

ON PLAYFUL THEFT: MASTER THIEVES AND TROLLING
THE (ART) ESTABLISHMENT

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis places art heists in the context of their journalistic and online commentaries to examine their implications for subversive anti-capitalist criticism. The 2012 Rotterdam Art Heist functions as a case study that demonstrates how online trolling participates in the production of a culture that undermines the conventional dualisms between popular and high culture. By linking crime and its commentaries to game and performance theories the thesis promotes pop culture against its devaluation by 20th century cultural critics Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Hence, it argues for folklore's role in critically rethinking the scholarship on the work of these acclaimed cultural critics. Anti-establishment perspectives are set against bourgeois moments in the Frankfurt School's critical theory.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. PROLOGUE.....	1
II. OVERTURE.....	2
III. ART HEIST AS DRAMA: EMPTY FRAMES TO OPEN PROSCENIUMS.....	18
IV. PLAYFUL THEFT IN “THE MASTER THIEF”.....	32
V. ENTR’ACTE.....	41
VI. TROLLING THE (ART) ESTABLISHMENT.....	47
VII. FINALE.....	59
REFERENCES CITED.....	63

CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

This metadrama is rather serious for a work about play. It follows the drama of an art heist while it also analyzes the interpretation of this drama's performance. The overture provides a sampling of what central theme or themes are to come, while the entr'acte introduces variations on themes that briefly connect the buildup of the performance to its conclusion. It ends with a finale that builds upon the basic themes and presents new but related ideas for the future.

CHAPTER II

OVERTURE

On the morning of October 16, 2012, news broke that the Kunsthal Museum in Rotterdam, The Netherlands had been robbed of close to a billion American dollars worth of art; the thief or thieves had taken works by Picasso, Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Freud, and de Haan. Images of empty frames and vacant walls from the crime scene began circulating around the world on the internet and the event quickly attracted international attention. Many in the art world were shocked and dismayed, knowing full well that those paintings might never be seen again. Dutch insurance agencies sweat as art crime detectives from agencies all over the world, including The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), the FBI, and the Association for Research into Crimes against Art (ARCA), began to analyze the details of the crime and provide a profile for who may have committed it and why.

There were some, however, who were less mournful about the theft. As reports came out online, users commenting on the reports (here on known as ‘commentators’) scoffed at the museum’s misfortune.¹ The heist provided them with an opportunity to express their general view that the works of art were overpriced symbols of a bloated elite class. Many comment threads on these reports were hostile towards the art world. Commentators lashed back at elites, speculating that the heist had been carried out or

¹ All online commentaries quoted in this thesis can be found on the websites cited under the main article’s author.

orchestrated by a “tasteful collector,”² “a reclusive art lover,”³ or “wanna-be collector with more money than they know what to do with”⁴ who will keep the art in their “panic room”⁵ or their “secret rooms where they keep stolen antiques and artwork.”⁶ It was the first major art heist since the global market crash of 2008 and consequently drew a lot of attention to the pricing and politics of art. It was also one of the first significant art heists to be trafficked and discussed on the Internet via online articles like those that appear on *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian* and discussed in their user-comment sections.

After several months, the investigation traced the crime back to a group of Romanian gangsters who wanted to sell the art on the black market. One thief, Radu Dogaru, stashed paintings at his mother’s house. As soon as she felt the pressure from police was too strong, she allegedly burnt the paintings to spare her son.⁷ It didn’t work, however. Dogaru and his accomplice, Eugen Darie, pleaded guilty to criminal charges in order to reduce their maximum sentence of 20 years down to 6 years.⁸

² MrMikeludo. 16 October, 2012, comment on Jones, Jonathan. “Dutch Art Theft: A Pick’n’Mix of Paintings Reduced to Criminal Collateral.” *The Guardian*. 16 October, 2012. artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/oct/16/dutch-art-paintings-collateral.

³ CreatureAdam. 16 October, 2012, comment on Ibid

⁴ MatthaisWeiss. comment on Weissmann, Jordan. “Have You Ever Tried To Sell a Stolen Painting?” *The Atlantic*. 16 October, 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/10/have-you-ever-tried-to-steal-a-stolen-painting/263682>.

⁵ stupormundi. 16 October, 2012, comment on Jones, “Pick’n’Mix”

⁶ UrbanRedneck2. 16 October, 2012, comment on Weissmann, “Ever Tried To Sell”

⁷ Brooks, Katherine. "Museum Analyzes Ash Thought to Be Burned Remains of Art by Picasso, Matisse & More." *The Huffington Post*. 16 July 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/16/rotterdam-art-heist-ashes_n_3606430.html.

⁸ Chappell, Bill. "Art Thieves Sentenced To 6 Years For Dutch Museum Heist." *NPR*. 26 Nov. 2013. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/11/26/247362218/art-thieves-sentenced-to-6-years-for-dutch-museum-heist>.

When the news first broke, some readers, the audience of the art heist, mocked the reality that the experts were reporting and their claim that a very real and very dangerous crime syndicate had committed the theft. Instead, their comments championed a different thief, a folkloric and popular culture thief which they presented as more real than the establishment's. My thesis explores this conflict and contest between narratives and ideologies within these critiques.

These trolls are unlike the online bullies that are commonly discussed when we talk about trolling. Like most trolls, these exploit an other's victimized position and mock them. However, instead of targeting a victim of an oppressed group (marginalized races, genders, classes, cultures, etc.), these trolls attack elitist establishments. Their antagonism transforms the art heist into a drama in which the public can act out its aggression against capitalist institutions.

We open with a lack, an empty frame or blank space on a museum wall. This lack is the beginning of our quest to steal back the realities the hegemonic structures of culture have absconded from the larger public. For many, these empty spaces are a horrifying recognition that criminality exists within places dedicated to beauty and culture. The media reads theft as ugly, abhorrent, abnormal, and deviant because it transgresses legal and cultural norms. But what other possibilities are there for examining theft and what might those possibilities reveal? Might there be alternatives which undermine the binaries that place high culture and aesthetics against crime and low culture?

These empty frames or spaces signify unknowing, gaps in knowledge. We initially do not know who stole the paintings or why. We do not know what is to become

of the stolen works and we do not really know why we should care. (Should we care?) Elite or bourgeois cultural structures tell us that the paintings are “priceless” and that the culprits are statistically most likely to be thuggish thieves, usually foreign, stealing in order to trade on the black market. We are told we should hate these thieves for stealing our collective treasures. We are told we should weep for the lost treasures without questioning how they came to be so precious and what the word “treasure” means in this case.⁹

This thesis uses the resonances between theft and play to examine art heists, especially their commentaries, and their related popular culture to look for subversive anti-capitalist critique. It presents the 2012 Rotterdam Art Heist as a case study for how online trolling is sometimes evidence of active cultural participation and dissent. This reading is then interpreted against ideas presented by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno which claim that pop culture creates only passive and disengaged audiences. This thesis reveals nuances about the experiences of culture that are lacking in such scholarship by tracing the relationships between theft and play as they are performed in an art heist, its audiences’ commentaries, and the popular culture narratives that structure them. Doing so shows that the dynamics between theft and play open up experiences of culture that undermine capitalist constructions of private property and artistic value that

⁹ Noah Charney’s anthology, *Art and Crime: Exploring the Dark Side of the Art World* (2009, Praeger) is one of the most informative texts on the world of illicit art trade. Many of the opinions found in the expert articles can be contextualized by reading through this anthology. Charney’s introduction, “Art Crime in Context” (xvii - 1) helps conceptualize the wide world of criminal markets by discussing who is trading, what they’re trading, and how much they’re trading for. Charney and chapter four’s author, A.J.G Tjihuis discuss the prevalence of organized crime in the illegal art trade with many active organizations coming from “The East” such as Romania, Russia, and China. All of the articles by experts that I have cited conclude that the *real* thieves are probably related to organized crime and are far more dangerous than the fictional Thomas Crown or Daniel Ocean.

still plague pop culture scholarship. In the end, it argues for folklore's role in the structure and scholarship of these critiques because of the interdisciplinary and anti-establishment perspectives it offers.

An art heist, e.g., the 2012 Kunsthall Heist, is a cultural event in which different audiences — those within the establishment (police, museum curators), those writing about the crime (art journalists, art crime detectives), and those responding to the writing about the crime (the commentators) — compete to have their narrative of reality supplant all others. Art heists are liminal moments in the process of reifying and reaffirming cultural reality. As times of uncertainty, they are moments of inversion in which the roles of “high” and “low” can trade places and play with the dynamics of power. Using the anthropological performance theories of Victor Turner and Beverly Stoeltje, I will trace these negotiations of power to show how commentators negotiate power and dissent from cultural hierarchy. Their comments invite a form of liminal knowing and experience of culture that runs contrary to the elite epistemologies that establishments like art museums and cultural publications (online and academic journals, etc) produce.

I examine public responses to the 2012 Kunsthall Museum Art Heist that online presses like *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian* publish. The official articles written for these publications are written by some of the most renowned art crime writers and investigators, especially Edward Dolnick and Anthony Amore. Edward Dolnick continually publishes on art crimes; his book *The Rescue Artist* (2005) is considered one of the canonical texts which applied the true crime genre to art theft. Anthony Amore was on the security staff of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum when it was robbed on

March 18, 1990. He has since become an art crime investigator and security systems advisor who helps museums and police better protect and recover their art. These men along with Noah Charney, and Robert Whittman make up the core of experts that appear after an art heist. These men have been employed by prestigious art museums, the FBI's art crime unit, and other government crime teams dedicated to art theft and forgery. They are each qualified to present inside information about the inner workings of illicit art trade, though they rarely offer up any new information. When these publications appear, they carry the same traditional script that gets repeated after each art heist.

The founder of the FBI's art crime team, Robert Whittman, presents such a script succinctly in an interview for *The Atlantic* shortly after the Kunsthal Heist. He says,

I can't make a blanket statement. But what I can say is, after 20 years of doing these investigations for the FBI, there is a general pattern. And the general pattern is that the criminals who do these jobs, these heists, are good thieves, but they're terrible businessmen. That's what it comes down to... What they don't understand is that the value of art is dependent on three things: authenticity, provenance—the history of the art—and legal title. Those are the things that really do create the value. I mean, let's face it, an artwork is basically a piece of canvas with some paint on it. So whenever you talk about these paintings, it's a matter of authenticity and provenance and legal title. And if you don't have one of those things, you don't have value.¹⁰

According to the establishment, thieves are never clever. They are skilled, but profoundly uneducated in the sophisticated nuances of the art market. They are not privy to the complicated legal processes that dictate and create ownership. They are judged by their inability to achieve any sort of “return” or “profit” from their work. According to

¹⁰ Weissmann, Jordan “Sell A Stolen Painting?”

this narrative, without the official stamp of bureaucracy, these paintings are worthless to everybody.

Edward Dolnick continues such a characterization in his exposé, “Art Thieves Are Not Like Thomas Crown - But They Are Eternal Optimists,” written in response to the heist. He writes,

Eternal optimists, thieves reckon that something will turn up. If they can't find a crooked collector, maybe they can work a deal with an owner or an insurance company. If they get only \$5m for a painting worth \$50m, they can live with that. As thieves see it, art-napping is kidnapping without all the fuss. Here is a victim who won't cry or jump out the window and who just might bring in a giant ransom...In reality, nearly all schemes go bad. Like a dog who finally catches the car he's been chasing, an art thief ends up with a painting he has no use for. So paintings pass from hand to hand, each thief confident at first that he can do what others could not, and eventually learning better. Paintings end up lost or ruined...Art theft is that rare game where everybody loses.¹¹

Does *everyone* loose? Online commentaries play against this narrative by changing the characteristics of the thief to one that is clever, tastefully sophisticated, and knowledgeable about the art market. “I've read stories about wealthy people who have “secret” rooms where they keep stolen antiquities and artwork,” one commentator said.¹² Another commentator added the story reminded them more “of the Mexican version of Fantomas, a master thief who stole art because it was there. [The user then includes a link

¹¹ Dolnick, Edward. "Art Thieves Are Not Like Thomas Crown." The Guardian. 17 October, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/17/art-thieves-rotterdam-heists-hollywood>.

¹² UrbanRedneck2. 16 October, 2012, comment on Weissmann “Sell a Stolen Painting?”

to the Wikipedia page for Fantômas].”¹³ Another deepened the references to the 1968 film *The Thomas Crown Affair* in Dolnick’s title, “art thieves aren’t like Thomas Crown?” they wrote, “that’s a shame. I was hoping that, after the day’s thieving is done, they all go home and enjoy a psychedelic dance scene with Faye Dunaway.”¹⁴

This direct play is made possible because *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian* are two of the few online news publications that allow for open and free public commentary. This feature invites anyone to anonymously or pseudonymously comment on published articles and address the experts. Anyone with internet access has the power to join the audience and register an opinion about the theft.

Many in the art world see such comments as insensitive mockery or the products of a glossy image painted by popular media. To many experts, these comments are nothing but the romantic ravings of a mob. Anthony Amore’s editorial “Debunking the Myth of Glamorous Art Thieves,” chastises commentators for supposedly believing that the crime was committed by a singular Master Thief, like those depicted in the movies. “In the real world,” he writes,

thieves who steal art are not debonair *Thomas Crown Affair* types. Instead, they are the same crooks who rob armored cars for cash, pharmacies for drugs, and homes for jewelry. They are often opportunistic and almost always short sighted...confronting these realities is essential to preventing more pieces of our cultural heritage from being lost.¹⁵

¹³ RobertSF. 16 October, 2012, comment on Weismann “Sell a Stolen Painting?”

¹⁴ SonOfTheDesert. 17 October, 2012, comment on Dolnick “Not Like Thomas Crown.”

¹⁵ Amore, Anthony. “Debunking the Myth of Glamorous Art Thieves.” *The New York Times*. 17 October, 2012. <http://www.newyorktimes.com/2012/10/17/opinion/debunking-the-myth-of-glamorous-art-thieves.html>

This was part of a string of articles written promptly after the heist, to address the belief in the fictional glamorous art thieves of popular culture with titles like Edward Dolnick's "Art Thieves are not like Thomas Crown - but they are eternal optimists,"¹⁶ and Toby Sterling's "Dutch art thieves were no 'Ocean's 11' team."

I am most interested in the critiques, the acts of trolling, that involve or invoke the Master Thief figure or motif which provoke such articles. Master Thieves are interesting tricksters because they create worlds and the dramas within them. This is a trickster figure who turns crime into a playful and creative act. Lewis Hyde writes about trickster thieves in his anthropology of the trickster, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (1998). He says, "the mischief-maker and thief is one of the prime movers of narrative. The original plotter of plots, he gets the story moving and it comes to an end only when he and his mischief have been dealt with."¹⁷ The commentators I analyze, once set off by the theft, choose a different narrative than the elite establishment. In doing so, create a reality in which the corruption of capitalism is exposed and criminalized.

Such alternative narratives threaten structures that support elite social positions when they are applied to the real theft. Art heists demystify the illusions of the art world; Art loses its quasi-sacred aura and becomes merely a profane product of equally bureaucratic and artistic labor circulating in a grotesquely inflated and privileged market.

¹⁶ Sterling, Toby. "Dutch art thieves were no 'Ocean's 11' team." *USA Today*. 17 October, 2012
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/10/17/dutch-art-thieves/1640187>

¹⁷ Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Magic, and Art*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998. 220.

These trolls reveal and critique the corrupted constructs of capitalist culture and do so through a playful ambivalence towards theft.

Master Thief tales help illuminate this ambivalence between crime and play by orienting our conceptions of crime into frameworks of playful contest. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of The Play Element In Culture* (1938), provides a framework of understanding play and theft as remarkably similar in how they can be perceived and understood.

According to Huizinga, play can broadly be described as “a well-defined quality of action which is different from “ordinary” life.”¹⁸ Play sets time and space apart as “out of the ordinary” and enters into a new reality, a play-reality.¹⁹ Play-reality exists in a fixed space, limited in time, and enacted with its own rules.²⁰ Huizinga cites several examples:

the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and functions, play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, harrowed, within which special rules obtain; as are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performances of an act apart.²¹

Like play, theft is also enacted within set boundaries of time and space as well as within specific rules. Theft takes place within a crime scene, a space in which the thieves perform their trade. It is out of the “ordinary” time for the space. So much so, that we

¹⁸ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: The Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. New York: Martino Fine Books, 2014, 37.

¹⁹ Ibid, 5.

²⁰ Ibid, 9.

²¹ Ibid, 10.

have different categorizations for how theft disrupts the “ordinary” time and space. If a theft occurs at a museum during working hours, when people are allowed to be in galleries, the theft is termed ‘larceny.’ If someone enters into the museum after it is closed, outside of the normal time for people to be visiting, theft becomes ‘burglary.’ When a theft occurs within a space, it transforms that space into a crime scene, making it ‘out of the ordinary.’ The space, though it may look physically unchanged, is different as soon as the criminal enters and begins to work their trade.

A burglar, according to Robert Wittman, is “the opportunist. He sees a vulnerability. That would include your armed robbers and people who go in and do burglaries. They think there’s a vulnerability they can take advantage of. That would be what I would classify [the Rotterdam thieves].”²² Burglars burgle because they are outsiders who look in and see a possibility for action. Those who commit larceny are what Wittman calls “experts.”

Those are the insiders. At the FBI, we did a study in 2000, where we found that 88 to 90 percent of museum heists have some insider component. That could be curator, it could be a maintenance man who works there. It could be an expert who goes in and tries to steal while he’s studying the collection. The third [category of thief] is a shop lifter. The place is open, and they just stealthily grab a piece and sneak out with it. Those thefts happen at the small historical societies and places of that ilk.²³

Some thieves con their way to their target by either bribing museum worker or becoming workers themselves. Others steal on a small scale to avoid arousing suspicion.

²² Weissmann, “Sell A Stolen Painting?”

²³ Ibid.

But, master thieves know how to make a burglary look like larceny. They are so stealthy, that they can move past the boundaries without disrupting them. Other thieves, like The Rotterdam Thieves, set off alarms, but evade the locking mechanisms or are gone before the police can arrive. They were quick and clever, but not quite stealthy. Thieves must carefully negotiate their boundaries to succeed at their crime. The general rule for criminals is simple: don't get caught. A lot is at stake; one false move and a thief could be publicly mocked, put in prison, and/or fined into permanent poverty. The tension created by these stakes gives a successful crime its entertaining draw.

While theft and play may appear frenetic, they are not chaotic. For, "inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order resigns... [Play] creates order, *is* order."²⁴ Rules and order drive and contain the action. As the drama continues to expand outward and the opposing forces come together to create conflict, a surface tension as status quo struggles to be maintained. Huizinga adds that "it is this element of tension and solution that governs all solitary games of skill ... the more play bears the character of competition the more fervent it will be."²⁵ Play always pushes against its boundaries. This discussion of play as contest or ordered disorder leads Huizinga to produce a nuanced definition that is helpful as we move toward an application of play theory to theft. Huizinga (re)defines the word 'play' as:

a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but binding, having its aim in itself and

²⁴ Huizinga, 10.

²⁵ Ibid, 11.

accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the
consciousness that is “different” from “ordinary life.”²⁶

The popular conception of play is that it is completely *laissez-faire* with no governing control or order. When applying this definition of play to theft, we can see the similarities. Theft has a fixed time and space in which it must occur; it is undertaken with the knowledge that it breaks the rules of law. What an application of Huizinga’s concept suggests is that thieves feel tension and perhaps joy in their work because they are willingly playing within and outside of legal boundaries. In light of this comparison, I suggest we see theft and play as kinds of ordered disorder. They each give their players a certain amount of agency and enjoyment within set boundaries or rules and they each create an tension that drives them. The tension holds the framework of play in place, but within it, all things are possible; new realities can be created or stolen. Tension is also what attracts audiences.

When a heist is reported, audiences form and speculate about how and why a theft was committed. Audiences of crime attempt to piece together the events of the heist in order to gain some understanding of the timing and skill necessary for the theft to have succeeded. They enjoy the crime *post facto* and continue to watch the tension tighten as the investigation gets underway.

The same can be said of audiences who enjoy Master Thief tales. These tales take the audience through the setting up and executing of tricks and allow the audience to be in on the con. The audiences watch with irony as the Master Thief works to achieve their goal while playfully averting arrest.

²⁶ Ibid, 28.

Theft is a playful game. Tension makes heists and Master Thief tales so popular and entertaining. Thieves draw our attention to the fact that a successful theft, like a fairy tale, uses “every last second of the time limit, with everything working out in the end, in accordance with the precise and sharp portrayal dominant elsewhere in the fairy tale.”²⁷ Theft is executed by “an unexpected but logical consequence of style.” It entices audiences because their results, however rationally planned, described, executed, are still surprising.²⁸

Thieves create worlds and set narratives into motion by creating the lack necessary for drama. Because the same can be said for both real and cultural thieves, my thesis explores the possibility of interpreting the real through the literary. Doing so allows me to fully demonstrate the confusion and wonder that happens during theft which makes it such a unique cultural element. Good thieves can seem to magically appear and vanish. Their actions leave an empty space, a lack which must be filled by a drama.

My thesis looks at what happens when that drama begins. I examine the heist itself as a playfully constructed social drama and ask how thieves in folklore create similar dramas, and what these fictional dramas about play and theft help us understand about the audiences of popular culture. When an art establishment is most vulnerable after a theft, commentators flip the script and insert a critique that destabilizes elite capitalist art culture’s most principle foundations: the creation of value and the notion of private property. Their comments challenge such cultural conceptions of value,

²⁷ Lüthi, Max. *Once Upon A Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976ed. 57.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 131.

particularly the value of art, property, and financial speculations. By presenting an alternative epistemology for understanding culture, one that disavows cultural constructions of worth or notions of private property, these commentators show ways in which audiences can repurpose folklore and pop culture texts or genres, even ones considered bourgeois themselves, for active cultural criticism.

Many popular culture scholars tend to dismiss popular culture as a level of culture that is always only at the will of capitalism. Although they want to liberate the masses from its stupefying controls, their critiques remain informed by capitalist mentalities about the originality, individuality, genius, and aura of art— all of which preserve the hegemonic importance of private property and the primacy of the establishment to determine value.

An examination of online comments shows how these theories remain oppressive rather than liberating. The commentators actively engage with culture and actively use pop cultural texts to subvert meaning. The commentators dissent from the status quo and become even more potent because they offer up a perspective that looks on theft as more playful than criminal. Such a perspective undermines the fundamental principles in cultural elitism held by elite art world members and so-called “anti-capitalist” academics.

It is vital to acknowledge folklore’s role in these acts of reframing. Folklore provides a counter narrative around interpretations of real events. They both have a standardized structure that drives the action from lack to fulfillment, with varying devices in between. Master Thief tales have a long established oral, literary, and cinematic

context that has followed a more or less similar plot-line: clever thief seeks/needs to rob elites of precious items and succeeds in doing so.

This basic structure is essential for the audience because it is the known standard structure of these tales that act as a group cohesion and allows any active audience member to contribute to the same line of critique almost instantly, thereby adding fuel to a fire of dissenting commentary. I suggest that folklore reconsider its radical roots and continually find new ways to support anti-establishment and anti-capitalist expressions in culture through their own decentralized scholarship. I believe it is a field well equipped to convey dissent to others through its approaches to text, experience, and expression.

CHAPTER III

ART HEIST AS DRAMA: EMPTY FRAMES TO OPEN PROSCENIUMS

Let us return to the empty frame left on the floor in Rotterdam. It is a creative void, an emptiness from which something will emerge. Now that the news has broken, the press have gathered to hear statements and ask questions. Suddenly, it becomes clear that the empty space within the frame is not really empty at all; it contains a very opaque gap in knowledge. Its existence draws focus and begins to create an event.

I propose to consider an art heist as theater, as play. The process of maintaining cultural hierarchy functions very much like a social drama. There is a setting, a place where cultural hierarchy can manifest its actions. There are actors, both key and supporting, who mend or remake structures. The stolen artworks become props, objects to direct, control, and contain attention. Most importantly, all is performed for an audience.

To consider the framework of this drama and how the audience factors into it, I borrow Victor Turner's concept of social drama from *The Anthropology of Performance* (1988) to posit that, in the event of an art heist, the comments insert their dissenting narratives during a moment of ordered disorder when the structures of hierarchy and ideology are traditionally weakened. Those comments assert new ways of seeing and being within culture. Turner's concept of social drama, "a kind of metatheater...a dramaturgical language about the language of ordinary role-playing and status-maintenance which constitutes communication in the quotidian social process,"²⁹ frames

²⁹ Turner, Victor. "The Anthropology of Performance" in *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York:PAJ Publications, 1988ed. 72-98

events as a performative dialogue. For Turner, social dramas allow for the public to become an active audience that is equally participatory in social events and customs.

The concept of social drama, as “an eruption from the level surface of ongoing life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs of making regular, orderly sequences of behavior,”³⁰ gives the public audience agency in shaping the order of social reality. Turner defines social reality as “a set of loosely integrated processes, with some patterned aspects, some persistences of form, but controlled by discrepant principles of action expressed in rules of custom that are often situationally incompatible with one another.”³¹ Turner’s model for approaching public events challenges centralization and destabilizes hierarchical order. Social dramas become “units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations.”³² They are sites of play and contestation wherein the audience can overturn social reality and critique the established ordering of culture. A heist like any social drama begs for an audience to watch, debate, and judge. The thrill of this particular kind of drama lies in the power of the chase and the open-ended narrative. If it is truly a good public drama, space is transformed into social space; this space can be comment feeds after articles, a gathering at a live press conference, or even an empty space on a wall where a masterpiece once hung. While the participation levels vary across these spaces, there is singular meeting point that unites them, the contestation of the meaning behind the heist.

³⁰ Ibid, 90.

³¹ Ibid, 74.

³² Ibid.

An art heist creates a new setting, a play-ground outside of ordinary reality in which different social contests can occur. As the stage becomes set for the police and museum authorities to begin their rehearsed script like the one discussed by Roger Whittman. They begin to order the chaotic speculation of “whodunit” into a structured space. Unlike most crimes, an art heist invokes the framework of a game that recalls a child-like enjoyment of playing cops and robbers, a chase in hot pursuit. This theatrical event begins instantly with the heist’s discovery, thus setting in motion the public drama to return the paintings, to end the emptiness on the wall, to fill the lack, and to close the gap in knowledge. According to Turner, social dramas begin in chaos when there is a “breach of regular norm-governed social relations”³³ in which “affect is primary, though an element of cognitive calculation is usually present, and the transgressor’s will to assert power or identity usually incites the will to resist his action among representatives of the normative standard which he has infringed.”³⁴ Theft disrupts culture’s quotidian aspects. It shatters everyday conceptions and constructions of what culture is, who owns it, and where it belongs. Art theft is a transgression against elite cultural order that dares to claim cultural objects as private property.

These transgressions are mirrored in the online commentaries. They break the rules of who gets to dictate information and taste to the public. They get to assess the stolen paintings as “modern crap”.³⁵ They disturb the control of elite critics by antagonizing and critiquing them through mockery. “Well good for the thieves,” one

³³ Turner, 75.

³⁴ Ibid, 91.

³⁵ BaalsProphet. 17 October, 2012, comment on Dolnick “Not like Thomas Crown.”

commentator added, “they have seen a way to beat the capitalist system and the artificial price of art has gave [sic] them the opportunity.”³⁶ Others took aim directly at the market. One commentator cited Ben Lewis, who had recently done a television report called *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* (2009). They posted:

Cynicism, absurdity, and obscenity are the three key characteristics of this vastly inflated art bubble, and the underlying causes are not hard to find: a lack of regulation and a lack of courage. Unlike other commodity and financial markets, there are no rules against insider trading (in the art world)...Contemporary art has become a poker game for the richest men and women in the world: they are daring each other to raise the stakes and call their bluff. Long ago we abandoned the idea that art should be beautiful, but it was never supposed to be a synonym for obscenity...The art world is dirty corrupt and immoral, and, if there was a name for such crime, these people would be charged with perverting the course or art history...This is the art world version of the patter of a used car salesman and its amazing anyone believe it.

To which they added, “These people have no morals about anything else, so why should they care about a little thievery to get what they want? Heck, that would probably make it even more intriguing for them.”³⁷ This comment contains the essence of many commentator’s critiques. They see the art market as far more criminal than the theft, but each are both considered playful or game-like. The art market and, by extension, capitalism as a whole is viewed as a kind of illegal or illicit club poker game, where only a very select few can pay to be at the table. When the theft occurs, and global media commentary is drawn in, the stage is set for drama. As two competing and sometimes

³⁶ TheManFromRotherham. 17 October, 2012, comment on Jones “Pick n Mix”

³⁷ MrMikeludo. 17 October, 2012, comment on Ibid.

hostile forces come together and confront one another, a crisis forms which incites or ignites the play.

The second and most critical phase, the crisis, is a liminal time that “takes up its menacing stance in the forum itself, and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with it.”³⁸ During this stage, power becomes dynamic. An art heist generates an inverted social structure through ritualized and ordered play among commentaries, allows for a leveling of social strata and a freer license to exchange dissenting ideas or engage in rebellious anti-normative behavior. Social dramas, then, are contests of narrative and ideology; they are stages upon which actors assert their agency over the social narrative. Amore, Dolnick, and Jones try to persuade commentators that if they only see reason and the facts, they would see that their claims were unreal and misguided. Conversely, the commentators are suggesting that the systems of high culture function on thievery accuse authors like Amore of missing the rationally deducible facts of systematic oppression.

An art heist upends the political order while the police appear “clue-less” and have no solid explanation to offer dissenting commentators. This causes a reaction from authorities which issues “redressive action ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution.”³⁹ Redressive action tries to correct, justify, or remedy the disharmony of the social drama. The art establishment attempts to “correct” or “educate” the public by providing them with facts and statistical

³⁸ Turner, 75.

³⁹ Turner, 75.

evidence against the comments about master thieves. This extends beyond the immediate temporal frame of the art heist; it continues long after the physical crime as been “solved” and the “proper” criminals are punished. The public drama of an art heist continues because there is no redressive action from elites that can dissuade the user comments. Online comments are recorded forever. Some users can be blocked, but there are ways around such interdictions. The journalists and experts reporting on the art heist write books in an attempt to further convince the general public that it is sheepishly following a low form of culture.⁴⁰ Yet, these books still rely on sensationalism and romanticism to sell. For example, a recent true crime book by Joshua Knelman, *Hot Art* (2012) is marketed with recommendations from author Margaret Atwood and the senior producer of *Law and Order*, rather than actual political or police authorities. This does not allow a “reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties.”⁴¹ Art heists, unlike Turner’s social drama, create a drama that ends in disharmony. Neither sides wins nor accepts the other. As these dramas persist, the memory of them creates new meanings and templates for future responses to art heists.⁴² Each art heist brings up these issues and each time the same sort of commentary arises.

⁴⁰ These books include:

Amore, Anthony M., and Tom Mashberg. *Stealing Rembrandts: The Untold Stories of Notorious Art Heists*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Dolnick, Edward. *The Rescue Artist: A True Story of Art, Thieves, and the Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005.

Knelman, Joshua. *Hot Art: Chasing Thieves and Detectives Through the Secret World of Stolen Art*. Portland, Oregon: Tin House Books, 2012.

McLeave, Hugh. *Rogues in the Gallery: The Modern Plague of Art Thefts*. Boston: D.R. Godine, 1981.

⁴¹ Turner, 74.

⁴² Turner, 96.

The commentators take up the drama to highlight issues of continued inequality within society. As folklorist Richard Flores writes, public dramas highlight the “struggle over the production and reproduction of culture,” which, “is situated in the emergent social formation evoked through the performance,”⁴³ that is, the “idealized” world of cops and robbers. Thus, even though the police wear badges and other symbols of authority, we see within the struggles of these institutions, that the audience plays a crucial role in the (re)making of culture. They destabilize the control elites have in their positions because they lobby for larger ideas of culture and justice from outside the traditional centers of power. Commentators use the opportunity to address the art institutions as a classist elitist system that actively cultivate exclusionary criteria for what is considered art and who can buy it.

Art heists attract an audience interested in discourses of art and culture and engage with these discourses publicly in online forums. High profile art crimes, like the one in Rotterdam, reiterate that culture carries capital. The staggering price tags of today’s works of art increase by the minute since value continues to accrue as a work gets older, more culturally valuable, and more rare. As an example, in 2013, a work by celebrated contemporary artist, Jeff Koons, sold for a record shattering 38.8 millions euros (40 million US dollars). Speculation over future aesthetic and artist appreciation drives the contemporary art market, a multi-billion dollar industry that bends to the tastes and finances of the people wealthy enough to participate.

⁴³ Flores, Richard R. "Los Pastores" and the Gifting of Performance. *American Ethnologist*, 21(2): 270-85. 1994.

Art crime exposes this inflation and incites hostility from online commentators who regard this inflation as elitist, unnecessary, and oppressive. The theft of major works of art, jewelry, etc. all shed light on the enormous funds necessary to participate in and produce culture. When elite institutions, like museums, lose control over their holdings, the big business such side of “high art” becomes increasingly obvious. The hand of culture-making is exposed as the same hand that exerts socio-economic oppression on a systematic scale.

Jonathan Jones, arts writer for *The Guardian*, looks at this exclusion with his article “Art: the blood sport of the ultra-wealthy,” which he wrote shortly after the Rotterdam heist.⁴⁴ In it, he compares the art market to a sporting ring in which many duel to the financial death for works of art. He even asks if there might be some “moral” quandaries about participation in the art market. How much is too much money for a piece of art? But Jones stops complacently short of condemning art marketers. He asks “what is moral and what is immoral in the world of art” yet never answers the question. He asks if art is “worth the money,” to which he asserts “it’s about what the auction houses can get people to pay,” but never critiques the idea.

It is commentators who take Jones’ article to a critiquing or dissenting level. Users claim that the art is “utter tat going for billions.”⁴⁵ One commentator recognizes Jones’ implicit assertion that art is “merely a commodity” but asks “does anyone who

⁴⁴ Jones, Jonathan. "Art: Blood-sport For The Ultra Wealthy." *The Guardian*, 18 Oct. 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/oct/18/art-blood-sport-ultra-wealthy>

⁴⁵ R042. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

really cares about art, care that this kind of crap is out of their financial league?”⁴⁶ Many argued that this said “more about the rich than it does about art” and that they are “milking the world of money.”⁴⁷ The discourse quickly turns into a discourse on exploitation, leading one commentator to declare “a plague on all their tasteless mansions, the parasites!”⁴⁸

The commentators asks Jones, and other elite members who may be reading, to consider how the art market, as an investment scheme, robs money out of circulation that could be used for public or social programs in “a market that gets stronger as the economy gets weaker.”⁴⁹ All of these comments, and others like them on concurrent articles like “Have You Ever Tried To Sell A Stolen Painting?” and Jones’ other article “Dutch art theft: a pick’n’mix of paintings reduced to criminal collateral” all strip away the glossy rhetoric of the expert authors to expose the elitist and implicit script that informs them. One commentator said that art

is worth what someone will pay for it, but that doesn’t mean it has any artistic merit. Art is merely a commodity...If someone bought [the stolen paintings] because they absolutely loved it and had to have it at any cost, then this is at least a good reason, but I’d say they have really shit taste. Seriously, does anyone who really cares about art, care that this kind of stuff is out of their financial league?⁵⁰

Another commentator added

⁴⁶ VoodooGnome. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

⁴⁷ gleebitz. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

⁴⁸ stupormundi. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

⁴⁹ MrMikeludo. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

⁵⁰ VoodooGnome. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

its quite apparent these guys are so successful at milking the world of money that they simply don't know where to put it anymore. Have a look at all the superyachts at a temperate beach near you, and you'll get a clue as to where stolen art might wind up.⁵¹

Such commentaries draw attention to the art market “stage”, which enacts social dominance and use the moment's theatricality to assert the critiques lacking in the larger social discourse.

Art heists reveal the inner scaffolding of cultural construction. They highlight the transactions that go into making a work of art valuable by allowing audiences to be made privy to museum profits and the speculation of the art market. Art heists show the museum's power to dictate what is culturally and economically valuable. Most importantly, art heists reveal the important scaffolding of privilege that determines access to and appreciation of this art by browbeating anyone who fails to see why the heist is anything but a tragedy. Art heists dramatize the elite snobbery of cultural gatekeeping when experts try to convince commentators that certain works of art are valuable and that the museum is, and has always been, acting to preserve the works for them on behalf of the larger public.

Commentators like these create discussion that critiques and dissents. The experts, museum representatives, and police officials do not critique the establishments that privilege them. That would disqualify them from the game. Instead, the audience

⁵¹ gleebitz. 18 October 2012, comment on Ibid.

recognizes the inequalities of the system and responds appropriately and traditionally with censorious commentary.⁵²

When the construction of culture is blown open for speculation by (popular) narrative critiques such constructions as they inform reality. Economic inequality is made widely-known and those outside are afforded a brief moment of collectively demonstrate their frustration. Commentators use the fragile or vulnerable positions of institutional culture to mock, critique, and play with institutionalized values and authorities. In the face of persistent opposition from cultural elites, these comments defy the “logical” or “reasonable” explanations that provide and challenge the elites to defend their criteria. Those comments, if nothing else, indict elite cultural markets on charges of exclusionary taste making and maintaining self-serving standards of culture by driving art prices based on the jointly privileged knowledges of aesthetic appreciation and financial forecasting.

These comments expose the cultural system’s corruption, not the actual identity of the thieves. No one seems interested in the Romanian crime syndicate that burnt the Rotterdam paintings before being caught and pleading guilty. This would indicate that the comments left in the initial wake of an art heist are not aimed at solving the real crime, but rather indicting the cultural system as a whole. Instead of identifying a “suspect,” they focus on the oppressive motives behind the theft and the general public’s exclusion from the world of fine art.

⁵²Saltzman, Rachelle H. ‘This Buzz Is For You’: Popular Responses to the Ted Bundy Execution. *Journal of Folklore Research: “Arbiters of Taste: Censuring/Censoring Discourse” (Special Issue)*. 32(2):101-120. 1995.

As the drama addresses issues of justice, the authority of the establishment and the critiquing audience collide in contestation. In such public enactments, multileveled exercises of power are at work and the struggle of reality comes to the fore. I have talked about the puzzling order of the disorder in an art heist, now I turn to look at the disorders of power that take place. I trace these power struggles following Beverley Stoeltje's analysis of power in the form, production, and discourse of ritual genres.⁵³

For Stoeltje, power can be amassed through the control of these three processes. She sees form as what is reoccurring and recognizable within performance. In this model, form structures the genre of performance and it is the familiarity of the form which gives the audience pleasure. The control over form is to theoretically control the audience's experience and expectations, the event's "magical effectiveness" because it dictates what is familiar, intelligible, or repeated to and by an audience.⁵⁴

Art heists follow a standard performance program. Once the investigation is underway, the investigators announce the crime to the public which brings in public attention. The attention fizzles out once the public loses interest. The necessity to keep major crimes in the public eye presents a conundrum to the police. From one perspective, public interest or attention increases the possibility of the criminals being apprehended or the works of art returned. Yet, sustained public attention brings continued scrutiny. Stoeltje writes, "the form that ultimately becomes familiar to its audience must be replicable because it must be repeated often to maintain its familiarity

⁵³ Stoeltje, Beverly. Power and the Ritual Genres: American Rodeo. *Western Folklore* "Theorizing Folklore: Toward New Perspectives on the Politics of Culture" 52(2/4): 135-56.1993.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 141.

and thus its power. However, it must also be restricted sufficiently enough that only those with power have access to its production.”⁵⁵

Criminal investigator, Robert Spiel Jr. wrote about publicity during high profile cases in his *Art Theft and Forgery Investigation: The Complete Field Manual* (2000). He advises:

when I feel the public would be interested by the identity of the victim,” like a high profile museum or gallery, “or the public would sympathize, or the public would be shocked by the identity of the victim and the circumstances; and the victim is willing; I will identify the victim in any bulletin or notification I issue, and I will also try to arrange follow-up media coverage on a regular basis as long as I can generate media interest. I have even recommended that the victim engage a media consultant to encourage the news media to tell the story about the art theft as often as possible.⁵⁶

The police determines a certain amount of expose by giving the press new talking points. It is then up to reporters to control the “organization of production.”⁵⁷ They decide what information to disseminate, how the public should feel about the information, and if the public gets a response. Online commentary exists on a select few websites. Many elite reports on the crime came from journals like *The New York Times*, afford no opportunity for public comments. They close off popular input thus censor critique by not even allowing the critique to take place. With public expression denied, journalists can control how the public interprets an art heist.

⁵⁵ Ibid,

⁵⁶ Spiel, Robert E. *Art Theft and Forgery Investigation: The Complete Field Manual*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 2000.73.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The art critics and crime detectives are supposed to control what the public thinks about art theft and the missing works of art. The articles I've noted are all about controlling public discourse with respect to the heist as well as the larger art world. But commentators resist this dynamic. Stoeltje says

decisions about the discourse will be made through the Organization of Production [sic]. The discourse includes not only the language of the ritual performance itself, but the language used by the producers of it in the texts they produce, such as...the text they provide for newspapers and television. However, the discourse is also widely disseminated through oral tradition which surrounds any ritual event, ancient or modern.⁵⁸

The commentators I analyze take up a tradition of mockery and criticism that robs the elites of their control over the discourse of social drama and breaks down traditional models of power. Despite numerous reports dictating what to think, feel, and believe about culture, these commentators do not allow elites to dictate the discourse. They continue their own dialog, discussing issues they think are important. Instead of approaching the crime "rationally" or "realistically," these commentators play with the elite directives and antagonize them with stories of Master Thieves. A closer look at these stories reveals that not only are these tales not as "romantic" as Amore and others claim, but also that they present theft as a playful space of critique.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 143.

CHAPTER IV

PLAYFUL THEFT IN “THE MASTER THIEF”

In his chapter on “Clever Thieves” in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, Jack Zipes explains the folkloric roots of “The Glamorous Art Thief.” Zipes categorizes them as either those who “steal for aggrandizement and violate someone else’s property,” who are “depicted in a negative light,” and who “are generally punished for their devious and selfish actions” or, as “heroes [who] do not steal out of social need but to accomplish a particular goal that involves recognition of their skill and cunning — these admirable and likable thieves are often compulsive and seek to celebrate their art.”⁵⁹

His two examples, Straparola’s “Cassandrino, The Master Thief” (1550) and the later Grimms’ version “The Master Thief” (1812) fall into his second set of characteristics. Both tales involve a singular masterful thief who is challenged to a series of tests that prove their skill or result in imprisonment or execution. What Zipes’ categories fail to include is that, throughout these tests, Clever thieves are constantly undermining elite social positions.

The Grimms’ “The Master Thief” uses a twisted rationality to ironically critique social reality. The dramatic irony of “watching” these thieves set up and execute their witty tricks against members of the upper class is a fundamental ingredient to the success and popularity of the Master Thief tradition. These tales are also about ordered disorder. The audience watches The Master Thief structure his illusions and then watches the victims fall prey to them. No one at the top is safe from The Master Thief — his trickery

⁵⁹ Zipes, Jack. *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* : Texts, Criticism. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.33.

fools members of the landed class as well as members of the church. This process makes a mockery of them, suspends their power, and creates social disorder.

This clever and enchanting criminality uses theft as a form of play or contest to critique social hierarchy. “The Master Thief” includes three trials, each of which involve a subversive playing with the orders of reality, both cultural and physical, which upend order and hierarchy.⁶⁰They are breaches in the social drama of the text. Such enjoyment is dangerous and calls for a thoroughgoing reconceptualization of many cultural norms or realities not only because it subverts social and moral order, but also because it bleeds over into reality in the event of an art heist.

The tale begins with The Master Thief’s return home after an absence of many years during which he has amassed considerable wealth. He has been gone so long that his peasant parents do not recognize him, except for his bean-shaped birthmark. The Master Thief, though he has become rational and industrious, is always marked by nature.

Master Thief tales are always about the divide between the wild & untamed and the cultivated & civilized, particularly from Zipes’ perspective. They traverse both worlds because they have a taste and elegance that affiliates them with elite classes while still having a “lowbrow” criminality. It is a similar divide that informs the divide between elites and commentators when the tales are invoked after a heist. The elites represent constructed ideas of refinement and sophistication which pits the masses against them as “delusional,” “unrefined,” culturally inferior and thus morally inferior.

⁶⁰ I will be using Jack Zipes’ translation of the Grimms “The Master Thief.” Tale 192. in *The Complete Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm*. Bantam Books: New York, 2002. 552-558. Print.

The Grimms' Master Thief and his father discuss crooked twigs as a symbol for the son's social standing. The Master Thief cannot hope "to grow straight again." The Master Thief does not regret a life lived on the straight path. Instead, he delights in his lifestyle of thievery. He says,

How did I acquire all this? I became a thief. But don't be alarmed. I am a master thief. There's no such thing as locks or bolts for me. Whatever my heart desires is mine. But I don't want you to think that I steal like a common thief. I only take from the rich, who have more money than they need. Poor people are safe. I prefer to give them things rather than to take anything from them. Therefore, I won't touch a thing that doesn't demand effort, cunning, and skill to obtain it.⁶¹

This brief introductory speech explains many reasons why "The Master Thief" is entertaining for audiences. His saying "there is no such things as locks or bolts," enables us to recognize that The Master Thief knows how to play within even the tights of boundaries; he fits and gets his pleasure from the challenge of wiggling inside secure places, of creating disorder through ordered means. Most importantly, he assures the folk/"lower" class members of his audience that they are safe from harm and thus welcome to enjoy the tale. The thief's targets are members of elite society from the government to the church, those who oppress the poor.

Upon hearing that The Master Thief has come to the area, the count in "The Master Thief" challenges the thief to prove he is truly a master thief and sets out three tasks: to steal a horse from the private stable, to steal the bedsheets and wedding ring

⁶¹ Grimms, 553.

from the count's wife, and to steal the clerk and parson from the church.⁶² He wagers that if The Master Thief were to succeed, he might be free to leave without charges. If he were to fail, he must marry the rope maker's daughter and be trapped in rural life.⁶³ It is here that theft becomes play as Huizinga defines it. The count dictates a limited time and space for The Master Thief to act. Each of these challenges are designed to test The Master Thief's ingenuity and cunning in his ability to play within the limits of law and nature.

For the first challenge, The Master Thief disguises himself as an old woman who brings wine for the nighttime stable guards opens up a reality that can be changed through disguise.⁶⁴ *He* becomes *she*. In describing cultural genres of play, Huizinga notes that in disguise the player *is* the other person and creates a new reality and a new identity.⁶⁵

Once inside the stables, The Master Thief removes his disguise and sets to work creating the illusion that the horse is still in the stables. After the guards fall into drunken stupors, The Master Thief uses pieces of the stables to recreate the frame of a horse to fool the guards into thinking they are still holding the reigns of the count's prize steed.

⁶² Ibid, 544.

⁶³ Marriage, it seems, is more damning a punishment than prison for The Master Thief.

⁶⁴ The Master Thief is not transgender, but he does cross gender lines in this story. It is comforting to know that the narrative accepts this gender change without judgement and never chastises The Master Thief for cross-dressing. The powers of gender switching also confuses gender boundaries. Disguise, is close to drag in this particular example because it is also a play on enforced categories of gender performance. It draws attention to these categories and the playful potential to subvert these categories. See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990),107-205 for an analysis of how drag plays with, and potentially subverts the social realities of gender.

⁶⁵ Huizinga, 37

This demonstrates The Master Thief's industriousness and his almost otherworldly acumen for understanding human perceptions. As an archetypal trickster, he has a superhuman understanding of the rational processes of human thought. He plays on judgements about size and rein tautness that the guards would use to feel the horses presence and constructs a forgery of a frame to convince the sleeping guards that the horse never left the stable.⁶⁶

The reading audience of "The Master Thief" is able to feel a complex response that is at once in awe yet aware. Unlike the befuddled guards, the audience is more amazed and enraptured by the trick and assumes a critical distance knowing that The Master Thief will succeed against the elites who challenge him. It is all a question of "how" and each trick will reveal yet another more difficult and fantastic answer.

Master Thief tales level cultural hierarchies by making the victims into examples. Their trickery reveals that the elitist attitudes are hubristic because they equate rationality to moral, political, or social order. They use discourses of "proper," "logical," or "rational" thought to justify their privilege and maintain the subordination of the people.

The second task introduces elements of the gothic into the text which troubles this further. Gothic here can implies associations with motifs or tropes of the Gothic cultural genre, such as contact with the dead, haunting, dread, or rapture. Since The Master Thief is challenged to procure the bedsheets from the count's chamber as well as the ring from

⁶⁶ Ibid.

This particular task is common amongst many earlier Master Thief-tales, perhaps going all the way back to Herodotus' tale of Rhampsinit in his *Histories* (c.440 BCE). The order in which it appears, however may vary. For example, in Straparola's earlier tale "Cassandrino - The Master Thief," this appears as the second task.

his wife's finger. The Master Thief must go to extremes to distract the count and lure him away from his chamber. To do this, The Master Thief goes "out to the gallows in the darkness and cut down a poor sinner who has been hanging from the halter."⁶⁷ He then carries the corpse up a ladder to the count's chamber window where the count has been waiting, with a pistol in hand. The count shoots the corpse in the head, exploding bits of body and sending the corpse tumbling to the ground. Shocked and surprised, the count runs down to bury him.

While the count is occupied with burying the hangman, The Master Thief tricks the countess into giving him her ring by imitating the count's voice. A voice calls out to the countess in the darkness and exerts control over her. She complies with the voice's demands gives the bed sheet and ring to the darkness believing the count needs them for the burial.⁶⁸

When both of these tactics are revealed to be part of The Master Thief's plan, the count and countess are both met with horror. The count is shocked to find The Master Thief still alive and now has to find out who he killed instead. The countess feels betrayed, almost as if she had cheated on her husband. The trick transforms both the count and countess into victims. Their inner chambers have been violated and each has to question what each knows to be real.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid, 555.

⁶⁸ This task is a slight variant from other Master Thief-tales. In many cases, such as in Straparola's version, the thief is to steal a body from the bed and substitutes a corpse instead. In Peter Christen Asbjørnsen's "The Master Thief" (1859) this task appears almost identically.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 555-556.

The Master Thief uses elements of the gothic, uncanny, and disgusting to play with the order of nature and law. These elements are terrifying or chilling because they are about discordances with nature. We rationally can understand the thief's plans, but there is still a sense of unease when we consider his contact with a corpse as well as the chunks of corpse the count must now collect and bury. Playing with the dead is grotesque and disrupts social norms about death and burial. The disembodied voice reminds us that even something familiar can be imitated. The use of gothic tropes and the grotesque are common throughout Master Thief narratives. They often become uncanny when they involve a tricking of the mind, which often has unsettling results for their victims. Disgust confronts us with our moral and cultural positions of cleanliness and contamination. To touch the dead, even more to play with the dead is a strong taboo.

Yet here, in The Master Thief's second task, these elements enter in because the tale takes place in a play-time where anything is possible. To undermine the social order, The Master Thief plays with conventional order. These moments destabilize cultural reality by fooling authorities. In this tale in particular, the elites become associated with death and disembodiment, represented by the tricks played on the count and countess, respectively. The upper classes become ritually impure in this tale and are mocked for their stupidity.⁷⁰ Yet, here again, we can delight in this confusion.

All of these elements collide in "The Master Thief's" third and final task — to steal the clerk and the parson. To achieve this feat, The Master Thief attaches candles to the back of crabs and sets them out in the church graveyard. He enters the church,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

dressed in a monk's cowl, and proclaims "Hark, you sinful people, the end of everything has come! Judgement Day is near. Hark, Hark! Whoever wants to go with me to heaven had better crawl into the sack. I am Peter, who opens and shuts the gates of heaven."⁷¹ He then directs the clerk and the parson to look out the window at the flickering lights of the dead as they return to heaven. Seeing the lights of the candles, but not the crabs, the clerk and the parson immediately forsake their followers and insist they be saved first and quickly enter The Master Thief's sack. While The Master Thief carries them throughout the town, he tells them that they are on their way to heaven. As he places the sack with the clerk and the parson into a pigeon coop, he assures them that the fluttering of wings are those of angels. The clerk and the parson in states of deranged, but perhaps ecstatic, catatonia and everyone mocks them, including the count.⁷²

The ornateness and underlying political criticism in this task make it a typifying trick for The Master Thief genre. First, he makes fools of cultural elites. Second, he tricks them with an illusion so intricate and detailed that it gives its victims a false sense of reality. And most importantly, it allows for the fullest range of dramatic irony to engage its audience.

Master Thief tales featuring playful theft challenge many of our assumptions of how the criminal features society. If theft can be fun, then perhaps our cultural ideas of

⁷¹ Ibid, 556 - 557.

⁷² Ibid. 557.

Many Master Thief-tales involve stealing religious figures, often by convincing the religious officials that it was the end of the world. The crabs with candles, according to the Aarne-Thompson index, has folkloric precedents that are not related to Master Thief-tales. The Grimms version and a Croatian version later recorded by Friedrich Krauss in his *Sagen und Märchen der Sudslaven* (Leipzig, 1883-1884) are the only known versions of Master Thief tale to use this trick.

what it means to possess something can be called into question. As we have seen, theft in itself can function as a critique. The resulting enjoyment of a criminal's handiwork, according to Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* (1975), splits our "moral unity that society demands of every human product" and we can relish in the tension of this splitting and subvert dominant cultural ideas.⁷³ These tales show that theft can be both play and critique, a notion that art heists also make clear. They allow us to add to Huzinga's ideas by considering socio-political critique itself a kind play. By using the criminal as a vehicle for critique, Master Thief tales ask us to reorient our ideas of what is acceptably called play and what criminal play might mean for a rebellious experience of culture.

⁷³Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. New York: Hill and Wang. Print 31.

CHAPTER V

ENTR'ACTE

*

A Note On Gender

So far, I have tried, where I can to use they/them pronouns when referring to The Master Thief tale tradition because they do sometimes include women and queer people. In the history that follows, you will not find any mention of narratives like *Entrapment* (1999), *Where In The World Is Carmen Sandiego?* (1991-1996), or DC Comic's classic villainess, Catwoman. These and few others have helped create a rich and complex strain of Master thief tales.

As my final chapter will explain, the online commentators' critique requires the Master Thief be white and male because, when they are reflected onto the art world, they critique its white heteronormative patriarchy. Female Master Thief tales are always already dissenting and critiquing cultural norms and therefore cannot be used as tools to critique the establishment in the same way I am analyzing. No one seems to suggest that a female thief robbed the museum as a critique of male-dominated cultural hegemony. However, this is an underlying motive within female and queer-driven Master Thief tales. These narratives need to be examined in their own right for the ways they subvert, challenge, or play with gendered cultural hierarchies.

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The history of The Master Thief after the Grimms is a dissertation in itself. As industrialization increased and with it the presence of a leisure elite, The Master Thief

soon had new arenas in which to practice his trade. The Victorian era in England saw a large number of Master Thieves in its serial crime fiction. Guy Boothby's Simon Crane (1897) is considered one of the first master thieves of the genre. Grant Allan's Colonel Clay (1897), E.W. Hornung's AJ Raffles (1898) and Arnold Bennett's Cecil Thorold (1917) were equally popular. The French also had a series of master or "gentlemen" thieves as they began to develop the *roman policier*. Maurice LeBlanc's Arsène Lupin (1905) was the most notorious, but he later turned his thieving skills into detective skills to catch other criminals.⁷⁴

These thieves operated within the leisure class, but were never fully part of them. They stole from those who did not have any other trade besides attending charity events and polo matches. Yet, those thieves, as career criminals, practiced a trade and were therefore somewhere in between gentlemen of leisure and the emerging "professional" man. These were men who did not need to work but did so nonetheless.

Throughout the rising and falling of wealth disparity, The Master Thief has found their way into a variety of genres that use the working man in an elite setting to reinvent old traditions. In America's immediate post-war era, the Master Thief lost his typical ostentatiousness and became briefly aligned with mobsters and organized crime, a setting that differed greatly from the whimsy of earlier folktales. Films like *The Killing* (1956) and *Rififi* (1955) depict The Master Thief as head of a gritty criminal organization. Though these films differ from the tale of "The Master Thief," they also introduce a new variation to the standard structure of Master Thief tales. No longer does The Master

⁷⁴ Sims, Michael. *The Penguin Book of Gaslight Crime: Con Artists, Burglars, Rogues, and Scoundrels from the Time of Sherlock Holmes*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

Thief work alone; he can incorporate himself and run an organization. The professional man has become the corporate man.⁷⁵

By the 1960s, the Western imagination was ready to reintegrate this new variation of The Master Thief. These stories and films take a playful approach to crime and seems to imply an endorsement of theft as a form of entertainment. With the advent of motion pictures, these thieves quickly learn to dance. They tango in ballrooms and slip under or *jeté* over security lasers. This seems to be a visual representation of their playfulness and draws attention of the similarities between the footwork of dance and the footwork of theft. Such an addition to The Master Thief tradition visually represents the classically playful tone of its folkloric roots.

In 1960, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and the other members of “The Rat Pack” starred in *Ocean’s Eleven* (1960), which introduced a new Master Thief, Daniel Ocean (Sinatra) and his crew of thieves as they plot to rob a Las Vegas Casino. *Ocean’s Eleven* and its millennial relaunch series (featuring George Clooney as Ocean) intensify the levels of interaction between theft and play. Not only are these thieves cheeky and comical as well as criminal, they also steal from places of elite play. Casinos are in the business of play, so thieves who steal from them work and play in places where play is work. To the audience, there is a confusion between the kinds of play at work. Casinos provide spaces to play while the casino owners and the thieves treat their business like some kind of game. This adds another layer of play to the film and further explores a multi-level relationship between theft and play.

⁷⁵ Gates, Philippa. *Detecting Men Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. Albany: State U of New York, 2006. 55-94.

When Stephen Soderbergh revisited the *Ocean's Eleven* series in 2001, 2004, and 2007, he took this ironic play and further deepened the irony. In his second film, *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), we are given a complex playing with reality and order as Daniel and Co. compete with notorious French thief, Baron François Toulour a.k.a “The Night Fox” (Vincent Cassel) to determine who is the best thief. The two thieves play with each other and their contest plays with the structures of reality.

This film is particularly important for our purposes because it is the only *Ocean's* film to take place within an art museum; the challenge is to steal a Faberge egg. Much like the Grimms' tale, this film destabilizes social order. Ocean's team uses holograms to create the illusion of an exact copy in order to make off with the real egg, not unlike how *The Master Thief* simulates a horse in order to steal the real one. The elite position of art museums is left under suspicion when the museum continues to house a fake egg rather than a real one. The museum no longer has claims to an “original,” and thus valuable work of art. Furthermore, it is no longer able to claim its staff can discern real from forgery.

According to Umberto Eco, this hyperreality, a forged and convincing likeness of reality, an authentic fake, uses computer technology to achieve ends similarly to those in the Grimms' “*The Master Thief*”.⁷⁶ In the post-modern era, the magic of the folk tale is being substituted for or by the wonder of digital technology. While the goals and the motives remain the same, their presentation and performance changes throughout the history of *The Master Thief*.

⁷⁶ Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. Harcourt Brace & Co: San Diego. 1976. 4

Soderbergh goes a step further to distort the verisimilitude of the film by having several actors play versions of themselves. Julia Roberts, playing Daniel Ocean's wife, Tess, is asked to play Julia Roberts the actress in order for the crew to get up close to the egg. With this device, Soderbergh has destabilized what it means to be watching a performance, which questions reality. The film breaks down the distinctions between actor, character, and audience. Thus, it makes it difficult to pinpoint dramatic irony. Everything is illusionary. Unlike early Master Thief tales which preserve a stable perspective for dramatic irony to take place, Soderbergh shows how crime and play together disrupt all orders of reality. The audience is no longer an audience that watches the events of the tale unfold. The audience is now an audience whose members must watch themselves watch the tale unfold.

Another 1960s film takes Master Thief-narratives in a more traditional route. *The Thomas Crown Affair* from 1968 (and later 1999 remake) tells the story of a wealthy entrepreneurial thief, Thomas Crown (Steve McQueen in 1968 and Pierce Brosnan in 1999) who tries to evade, but nevertheless falls in love with a femme fatale insurance agent (Faye Dunaway and later Renee Russo). Crown is a Master Thief who works alone and takes more traditional steps to undermine social and physical order. The 1968 film does not do as much of this as the later 1999 film, but both films use disguise as part of their evasive techniques, though neither film swaps gender like in "The Master Thief" and only the 1968 film has traces of the gothic in it.

Unlike the 1968 film centered around a bank heist, the 1999 film takes place explicitly within the art world and introduces many impostors at the final climax in order

to confuse investigators as to which person is the real Thomas Crown. 1999's Crown also uses forgery, a more classical form of simulation than Soderbergh's hologram, to trick the investigators and audience into disbelieving what they are seeing. In this there is still very much an appeal to play. Thomas Crown may not be as ironic as Clooney's Daniel Ocean that will come post-9/11, but Crown commits his crimes with a smile. He enjoys the theft, though not as much as he enjoys the cat-and-mouse game with Renee Russo, and we, in turn, enjoy his enjoying himself.

Yet, for all their traditional aspects, these films show a remarkable turn in the history of Master Thief tales. These thieves have become capitalists. No longer is the Master Thief a singular character working their way through the world taking what they can or settling down and conforming to legal or moral values, like in Straparola's tale. He is now the leader of an organization or company: 1999's Thomas Crown is the owner of Crown Acquisitions Inc, which he uses as a front for his stolen goods; Daniel Ocean runs a network of thieves and criminals. They reaffirm the fundamental notion of private property and capitalist enterprise by keeping the stolen goods as their own. They treat the art as if it has high cultural value, a value which they seek to preserve only for themselves as they are the true appreciators.

CHAPTER VI

TROLLING THE (ART) ESTABLISHMENT

If characters like Thomas Crown or Daniel Ocean reaffirm capitalist ideologies and structures, what sort of social critique might be read in the online user comments? I argue that the critique inherent within these online comments is that the art establishment, from the market to the museum, functions like an art crime. Comments attack the art world by suggesting “art thieves steal to order [for a wealthy collector].” They say “the Art World is so corrupted by the fakers and the gullibly rich,” and that “surely there is a dodgy...oligarch [who] wouldn’t say no to a cut-price Monet or Picasso.”⁷⁷ The art world is made up of people “so successful at milking the world of money that they simply don’t know where to put it anymore”⁷⁸ dissent from expert opinion and they play with the idea that these thieves were glamorous or working for someone glamorous. They antagonize, or ‘troll,’ the art establishment. In doing so, they destabilize the elite hold over culture.

Experts misread these comments as suggesting they know the true identity of the thieves involved. They do not. Rather, their comments react against a hegemonic cultural reality and suggest that the real criminals are the rich collectors who abscond art for their own pleasure. Their comments, through playing in direct opposition to elite narratives of what has happened, challenge the assumed capitalist control over culture.

Anthony Amore’s “Debunking The Myth of the Glamorous Art Thief” tries to reassert the dominance of elite opinion on society. Jonathan Jones’ article on the “blood

⁷⁷ Martin⁷⁷. 18 October, 2012, comment on Jones “Blood Sport.”

⁷⁸ gleebitz. 18 October, 2012, comment on Ibid.

sport” of the art market does not critique far enough because it would trouble a control that privileges his position as an art critic. While the commentators may not be right about who actually stole the works of art, they are right to liken the business of museums to an act of theft conducted by rich white males. Museum proprietors buy up expensive works of art, keep them secreted away, earning value. Eventually, they sell or lend the works to museums for a profit and tax deduction.

Commentators do not see the crime as criminal at all. They see the theft as an opportunity to critique the society that excludes them. They may not champion the thieves like a social bandit, such as Robin Hood, but they do continue the thieves’ work in robbing the establishment of their possession of culture. They talk back. Whether it is their interest in Master Thief narratives that informs this perspective or if their perspective orients their interest, a Master Thief narrative allows commentators to form a creative and dramatic critique of social hierarchy.

This expression of critique demonstrates an active participation within culture. Not only are the commentators engaged with culture enough to understand its exploitive economics, but they also use capitalist popular culture against the bourgeois. They take pop-cultural narratives and suggest that those narratives are not fantasy, but rather metaphors of the real structures of our thieving capitalist culture.

Films like the *Ocean’s Eleven* Series or *The Thomas Crown Affair* create the illusion of social critique by having a likable criminal perform his trade robbing the elite spaces of society, but who nevertheless maintains the capitalist emphasis on private property and entrepreneurial individualism expressed through art appreciation. They

keep the loot for themselves and set up companies or small corporations to secure and finance the longevity of their enterprises.⁷⁹

The online-user comments offer a radical reconsideration of this fantasy and suggest that these films reveal the ideology of how capitalism interacts with the art world. Institutions, through cultural hegemony, teach mass audiences to like the art establishment and to even enjoy its thievery.⁸⁰ They are told they that should appreciate the private possession of art because the criminal connoisseur maintains and preserves the mystical or sacred aura of art through their admiration and devotion. We are to be glad that the art is in the hands of someone appreciative, no matter how they obtained the art or to whom the art really belongs.⁸¹

This is where most critics of popular culture would stop in their critique and claim that there is no use or value in these heist films or in Master Thief folklore because they

⁷⁹ There is an interesting debate amongst the Ocean's Team at the beginning of *Ocean's Twelve*. Several of the members express their distaste for the suggestion that Ocean owns the team. However, this worker's complaint is not answered by Ocean and he continues to be the assumed head of the operation. The Ocean's Team appears egalitarian, but is in fact run in hierarchical fashion with a President (Ocean), Senior VP (Rusty), and CFO (Reuben), and so on down.

⁸⁰ A clear example of enjoying the thievery of arts economics can be found in the public fascination with art auctions. In *Sotheby's: Bidding For Class* (1998, Little Brown), Robert Lacey, analyzes how the 1950s saw the rise of a culture of the auction house that promoted auctions as a black tie affair secured for the wealthy elite. Lacey goes on to show how these auctions became part of public entertainment, despite the rising inflation of the art market. Though Lacey does not make this claim directly, his book exemplifies how capitalist culture creates spaces for self-promotion which also attract larger public audiences in order to asset their dominance. Auctions are a sporting event in which elites joust for increasingly obscure works of art and try to remain one step ahead of the market. Their structures are exhilarating and attractive, but the spaces are actually rather esoteric and exclusionary.

⁸¹ We can see this particularly well in cases where museums have come into possession of works of art that were stolen in wartime. Many museums refuse to give up their works of art, claiming they are "better cared for" in the hands of "capable" institutions, rather than in private collections. They claim that their holding onto the work of art is of public interest, when in reality they are more interested in keeping the revenue from visitors attracted to the museums because of the art.

Nazi plundering is different than the kind of art theft I am dealing with in this paper. War-time thievery is not subject to the same kind of playfulness I have been analyzing. Acts of plundering are not 'heists.' They are violent, and blatantly insert ideological control.

delude audiences and reaffirm capitalist hegemony and ideology. Walter Benjamin, in his celebrated essay “The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), labels the “aura” of art as the mystical quality of fascination inherent to rare, unique, or individual works of art. Benjamin later mourned the death of the aura thanks to the advent of mechanical reproduction. For Benjamin, reproduction “detaches the [work of art] from the domain of tradition” and “substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.”⁸² Experts claim theft diminishes the aura of these masterpieces.⁸³ Thefts disturb the dominion of tradition that art institutions safeguard; it is their job to protect a work and preserve its singularity. Hegemonic institutions uphold the aura of art and insist that not only are these works “price-less,” but that they are also victims wanting to be saved, singular beauties abducted from their ivory tower and in need of a valiant rescuer.

Similarly, Theodor Adorno, in his essay “The Culture Industry Reconsidered” (1975), said that “the massed are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery.”⁸⁴ For him, pop-cultural audiences are anesthetized followers, after-thoughts with no agency in the capitalist culture.

Many of Adorno’s essays on popular culture are concerned with mechanization or standardization. Adorno lived through World War Two and the rise of fascism, which held standardization and mechanical obedience as fundamental tenets in its ideology. He

⁸² Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. H. Arendt and trans, H.Zohn. London: Fontana, 1992ed.217-254.

⁸³ Once a painting is stolen, it awakens deep fears about forgeries in the art world as well. The fear of forgeries parallel Benjamin’s elegy for the aura in that both circumstances - forgery and reproduction - remove the painting’s individual or unique standing that supposedly makes up a large portion of its value.

⁸⁴ Adorno, Theodor. 1975. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge. 98-108.

saw people swayed by the glossy mass-produced propaganda and feared that capitalism's emphasis on "sameness" would facilitate more fascism into the world. He saw pop culture as part of a similar wide-spread attempt at brainwashing to produce mindless consumers devoted to the deification of the dollar.

In "On Popular Music" (1941), Adorno delivers his most stern attack on standardization and popular culture. His essay's premise is that popular music uses standardized chords and themes as well as industrial production and distribution techniques to lure consumers into continually buying or listening to the same music over again. He claims,

The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization. Standardization extends from the most general features to the most specific ones... This inexorable device guarantees that regardless of what aberrations occur, the [music] will lead back to the same familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced.⁸⁵

Popular culture, for Adorno, becomes more about framework than detail. In this sense, Adorno is afraid of generic culture, genre culture and does not concede that these structures can provide a liberatory experience. Adorno compares this technique of capitalist cultural industry to artistic technique. He writes,

the concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with technique in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic. In contrast, the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore

⁸⁵ Adorno, Theodor. "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, no. 9. 1941. 17-48.

always remains external to its object...Structural standardization aims at standard reactions.⁸⁶

According to Adorno, only “serious” culture is worth anything because it is novel, original, unique, or un-conventional. For him, “what parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture.”⁸⁷ Adorno does not like formulaic conventions. He does not see them as containing any substance. To him, they all follow the same model in order to attract audiences. This is as much a critique of the producer as it is of the consumer. Consumers are guilty of buying into the profit motive of capitalist culture in their act of consumption. In doing so, they sacrifice their true experience and appreciation of art.

Adorno positions the authentic against the standardized, much like Walter Benjamin does in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” For Adorno a work of “serious” art has an aura because a “serious” work is unique, produced in a singular moment in time, and cannot be widely distributed. Both of these critics privilege private property over public ownership. These critics want to preserve the integrity of the individual work and not have it (re)produced for mass consumption. A work of “serious” art can be possessed by only one institution or person. This limits the experience of a work of art to a single place. Robert Wittman placed this in the context of the legal bureaucracy of the art world when he said

⁸⁶ Ibid, 31.

⁸⁷ Adorno, “Culture Industry.” 99

the value of art is dependent on three things: authenticity, provenance—the history of the art—and legal title. Those are the things that really do create the value. I mean, let's face it, an artwork is basically a piece of canvas with some paint on it. So whenever you talk about these paintings, it's a matter of authenticity and provenance and legal title. And if you don't have one of those things, you don't have value.⁸⁸

Value, then, comes from certification, not artistic inspiration. For a painting to be worth anything the possessor must have total control over the claim and history of the art. Authenticity gets determined by recognized and “legitimate” critics. The provenance must follow the trail of receipts and the references from past elite owners. Once these items have conferred, they can create legal possession, which is dictated by lawyers and judges who specialize in art authentication and exchange. These are all circles that are highly suspicious of outsiders, particularly those from “lower” classes.

In their attempt to avoid capitalist culture, by avoiding centralized centers of production and distribution, these scholars forget that institutions like fine art museums or concert halls are also centralized. Though they do not produce the work, they nonetheless have a strong control over the display and access to a work. They are nonprofit enterprises, but the influencing benefactors are bourgeois. In order to have political power within these institutions, one's tax deductible donation must be a large amount of money. Establishments like fine art museums determine what is considered “worthy” art, “serious” art, and “valuable” art. They are centralized places from which the dictates of what constitutes a representation of Culture are issued. In their distaste for popular culture, Adorno and Benjamin conveniently overlook the fact that their

⁸⁸ Weissman “Steal a Stolen Painting”

alternatives to popular culture privilege an elite few. This makes their critiques more oppressive than capitalist culture because they are insidious and parade as anti-capitalist proposing to liberate the audience.

Yet, the commentators I have been discussing clearly show a use of culture by an active participant, rather than a passive object. They are also a regurgitation of culture back onto the modes of industry, a reaction that is anything but standard. Instead of being treated as objects, forced to stomach the capitalist messages of private property and the preservation of elite access to art, these commentators exhibit a resistance towards having a standard experience of popular culture. They throw up digested bits of culture like Master Thief tales and spit it in the eye of those who made it. One commentator, TheManFromRotherham, took to parodically masquerading as the Rotterdam thief across several different message boards and news articles. They offer a ransom and make up a story that could be the plot of any heist film. They taunts

The Dutch media are reporting the thieves want a ransom and I can report they are right. I'm the suspicious looking guy standing beneath Paul McCarthy's Santa with a Butt Plug on Eendrachtsplein, if you want some paintings follow me to the Melief Bender, in the alcove hand me a brown envelope with wads of cash, then I'll take you to the garbage container where the paintings are hidden. Come Monday the container will be emptied along with its contents including the paintings and [I'll] go back to work as though nothing has happened. The countdown starts here, 5 days and counting.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ TheManFromRotherham. 18 October, 2012, comment on Dolnick "Not Like Thomas Crown." Eendrachtsplein is a subway station in Rotterdam. Melief Bender is a café in the center of the city.

They, and the others I have discussed in this paper, are a representative sampling of other potential ways audiences can react to and with popular culture.

The commentators are people who actively contribute their opinions about culture thanks to the Internet's democratic appearance. Adorno and Benjamin could not have foreseen the potential of the Internet to challenge their theories. Trevor Blank, in his book *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age* (2013), examines the Internet as place for critique and dissenting play in the context of disasters and celebrity deaths. He demonstrates that the Internet has facilitated the potential for people commonly overlooked by scholars to participate in a "horizontal diffusion of culture," rather than accepting top-down approaches to culture.⁹⁰ User comment sections, "[afford] users the freedom to counter such hegemonic reportage tactics without the looming threat of physical confrontation or fear of damaging their 'real world' reputations if they speak out" and they can do so with humor as a major tool within an internet user's "expressive arsenal."⁹¹ Humor, especially antagonistic humor "involves the calculated risk of performing humor litigiously."⁹² An online presence aids this dissenting play because it minimizes risks of repercussions while maximizing the potential for confrontation against established structures of culture.

We can see how these commentators are absorbing generic plot lines and structures ironically manipulating them to antagonize capitalists and their constructs of

⁹⁰ Blank, Trevor. 2013. *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. Print. 12

⁹¹ Ibid, xvii

⁹² Ibid, 9.

culture. These comments are able to turn capitalist-manufactured fantasies against their creators. Commentators turn an open forum into a space of liminal play where all potential dialogues are possible. When they turn to trolling, they steal away the power and control of the narrative from the elite and use their new power to accuse elite institutions of exclusion and threaten to undermine their power by no longer acquiescing to the demands that certain works of art be considered sacred. The comments use genre and known story lines to change the drama of an art heist into a moment to speak out against class and cultural oppression.

Art heists are constructed as moments of cultural mourning. We have been told by elite institutions, and the theorists who overtly or secretly support them, that certain works of art are precious and that a loss of them is a loss for the whole world. The comments that accuse experts of “cannon snobbery”⁹³ and “art farty babooneries”⁹⁴ stand out as glaring accusations of cultural gatekeeping practices as exclusionary and oppressive. The commentators become the likable thieves that steal from the rich. But, instead of stealing a work of art, they steal the power to control the narratives of reality. They do this by being active watchers and participants who seize the opportunity to play, trick, and fool the elite. They become the master thieves who enter into a discourse usually reserved for a privileged few and rob them of their chance to further ingrain their hegemony.

⁹³ stupormundi. 16 October, 2012, comment on Jones, “Pick ’n Mix”

⁹⁴ bobmarmalade. 16 October, 2012, comment on Ibid.

This is made possible by the Internet because it functions as a common area, which, according to Lewis Hyde, supports socio-political exchange. When writing about the public commons in the eighteenth-century, he says, “the physical commons...are like a theater within which the life of the community is enacted and made evident.”⁹⁵

Common areas are highly performative and thus dangerous and nebulous spaces.

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon takes this reading of the public commons and applies it to her interpretation of the crowds in eighteenth century Atlantic theater. In her book *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World: 1649 - 1849*, she shows how theater and performance provided the space for direct social critique as common areas slowly became privatized.⁹⁶ Her reading of eighteenth century audience participation and engagement has interesting ramifications for this study because it shows how drama has historically helped order disorder so that it may be used for critique. The commentators online show a similar kind of participation to those of the eighteenth century. They talk back, they stop the show, and they change the script. The commons has shifted, but the participation and drama has not changed.

We are drawn to these events, and take pleasure, or have *jouissance* in them because, according to Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), the “shock, disturbance, and loss, which are proper to ecstasy, to bliss” are very much present.⁹⁷ The pleasure in shock of the theft, the disturbance of social order, and the loss of a high valued

⁹⁵ Hyde, Lewis. *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. 2010. 31.

⁹⁶ Dillon, Elizabeth Maddox. *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World 1649 - 1849*. Durham: Duke University Press.2014. 2

⁹⁷ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 19.

commodity creates a kind of ecstasy as we move beyond the taut restraints of what is socially acceptable to enjoy and move into a forbidden pleasure, into 'guilty pleasure'. We are supposed to feel pain at the loss of precious works of art. But if we enjoy the loss, there is potential for liberation within culture. This can help us escape hegemonic forces which dictate how we are supposed to experience culture and what is to be valued within it.

CHAPTER VII

FINALE

Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968) successfully demonstrated that folktales employ standard functions, driving actions, or plot points, that facilitate their telling. Propp's morphology which is "a description of [a] tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole" shows that standardization does not have to mean uniformity or sameness.⁹⁸ Rather, it can mean a set number of criteria that can be played within or experimented with. There are "limited functions" but an array of combinations that can be used to make up a tale.⁹⁹ As the later chapters in Propp's text show, the multiplicity of combinations possible means that the folktale can not be simplistically reduced to a single set of functions; rather, it can possess a morphology that is quite complicated.

Master Thief tales are linked across the world because of its standardized structure. It has allowed people who may not know the exact references to Daniel Ocean or Thomas Crown to infer their plot lines and join in the fun and antagonism. The standardized structure of these films and tales, contrary to Adorno's assertions, brings people together for an anti-capitalist cause rather than separating them into isolated individuals. That underlying narrative structure supports the perspective that theft commentaries are an act of play or contest.

⁹⁸ Propp, Vladimir. *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1968. 19.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 21.

In 1983, Jose Limón, writing in *The Journal of American Folklore*, called for a reconsideration of folklore's promoting an anti-capitalist agenda because of its "democratic nature," but he worried that Marxist thinkers in The Frankfurt School "largely fail to draw on [its] potential".¹⁰⁰ According to Limón, The Frankfurt School can "sense the potentially oppositional nature of folklore, [but] they define folklore as a cultural domain that is itself under constant and competitive attack from the hegemonic sociocultural social order."¹⁰¹ "For Adorno," he says, "folklore is a thing of the preindustrial past and today serves only the needs of "objectivist" high art."¹⁰² Limón goes on to counter these claims by showing how folklore has possibilities for critical discourse and that folklore in the modern world can "constitute a kind of folk political philosophy."¹⁰³

Limón's work is largely focused on non-narrative forms of folklore, such as ritual festivals, and is primarily concerned with how they address the political philosophies of Marxism. My paper has been inspired by Limón's call for a reexamination of folklore's relationship to Marxism, but answers that call in a different way. I have been mostly concerned with how trickster folk narratives like those of Master Thieves can be used to express anti-capitalist sentiment outside of any one political philosophy. I have argued that these tales, though later internally bourgeois, can be taken apart, chewed, and

¹⁰⁰ Limón, Jose. "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction." *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 96, No. 379. 34-52. 1983. 39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 42.

regurgitated in the faces of bourgeois capitalists through dissenting play. Those internet trolls take the basic structures of a commonly shared narrative and use them as weapons to indict capitalism and the recipients of its privileges, the elite members of society, as thieves. I have shown how folktales, contrary to Adorno's assertions, bridge the preindustrial past and the present and can be used for more than just entertainment. They can be used for critique.

Tricksters critique the structure of the world by making it, destroying it, or both. Early Master Thieves made a world where theft was playful. With the introduction of capitalism, they used that playful theft to benefit their capitalist desires. The commentators take up the sentiments of playful theft that are still part of the current Master Thief tradition, deconstruct its inner bourgeois ideology and reconstitute it in the form of critique. Theft can be viewed as social critique because theft has culturally been framed as play. But the folktale is not the only folkloric aspect of this cultural phenomenon.

As a performative event an art heist opens up the possibility for bourgeois culture to be critiqued and played with, as if critique were a kind of playful theft. I have shown throughout this paper how perceiving theft as a playful act undermines capitalist assertions of private property and cultural gatekeeping and turns an event that would normally reaffirm bourgeois cultural structures into moments of discord and dissent. Online comment sections invite open discussion regardless of class, and when they are combined, narratives of Master Thieves appear to implicate elite members in the ongoing crime of cultural exclusion. This dissonance will never fully resolve and will continually

reappear so long as capitalist cultural structures remain, even those implicit within Marxist critique. This is a social drama, a steam value that will thankfully never fully be dampened. Folklore can aid in stealing back of cultural reality, if only we recognize its crucial role in the act. The first step is liking the criminal.

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