follows: “what has been good for the art world has been disastrous for the rest of the world.”²¹ Consider how prices for individual artworks now fetch astronomical sums; a Picasso painting which sold at auction at Christie’s in 2010 for \$106.5 million versus the record-breaking sale of *Salvator Mundi* attributed to Leonardo da Vinci in 2017 for US\$450.3 million.²² Such transactions exacerbate the divide between haves and have-nots, further cementing social class stratification.

Private collectors may choose to make their collections accessible to the public by donating artworks to museums or creating their own foundations, but this type of philanthropy has an undercurrent of *noblesse oblige*. As a result, many audiovisual media representations from the past decade dealing with the art market/industry entail social commentary and, on certain occasions, revenge fantasies to counteract the increasing

18 Crane, 349-50.

19 Velthuis, 20-23.

20 Artnet Report, 46.

21 Velthuis, 31.

22 Artnet Report, 34.

inequality and unfairness exposed by the aforementioned trends. Even so, there is no denying that audiences gravitate towards the excess found in the lifestyles of the rich and famous, which is transposed onto attractive actors and stunning locations.

“The best cons come from a place of truth.” (Neil Caffrey, *White Collar*)

Audiovisual representations provide an experience of “realism,” in the sense that they portray “mental schemas that provide typical and familiar ‘recognizability.’”²³ However, realism in audiovisual media can be either objective or subjective, depending on the aim of the creator; for example, a “realistic” visual picture with naturalistic acting may nonetheless have a “wildly improbable” plot. Thus, in these representations, realism does not necessarily imply truth, but rather presents a concrete representation that is experienced by the viewer as something that may or may not be true. This process relies heavily on characterization, familiarity with the “real” world, and the relationship between the two.²⁴ Characterization will depend on cultural, social, and historical contexts as it is ultimately subject to agreed-upon norms and tropes. This means that portrayals vary over time as the result of communication between different groups, and evolve according to the knowledge of representation-makers and the intended or actual recipients. The effectiveness of audiovisual representations therefore relies on audience perception: “What is realistic is not solely nor necessarily real, for many addressees it must also be *experienced* as real.”²⁵

“The demand has people ready to kill.” (Rhodora Haze, *Velvet Buzzsaw*)

It could be argued that outsiders follow the model of “realism by perception” whereas insiders ascribe to “realism by knowledge,” although lines become often blurred.²⁶ Insiders provide the details for audiovisual representations, which subsequently transmit a constructed reality that viewers absorb, transforming perception into reality. The controversial Netflix film *Velvet Buzzsaw*²⁷ – mentioned at the start of this article – assembles widely recognizable figures in a world where most art market participants are not only greedy but also hypocritical, with predictably negative results. Through the lens of absurdity and horror, the audience comes to understand how the ever-churning art in-

23 Torben Grodal, The Experience of Realism in Audiovisual Representation in Anne Jerslev, ed., *Realism and ‘Reality’ in Film and Media* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 67.

24 Grodal, 68.

25 Grodal, 70.

26 Grodal, 72.

27 *Velvet Buzzsaw*, directed by Dan Gilroy (2019; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix), streaming.

dustry upholds an extreme version of capitalism; it is an ouroboros, a snake that eats its own tail and is never satisfied. Pretentious jargon, high-concept installations, futuristic fashion choices, and morally bankrupt behavior act as window dressing to underscore the film's tone: one that strongly objects to the over-commercialization of art.

The film centers on a group plotting to sell a dead artist's work against his wishes, who are all brutally murdered by the artwork itself in a supernatural twist. When characters die, it is a clear expression of poetic justice. Memorably, a curator's body is discovered next to the sculpture that killed her at an art fair resembling Art Basel, and visitors initially believe that the murder scene is actually an immersive installation, adding another layer of satire directed at those who attend art market events and "buy into the hype." The only people spared are those who share the artist's "disgust for the world of money" and do not profit from the paintings. Furthermore, by skewing towards horror film tropes, *Velvet Buzzsaw* is able to engage audience members unfamiliar with the art market (outsiders) with generalized knowledge to prime them with audiovisual cues so they understand what behavior is desirable and what is not. Even though the plot itself is fantastical, the way the world of the film is built is experienced as real since it is based on the existing art market, albeit taken to an extreme.

The recent film *The Burnt Orange Heresy*²⁸ carries on the trend of labelling art market participants as a greedy lot and illustrates how the art and crime worlds intersect by framing the action as a thriller. It depicts a conspiracy to steal a living artist's work and stars Mick Jagger as a "wealthy and conniving art dealer" who convinces a "swindling art critic" to procure a painting from a reclusive artist as part of a sinister quid pro quo deal.²⁹ Its motto of "redemption, embezzlement, and forgery" can also be applied to *The Goldfinch*,³⁰ a film adaptation of Donna Tartt's novel. Here, the titular painting is ultimately used as collateral for illegal activities while the main character, who originally took the painting to safeguard it after a terrorist attack, engages in antiquities forgery to make a living. Fascination with unscrupulous art market characters can also be seen in the trailer for upcoming film *The French Dispatch*, this time in Wes Anderson's trademark wry style.³¹ Here, Adrien Brody plays an aggressive art dealer supposedly based on Joseph Duveen, a highly influential British art dealer.³² The relevant part of the trailer focuses on Brody facing off against an artist and jockeying back and forth over whether an artwork is for sale. The dealer's arrogance and entitlement insisting that the work is

28 *The Burnt Orange Heresy*, directed by Giuseppe Capotondi (2019; New York City, NY: Sony Pictures Classics).

29 Sarah Cascone, Mick Jagger Will Play a Crooked Art Collector in a New 'Erotic Neo-Noir Thriller' Movie About a Painting Heist (London: Artnet, 23 July 2019), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mick-jagger-will-star-art-heist-film-1607881>.

30 *The Goldfinch*, directed by John Crowley (2019; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures).

31 *The French Dispatch*, directed by Wes Anderson (2020; Los Angeles, CA: Searchlight Pictures).

32 Taylor Dafoe. Wes Anderson's New Art History-Inspired Film Stars Adrien Brody as a Ruthless Art Dealer (London: Artnet, 12 Feb. 2020), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/adrien-brody-dealer-wes-anderson-film-1776168>

for sale – despite the artist’s protests – must surely strike a chord with those who believe that the art market is not only over-commercialized, but a pool of greed that benefits a select few at the expense of others.³³

“What’s the point of art if nobody sees it?” (Josephina, *Velvet Buzzsaw*)

In order to situate these audiovisual representations within a wider societal discourse, it becomes necessary to examine how the messages contained in representations of the art market are constructed and communicated by source material for reception by audiences. According to Stuart Hall’s reception theory, messages are disseminated across four separate stages, each with its own limits and possibilities: production, circulation, use (also called distribution or consumption), and reproduction. In its discursive form, a message relies on meaning in order for consumption to take place; without meaning, a message will have no effect. A message is also subject to the rules governing its form and the language used: “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a *communicative event*.”³⁴ The story will then be encoded by the creator and decoded/consumed by the recipient/audience as the message is transferred.

The “story” in this case is that the art market has borrowed heavily from other markets and societal spheres, resulting in a rupture between its roots and its present form. Artist life cycles have shortened from decades to years (or months), conspicuous consumption and event culture are rampant (particularly at art fairs), quality is often overlooked in favor of what is trending at the moment, and celebrity and branding are requisites for sales.³⁵ As art market insiders focus on the raw potential of these transactions, outsiders are more prone to label these as examples of naked consumerism, particularly regarding contemporary art and living artists, which have now entered the general public consciousness. This combination simultaneously fascinates and repels audiences with its depiction of excess and escapism: “From gallery dinners and studio visits to art-fair parties and biennials, the social incentives also heavily favo[r] the contemporary, particularly as the amount of money flooding into the art business ma[kes] these events more lavish and exclusive. The revenue boost translate[s] into bigger budgets, greater ambition, and more robust marketing for successful galleries and artists. Before long, this expansion

33 Despite the need for merchandise to move the market itself, artists are often the parties who benefit the least from selling their work, especially if they are new, unknown, and relatively inexperienced. See Lucy Rose Sollitt, *The Future of the Art Market* (London: Creative United, 2019), 25. However, those artists with sufficient clout and backing to support their brand are able to dictate terms and obtain tidy sums; for instance, Jeff Koons’ stainless steel sculpture of a rabbit broke the record at auction for a work by a living artist, selling for \$91.1 million. See Scott Reyburn, Jeff Koons ‘Rabbit’ Sets Auction Record for Most Expensive Work by Living Artist, in *The New York Times*, 15 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/arts/jeff-koons-rabbit-auction.html>.

34 Stuart Hall, Encoding, Decoding, in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 508.

35 Velthuis, 32-33.

became a virtuous cycle. The more contemporary art bubbled over into the celebrity and mass-culture spheres, the more global brands were keen to partner with artists, and the more popular the artists became. Audiences can now encounter the work of fine artists... in a thousand other venues far more visible than the traditional art context.”³⁶

In the context of films and television, before messages can produce an effect, they must be appropriated as meaningful discourse and decoded meaningfully. Since these types of media contain both visual and aural discourse, translating the three-dimensional world into a two-dimensional one, a necessary distillation of meaning must occur. Language is a key aspect of this process.³⁷ When depictions are sufficiently “real,” the impact on the viewer/audience is such that the message can override prior perceptions and distribute codes so widely that they become naturalized (or near-universal). In other words, the message must be translated into the audience’s language in order to be properly received and understood at a basic level populated by symbols. This includes caricatures, which are coded with mannerisms that the audience is primed to understand and accept, as part of an additional discursive aspect. The messages are then absorbed and reproduced between individuals once the audiovisual representation has ended. By tapping into underlying cultural anxieties and rearticulating them in a manner familiar to the audience, messages help shape the perception of reality beyond the screen.

“The idea of money. The necessity of money. The secret life of money.” (Jürgen Mossack, *The Laundromat*)

Relying on Hall’s theory, a core message transmitted in art market audiovisual representations is that money is power and art is a means to an end – a status symbol – rather than an end in itself due to its inherent aesthetic qualities. The television series *Riviera*³⁸ is a prime example of this view. It centers on the family of a rich businessman based in Monaco, whose second wife (Georgina) is a former curator and has an established art background. In fact, one of the series’ opening scenes takes place at an auction where Georgina bids on a contemporary artwork. The plot plays out against a backdrop of luxury cars, yachts, exclusive parties, and freeports. During the second season, Georgina attempts to launch a private art foundation to lend an air of legitimacy to the family’s dealings after learning her husband used their collection to launder money, but becomes involved in other criminal activities instead. In the first episode, an up-and-coming contemporary artist is killed and the prices for his work immediately skyrocket, which is true to life.³⁹ Georgina also becomes embroiled with the black market during

36 Artnet Report, 29.

37 Hall, 511.

38 *Riviera*, seasons 1 and 2. Directed by Philipp Kadelbach, featuring Julia Stiles, Anthony LaPaglia and Lena Olin. Originally aired 15 June 2017 on Sky Atlantic.

39 One example is Matthew Wong: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-01/painting-reaps-6-700-return-less-than-year-after-artist-s-death>, accessed 17 September 2020.

a search for a stolen Vermeer. As this and other media portrayals demonstrate, fortune in the art market usually favors the wealthy. Georgina faces no concrete repercussions for her crimes even as her art empire spirals out of control and she is forced to commit greater transgressions in order to maintain power.

But it is not only insiders who profit from the art market; it is susceptible to criminal activity from outsiders as well. The series *White Collar*⁴⁰ straddles the line between law enforcement and criminals by employing a tried-and-true technique: a partnership of opposites. The main characters are an FBI agent and a skilled forger/con man who track down white-collar criminals, including thieves who target luxury goods ranging from dinosaur eggs to gold coins and Old Master paintings. In reality, the FBI does have a specific division focusing on art crime, which has recovered millions of dollars in stolen items.⁴¹ *White Collar* allows audiences to gain insight into this type of work while glamorizing it; after all, heists and raids are much more interesting than paperwork. Television series *Blood and Treasure*⁴² also features an unconventional partnership, this time between an antiquities expert and an art thief who team up to catch a terrorist funding his attacks with stolen antiquities. It demonstrates how illicit looting and export of cultural objects can involve cross-border national and international crimes, albeit in a commercialized fashion.⁴³ The show includes “loot to order” requests, which essentially commission the smuggling of antiquities for interested buyers,⁴⁴ and Mafia auctions for stolen items. While these are more complex issues than *Blood and Treasure* would suggest, there is no denying that the narrative paints an attractive picture of adventure and right versus wrong, much like the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*,⁴⁵ despite marginalizing the toll of these thefts on countries and communities or origin in favor of personal drama.

*The Laundromat*⁴⁶ further tackles the art market’s dark side, which has been linked to money laundering, terrorist financing, and organized crime and drug cartels. The film is a fictionalized look into the Panama Papers scandal that demonstrates how billions of dollars passed through the offices of Mossack Fonseca, allowing individuals and corporations to conceal ownership of property, evade taxes, and legitimize criminal activity. Billionaires from around the world funneled massive amounts into art investments through offshore entities; there was “enough art hidden in private collections to fill a

40 *White Collar*, seasons 1-6, created by Jeff Eastin, featuring Matt Bomer and Tim DeKay, originally aired October 23, 2009 in broadcast syndication.

41 <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/violent-crime/art-theft>

42 *Blood and Treasure*, season 1, created by Matthew Federman and Stephen Scaia, featuring Matt Barr, Sofia Pernas and Oded Fehr, originally aired May 21, 2019 in broadcast syndication.

43 Since 2014, the UN has condemned the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East, recognizing that looting and the illicit traffic of cultural objects is used by terrorist groups to finance their activities. See UN Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2199.

44 Steve Swann, Antiquities looted in Syria and Iraq are sold on Facebook (London: BBC News, 2 May 2019), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47628369>

45 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, directed by Steven Spielberg (1981; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures).

46 *The Laundromat*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (2019; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix), streaming.

public gallery,” including luxury assets from Paris and paintings by Picasso and Modigliani.⁴⁷ Although the underlying story is undoubtedly true, the film dramatizes it to attract a greater audience, who perhaps would not have learned of these events otherwise.

This also occurred with the series *Drunk History*,⁴⁸ which tackled the infamous 1990 theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. This remains one of the most famous unsolved thefts in history, with potential links to organized crime. In just 81 minutes, over US\$500 million worth of art was stolen, including works by Rembrandt, Degas, and Manet.⁴⁹ However, the heist was portrayed humorously, including speculation that the paintings are currently being stored in an unassuming basement. Meanwhile, the series *Sneaky Pete*⁵⁰ frames wine forgery so that the viewer sides with the underdog team and admires their ingeniousness rather than stressing how this type of fraud is wrong. Essentially, collectors are seen as snobs who receive comeuppance after wasting their money on pretentious status symbols and feigning good taste. In these representations, shifting perspectives engage the audience’s sympathy in favor of players who manipulate the market and engage in criminal activities, but whose motives are recognizably “good” – or at least perceived as such.

“Always trust your hunches, dear.” (Joseph Cassidy, *The Burnt Orange Heresy*)

While fictional portrayals seemingly “invite us to consider th[e] state of affairs [of a given story],” non-fiction portrayals assert what has already happened.⁵¹ However, no portrayal is entirely free from bias. The documentary *Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery*⁵² presents Wolfgang Beltracchi, a notorious forger, as a true artist and hidden genius, a vigilante fighting against pretentious and greedy art dealers and critics. Forgeries highlight the subjective nature of artworks and the extremely significant role of critics and connoisseurs; once a work is revealed as a forgery, it looks the same but is fundamentally altered in an intangible way, causing its value to plummet. In other words, the work’s value is predicated on the artist’s name recognition more than its visual appeal. Forgery is often

47 Ben Davis, Explosive ‘Panama Papers’ Highlight Art’s Role in Lives of Tax-Dodging Superrich (London: Artnet, 4 April 2016), <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/panama-papers-tax-dodging-superrich-465305>.

48 *Drunk History*, season 1, episode 4, “Boston,” directed by Jeremy Konner, written by Jeremy Konner and Derek Waters, featuring Martin Starr, Jason Ritter and June Diane Raphael, aired July 30, 2013 in broadcast syndication.

49 Leah Silverman, Inside the Baffling, Unsolved Case Of The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum Heist (New York City: All That’s Interesting, 26 March 2019 updated August 6, 2019), <https://allthatsinteresting.com/isabella-stewart-gardner-museum-heist>.

50 *Sneaky Pete*, season 3, episode 2, “The Huckleberry Jones,” and episode 3, “The Stamford Trust Fall,” directed by Jon Avnet, written by Bryan Cranston and Jamie Pachino, featuring Giovanni Ribisi, Marin Ireland and Shane McRae, aired May 10, 2019 on Amazon Prime streaming.

51 Grodal, 72.

52 *Beltracchi: The Art of Forgery*, directed by Arne Birkenstock (2014; Brooklyn, NY: Kimstim Films).

seen as a “victimless crime” since those duped are not harmed in a strict sense; however, even when (fictional) people are harmed, this can be played for laughs, as in *Velvet Buzzsaw*. Despite the forgeries looking authentic and fooling dozens of educated specialists, Beltracchi’s own works were essentially worthless since he was not an established artist. Ironically, Beltracchi has now emerged as a highly sought-after name in the art world after his release from prison and his works fetch hundreds of thousands of euros.⁵³

Another documentary, *Driven to Abstraction*,⁵⁴ narrates the downfall of prominent art gallery Knoedler & Company as the result of a far-reaching forgery scandal. For nearly two decades, the gallery procured and sold at least 40 forged works totaling US\$60 million allegedly attributed to modern American masters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. The paintings were created by a Chinese immigrant and then artificially aged to fool buyers. Unlike the Beltracchi documentary, *Driven to Abstraction* illustrates the toll of forgery on those who are duped. This is largely complicated due to the art market’s systemic secrecy and penchant for anonymity in addition to the victims’ embarrassment. Director Daria Price stated that her aim was not to “ge[t] at one final truth that wraps up neatly, but a way of telling how this evolved, how something like this could happen.”⁵⁵

Non-fictional representations therefore show another side of the art market that complements fictional portrayals’ constructed image of the industry. Both types of representations can, however, demonstrate the art market’s fragility and how relatively easy it is to manipulate for someone with insider knowledge by playing to mega-collectors and dealers’ sensibilities. It is clear that coded messages in audiovisual representations concerning the art market have been overwhelmingly effective; the public consciousness has retained an impression which often coincides with an exaggerated version of reality. The art market has not only become immensely popular, but also demystified to a certain extent for the general public. While it still retains some allure – images of wealthy collectors, private parties, champagne and caviar are ongoing – recent adaptations are very interested in the seedy underbelly of the market as well, as seen above.

The aforementioned examples serve as dark reflections of the art market, seen through a lens of fascination and critique. It is important to note that the art market cannot be shielded or separated from rapid social and economic changes occurring at a global scale. Market polarization, increased financialization, rising operational costs, new competition, changing consumer practices, high barriers to entry for artists, and rapid technological developments are key characteristics of the 2020 art market.⁵⁶ The segregation between mega-galleries and auction houses and mid-to-low sector dealers has affected

53 Art Critique, *The Long Game: how Wolfgang Beltracchi conned the art world* (Paris: 24 Jan. 2020), <https://www.art-critique.com/en/2020/01/the-long-game-how-wolfgang-beltracchi-conned-the-art-world/>.

54 *Driven to Abstraction*, directed by Daria Price (2019; New York City, NY: Grasshopper Film).

55 Adrian Horton, *Driven to Abstraction: the inside story of a \$60m art forgery hoax*, in *The Guardian*, 28 August 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/aug/28/driven-to-abstraction-documentary-art-forgery-hoax>.

56 Sollitt, 12.

turnover, and several well-respected galleries have shut down as a result of this Darwinian struggle.⁵⁷ Economic and political uncertainty have also contributed to growth stagnation, with some suggesting that the market is due to contract rather than expand in the near future.⁵⁸ This all paints a portrait of art as a potentially over-commodified asset linked to luxury lifestyles, even as governments tout the benefits of art and culture to improve quality of life across social demographics by making it more accessible. However, underlying cultural anxieties point to an uneasy ongoing relationship between the art market and its audience.

“So what happens next? What do we do next?” (Ellen Martin, *The Laundromat*)

The struggle fueling these representations is not only between high and low culture, or greed and morality, but also between individualism and collectivism. It is easier to transpose rigid views that art market participants are solely driven by profit than admit that the art market has flaws, but is a necessary part of life and requires compromise. These representations do have a positive side, as they allow the audience to participate in transactions that often take place behind closed doors and learn about relatively niche matters. The “reality” portrayed in audiovisual media may not always be a strict version of the truth, but it is heavily influenced by perception. Therefore, as society and the art market continue to change in tandem, audiovisual media representations will reflect viewers’ main preoccupations regarding the industry. In particular, one can expect a continuation of art thrillers and satire focused on HNWIs and quasi conglomerates, such as high-end auction houses, galleries, and dealers, exemplifying tense relationships among social and economic classes. These adaptations will likely focus on the interplay between art, wealth and crime since these are combinations which provide fodder for discourse. With so many themes to choose ripped from the headlines, viewers (insiders and outsiders alike) will be spoiled for choice.

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57 Anny Shaw, In the wake of a wave of closures, galleries are adapting to survive, in *The Art Newspaper*, 12 July 2017, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/in-the-wake-of-a-wave-of-closures-galleries-are-adapting-to-survive>.

58 Sollitt, 14, 20.