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On Pros and Cons and Bills and Gates: The Heist Film as Pleasure

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Abstract:

This article tries to shed light on the multiple, but underrated pleasures of the heist film – a genre that has attracted numerous major directors from Jean-Pierre Melville and Stanley Kubrick to Michael Mann and Steven Soderbergh, but has received limited scholarly attention. I approach the genre from a, broadly, philosophical perspective and draw on thinkers such as Peter Sloterdijk, Georg Simmel, Paul Souriau and Bruno Latour to argue that their emphasis on (1) skillful action and kinaesthetic empathy, (2) smooth transgression of boundaries and (3) well-functioning social collaboration and we-connection, the genre's best exemplars satisfy, in fictional and quasi-utopian form, a number of real-life desires.

Keywords: skillful action; kinaesthetic empathy; social collaboration; boundary transgression.

“The biggest unanswered question is: Where is the money?”
(Earth, Wind and Fire: “System of Survival”, 1987)

Well, the money is not there. The money, the gems, the gold, the artworks are hidden, stowed away, and protected in banks, casinos, museums, jewelry stores, or race-track vaults. No access anywhere – unless, of course, one enters vicariously by watching a particular set of films in which a group of gangsters, crooks or burglars commits a complicated

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theft through precisely coordinated actions and skillful collaboration. The name of this genre – the heist film, sometimes also the caper movie – leaves many people uncertain as to what it is. Some languages – for instance, German – do not even have their own word for the genre. And yet, since the 1950s, a number of major directors have felt tempted to tinker and play with it. Stanley Kubrick, Jean-Pierre Melville, William Wyler, Claude Sautet, Louis Malle, Quentin Tarantino, Michael Mann, John Woo, and Wes Anderson have all made heist films, as have Katherine Bigelow, David Mamet, Spike Lee, and Steve McQueen.

No doubt, the heist genre has produced a number of important films, too: from *Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), *Rififi chez les hommes* (Jules Dassin, 1955), *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1956), and *Le Cercle rouge* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1970) to *Heat* (Michael Mann, 1995), *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001), and *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010). But what Robert Warshaw (1948/2008) once wrote about the gangster film resonates with the heist film as well: “One goes to any individual example of the type with very definite expectations, and originality is to be welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it” (p. 177). It is, I think, a sign of strength when a type of film can leave its habitat and gain new life in a foreign territory. The heist film easily sheds its typical form and shapeshifts from the live-action film into the guise of animation (*The Fantastic Mr. Fox* [Wes Anderson, 2009] or *The Nut Job* [Peter Lepeniotis, 2014]), the documentary (*Man on Wire* [James Marsh, 2008]), or the television series (*Widows* [1983–85] or *Money Heist* [*La Casa de papel*, 2017–20]).

However, scholarly attention to the genre is very limited in Anglophone cinema studies. To be sure, one can find stand-alone articles devoted to individual films and chapters in books on heist-film directors like Melville, Mann or Soderbergh (e.g. Vincendeau, 2003; Rayner, 2013; Tait, 2011). Yet the only monograph devoted to the genre in English is Daryl Lee's rather slim *The Heist Film: Stealing with Style* (2014), a book that focuses predominantly on providing a valuable overview of the genre's history. More recently, Jim Leach and Jeannette Sloniowski have collected a series of essays of varying scope for *The Best Laid Plans: Interrogating the Heist Film* (2017). This volume also features one of the two most illuminating articles on the genre so far: Tim Palmer's “The Joy of Burglary: Wealth Relocation Strategies and Other Entertainments in the Postwar French *Policier*” (the other one being Stuart M. Kaminsky's classic “Variations on a Major Genre: The Big Caper” from 1974). For extended philosophical treatments – of the kinds Stanley Cavell provided for the comedy of remarriage (1981) and the melodrama (1996)

or Robert Pippin offered on the western (2010) and film noir (2012) – one searches in vain. I want to take a few first steps in this direction here. From a philosophical perspective I suggest three reasons why the underrated and mostly unacknowledged genre of the heist film promises such great pleasures to its devotees. As we shall see, they have to do with the genre's emphasis on skillful action, kinaesthetic empathy, the smooth transgression of boundaries, and well-functioning social collaboration and camaraderie.

Skillful Action and Kinaesthetic Empathy

In Peter Handke's early novella *Short Letter, Long Farewell* (1972/1978) the first-person narrator reports how silent comedies with their "praise of clumsiness" could not "flatter" him any longer:

The heroes who can't walk down the street without having their hats blown into the paths of steamrollers, or bow to a lady without pouring coffee on her skirt, had come to strike me more and more as exemplars of an inhuman life (p. 28).

And indeed, for the philosopher Henri Bergson, the inhuman and machine-like are the main source of punitive laughter. Yet some viewers cannot even laugh about people who act inelegantly, awkwardly, and clumsily. For them, the inept handling of objects is decidedly bothersome and bodily displeasure keeps accumulating while watching. The Dutch filmmaker Alex van Warmerdam understood this perfectly well when, in his film *Ober* (2006), he directed a scene which may well belong to the most cruelly unwatchable. Here the protagonist enters a gloomy store in a small alley to buy, of all things, a bow and arrow. An old hunchback woman, played by a relatively young man, tries to wrap up the weapons. She does it with excruciating slowness and endlessly shaky clumsiness. For some viewers, watching this scene would come down to a form of aesthetic torture.

In many ways, the heist film is the opposite of the slapstick comedy. Even if in both cases the confrontation with man and object is at the heart of the genre, the heist protagonists do not stumble, fall, and stupidly break things by accident. While the loud and loutish blunderer sends entire environments into chaos, the burglars work with surgical precision, breaking only the most necessary things. In fact, watching heist films has a lot to do with the pleasure derived from observing people act with expertise and in skillful ways. In this, the genre borders most closely on the dance musical and the sports film. However, failure can certainly play a significant role: quite fittingly, Jeannette Sloniowski

(2017) points out that the heist film “seems a perfect target to parody because of its strict insistence on competence and precision” (p. 29). From the early stages of the heist film in the 1950s – most notably in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (*I Soliti Ignoti*, Mario Monicelli, 1958), but later on also in *Crackers* (Louis Malle, 1982), *Bottle Rocket* (Wes Anderson, 1996), or *Small Time Crooks* (Woody Allen, 2000) – the heist film has made fun of gangsters failing.¹

Philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists have thought a lot about skill and know-how recently (see, for instance, Löwenstein, 2017; Dreyfus, 2014; Ingold, 2000), and the heist film – like the circus and acrobatics – is a perfect exemplar of a popular art form that admires skillful virtuosity. Heist films let the audience partake in the perfectly timed actions of protagonists who know exactly where to go, what to do, and when to act. The master thief in the remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (John McTiernan, 1999), played by the elegant Pierce Brosnan, robs a Monet painting in broad daylight from the Metropolitan Museum of Art by blocking a security gate with a briefcase, effortlessly sliding underneath it, grabbing the painting from the wall and removing its frame, placing it neatly inside a second suitcase perfectly stored under a visitors’ bench, sliding back underneath the gate, and blending into the crowd of visitors leaving the museum being evacuated at this moment. Not a drop of sweat is spilled, not a single piece of suit crumpled, not a wisp of hair moved.

For the heist heroes, the financial gain is often not the only fuel that fires their engines – at least equally important is the adventure of testing their skills, foregrounding their expertise and showing off their *savoir faire*. Why does Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), the literal *Inside Man* (2006) of Spike Lee’s film, plan the perfect bank robbery? “Because I can.” For Michael Cherrito (Tom Sizemore) in *Heat*, “the action is the juice.” Every member of the crew has their own specialties, everyone does what they are best at. As Jeremy Strong observes (2013), one of the characteristics of team films like heist movies is that “team members have sunk or otherwise gravitated to employment that does not utilize their talents or which avoids the recognition of their true vocation” (p. 72). Their skills and expertise only shine during the heist – that is why they feel propelled to commit the crime and cannot not do it.

The idea that skillful crimes can be brought to perfection is nothing new – in fact, it reaches back to ancient Greece. In his *Metaphysics*

1 For a helpful overview of the historical roots and the evolution of the genre, see Lee (2014).

(350 BCE, part 16), Aristotle mentions “perfect” or “good” thieves who, like perfect doctors or musicians, “lack nothing in respect of the form of their proper excellence.” In the heist hero, one can see at work the upward-striving vertical tension that philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in his Nietzsche- and Rilke-influenced philosophical anthropology *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), considers a near-universal of human cultures: the drive to better oneself, to optimize, to become perfect. According to Sloterdijk (2013), in Nietzsche’s thought one finds an ethical imperative that implies “an unconditional overtaxing”: “humans can only advance as long as they follow the impossible” (p. 442). In the heist film, one can hear an echo of this ethical command in the criminals’ tendency to raise the stakes: you do not just break into some bank but one of the best-secured ones (*Inside Man*), you do not just rob one casino but three (*Ocean’s Eleven*), you do not steal a valuable good from a building but literally enter a person’s mind (*Inception*). And just like the acrobat, the heist heroes often want to make the impossible look simple, as Sloterdijk (2013) astutely observes:

it is not enough, therefore, to walk the tightrope and perform the *salto mortale* at a great height; the acrobat’s decisive message lies in the smile with which he bows after the performance. It speaks even more clearly in the nonchalant hand gesture before his exit, the gesture one could take for a greeting to the upper tiers. In reality, it conveys a moral lesson: for our like, that is nothing. (p. 196)

Sloterdijk’s description is well illustrated by the laser dance in Soderbergh’s *Ocean’s Twelve* (2004). To the beats of La Caution’s “*Thé à la menthe*”, the Night Fox (Vincent Cassel) performs a mad mixture of capoeira and floor gymnastics to maneuver through a moving mikado of laser security beams in a museum in Rome’s Villa Borghese. It is not too far-fetched to imagine an fMRI scanner delivering evidence for how the viewer’s brain lights veritable fireworks with mirror neurons exploding in various beautiful colors. If the Night Fox were to touch one of the lasers or if it were mildly grazing his skin, all hell would break loose. But with little effort he reaches the unprotected parts of the museum – and at this point, he capers a bit and clicks his heels in the air as if to say “this was merely a walk in the Borghese park”.

With this epitome of the skillful break-in in mind, one can arrive at a slightly more precise characterization of the genre. The heist film is often about likeable crooks who perform their skills aesthetically, even gracefully. In *The Aesthetics of Movement* (1889/1983), Paul Souriau defines grace as the “expression of physical and psychological ease

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of movement” (p. 81). It is the outward appearance that for Souriau shows whether someone is psychologically and physically at ease with an activity, and this ease derives, among other things, from an absence of noise:

silent movements seem to happen of their own accord—bounces on a thick carpet, running in sneakers, the leaps of a squirrel, the walk of felines, a horse galloping in a meadow, the flight of the owl, the gliding of a hawk, the fluttering of a butterfly. (p. 85)

In light of the many wordless and almost completely silent break-ins in the history of the genre – most famously in the 35-minute climax of *Rififi* and the beginning of Melville’s *A Cop* (*Un flic*, 1972) – the heist film’s potential for gracefulness becomes particularly pronounced. Together with their fluidity, effortlessness, and defying of gravity, the heist heroes’ skillful actions, laser-dancing or otherwise, seem comparable to those of dancers – a point already raised in Bosley Crowther’s (1956) review of *Rififi*, in which the *New York Times* critic describes the film as “staged [...] like a ballet” (p. 37).

But heist characters cannot be identified one-to-one with Sergei Polunin, Isadora Duncan, or Rudolf Nureyev. The reason is that, unlike the idols from the pantheon of dance, the criminals perform a purposeful, instrumental action that implies a particular object-relation. Here, once again, a comparison with the slapstick comedian might be illuminating. While Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and their peers are slaves to the object, the heist heroes dominate it. Or rather, they develop a symbiotic relation with their hammers and drills, lock picks and glass cutters, ropes and money bags, skillfully incorporating the objects into their body schemas. Moreover, while slapstick comedians struggle with the obstinacy of the object and do not comprehend its affordances, the heist heroes demonstrate the variabilities of what one can do with things. For instance, the umbrella in *Rififi* becomes a means to protect drilling debris from falling and activating the alarm system, and in *How to Steal a Million* (William Wyler, 1966) Peter O’Toole uses a boomerang to clandestinely activate the alarm system that distracts the guards.

In these skillful, object-incorporating movements, we are invited to participate vicariously. Here the keyword is kinesthetic empathy, the innate capacity to feel with the movements and actions we observe (for an overview of theories on embodied responses to the movement of others, see chapter 5 in Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018). We are comfortably placed in our cinema seats and hardly move at all, but it is precisely this still and seated position that allows us to experience – and take pleasure in – the

actions of the criminals with a self-awareness that would be different were we performing these actions ourselves. Via kinesthetic empathy we find satisfied a yearning that results from our ineffectiveness, even incompetence and ineptness. The perfectly timed and coordinated movements of the thieves, robbers, and burglars present us with the utopia of a well-functioning goal-directedness we long for when we spill coffee over our laptops, place a long-line forehead miles past the service line, or bump our new cars against a street lantern.

However, focusing exclusively on story and characters would make us blind to the aesthetics of the film as a whole. Filmmakers use various means not only to enhance the kinesthetic empathy with the character's body (most notably by bringing the viewer close to the action and the body parts involved), but also to evoke kinesthetic empathy with what Vivian Sobchack (1992) has called the "film's body" (predominantly through camera movements, editing and *mise-en-scène*, of which the character is an integral part). As Nick James (2002) writes about the final robbery in Michael Mann's *Heat*,

the way the scene is so crisply edited encourages us to sit back and appreciate the sheer efficiency of this heist – the fact that the three cloth holdalls Shihlerlis [Val Kilmer] has in his briefcase each fit the huge packed cash bundles perfectly seems audacious. (p. 67)

Thus, the best heist films fuse two forms of kinesthetic empathy by combining the bravura movements of the protagonists with the skillful actions of directors, editors, and cinematographers.

Transgression of Boundaries and Rebellion against Exclusion

The bills, the jewels, the gems, the artworks: they are stowed away behind gates, doors, walls; shielded by locks, safes, impenetrable glass; protected by lasers, surveillance cameras, and motion detectors. Since ordinary people are always denied access to them, this exclusion allegorizes a key experience of modernity: being distanced from the centers of wealth and power.

In one of Franz Kafka's most famous parables, "Before the Law" (1915), a man from the country tries to gain access to a building. But the gatekeeper says: no, not now. As the man from the country soon finds out, the tall and bearded porter is only the first of a series of gatekeepers who protect the entrances to rooms nested inside each other and who have more power the deeper one gets inside. Impressed and intimidated, the man decides to wait in front of the gate. He waits and waits and makes further attempts to get access. He even tries to bribe the gatekeeper but to

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no avail. Kafka – for Harold Bloom (1995) the author most representative and canonical of the twentieth century – is a writer of closed doors, of gates that do not open and of walls that close in – something well exemplified also in his unfinished novel *The Castle* (written in 1922) and the short story “A Little Fable” (probably written in 1920). While the man from the country eventually dies in front of the gate, the pros and cons of the heist film do not.

By definition, they make it beyond the gate, and each one becomes a *persona grata* of his or her own accord. Thus, the heist heroes manifest our desire to extend spatial options, to resist boundaries set by gates and walls, to rebel against artificially imposed limits. Getting in and out whenever you want: this is the dream the heist heroes turn into a fictional reality. Daryl Lee (2014) similarly claims that the heist “encodes in story form a particular desire to elude the oppressive aspects or limitations of contemporary mass society” (p. 5). The spatial transgressions symbolize an act of freedom and can be read as metaphors for social mobility; the heist film thus epitomizes our attempts to overcome the feeling of exclusion and denied access expressed by Kafka like no one else.

Similarly to the protagonists of the road movie, for whom the horizon is the limit and the highway the royal road to freedom, and like the reckless criminals-on-the-run in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) or *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), heist heroes do not accept restrictions. And much like the protagonists of the prison film, they try to defy the strictures of spatial freedom by reaching a “beyond” (not least because many of the heist film’s ex-cons – from *Rififi* and *The Killing* to *Ocean’s Eleven* – have an intimate relationship with penal institutions). However, unlike the successful prison break, the break-in does not mean an opening up of potentially limitless space but, at first, an entering into a finite space. In fact, as in Kafka’s story, space in the heist film is often organized like Chinese boxes, where the precious objects are hidden in spaces-within-spaces-within-spaces and the stakes get higher and higher.

Also psychological thrillers and horror films deal with trespassing and the transgression of boundaries between inside and outside, but they do it from precisely the opposite side: here the gates and doors and windows and walls function as a protection of vulnerable individuals and their property. What comes from outside equals threat, and to expulse the hostage-taker, serial killer, or monster is to restore a shaken order and reestablish a lost feeling of security. In the heist film, instead, we root for protagonists who reject the concept of property and its accompanying idea of security. Their plan to overcome boundaries, to break and enter into dangerous territory, involves studying city maps and brooding over architectural plans, visiting locations, and observing the movements of

security personnel. The break-in makes the criminals search for Ariadne's thread in modern maze constructions, plant an inside man as a Trojan Horse, dig subterranean tunnels, or, since touching the sensor-protected floors is perilous, defy the laws of gravity by dangling from a ceiling opened like a can of beans. This allows the robbers in *Rififi*, *Topkapi* (Jules Dassin, 1964), or *Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma, 1996) to snatch their obscured objects of desire like the intelligent magpie in Rossini's opera *La gazza ladra*, which hails from the sky to steal a piece of shimmering gold. And here one should not forget to mention that the term "heist," which apparently became a noun only around 1930 (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary), was originally a dialectal version of the word "to hoist," that is "to raise" or "to lift," and a trace of that connection one also finds in the word "shoplifter."

Michel Chion (2017) asserts that security systems and warning signs in films "remind us that real space in real life is full of borders both physical and social and that real space is resistant and solid" (p. 88). But for Chion – and, we should add, all those who love heist films – the cinema functions as an "art of crossing-over that ignores barriers." Alternatively, we could say that heist heroes create a bridge over an abyss or build a path that connects what is separated. As Georg Simmel writes in his essay "Bridge and Door" (1909/1994), path-building is a specifically human achievement and symbolizes an extension of human will over space: "the animal too continuously overcomes a separation and often in the cleverest and most ingenious ways, but its beginning and end remain unconnected" (p. 6). This connection created by the bridge is crucial, of course, because the criminals, once they are in, also need to get out.

Interestingly, in the heist film, spatial mobility often comes with and depends on a fluidity of identities such as putting on masks, faking passports, switching license plates, wearing false uniforms, assuming a wrong identity to fool the police or the security guards. "It's fun to play pretend," says one of the protagonists in David Mamet's *Heist* (2001). In this respect, the heist hero resembles master impostors from Felix Krull to Mr. Ripley whose role-switching secures social mobility. Much gender theory has rebelled against being captivated in an inert, predefined role by emphasizing the performativity of identities (the locus classicus is, of course, Butler 1990). While it would be a stretch to identify the blatantly masculine genre of the heist film (for rare exceptions, see Steve McQueen's *Widows* [2018] and *Ocean's 8* [Gary Ross, 2018]) with ideas about gender emancipation, the underlying idea bears a striking resemblance: one can sense an aversion against being fixed into an identity.

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Seen through Kafka's pessimist lens, the heist hero's spatial and social mobility must come across as a revolt against the preestablished order of the moneyed and the powerful. The criminals put a wrench in the machinery of capitalism embodied by banks, casinos, jewelry stores, and museums. And the effect does not even hurt society at large. While one may hesitate to subscribe to the idea, voiced by commentators like Stuart M. Kaminsky (1974), that heist heroes are latter-day successors of Robin Hood or Jesse James – that is, outlaws who allegedly helped the poor –, one should see the genre as a fictional upheaval against institutions whose financial model often rests on exclusionary practices. It is therefore not entirely unjustified that Tim Palmer (2017) calls the heist “an extraordinarily realized act of concerted civil disobedience, a middle-finger salute to the world” (p. 63).

With every successful break-in, the heist heroes confirm Marx's (1861–1863) tongue-in-cheek remarks about the social value of criminals and their positive effect on productive forces:

Would locks ever have reached their present degree of excellence had there been no thieves? [...] Crime, through its ever-new methods of attack on property, constantly calls into being new methods of defense, and so is as productive as strikes for the invention of machines.

In his famous discussion of the door as technology, Bruno Latour (2008, p. 154) argues that technology is meant to create asymmetry and irreversibility. A wall-without-a-door would create an equilibrium between the inside and the outside, while a door-in-the-wall allows for a selection of what gets in and what remains out. Through their spatial transgressions – minutely coordinated efforts to open a safe, drill holes in a wall, crack a security code, trick a surveillance camera – the heist heroes try to recreate the original equilibrium.

However, it would be wrong to simply claim that the heist film pits humans against technology; rather, technophile humans work against humans who use technology to keep humans out. In his discussion of the automated door closer, Latour (2008) further argues that we rightfully call that tool anthropomorphic – partly because it is man-made and facilitates human action, but partly also because it regulates prescriptively how we act. The heist heroes thus have a double relation to technology: they incorporate technology (the drill) in a symbiotic fashion, and they defy, in ingenious ways, technology's prescriptive rules of how to physically undertake an action (the closed gate that demands staying outside). It is one of the genre's many enjoyable paradoxes that the heist heroes use technology to overcome technology. Using cracks in the

system, they are the hackers of the material world. Hence, the pleasure of the heist film does not only reside in the admiration for the execution of the plan and our kinesthetic empathy with skillful actions, but also in an appreciation of the plan's ingenuity (an appreciation that can easily extend to the scriptwriters who came up with these ideas to begin with).

For Latour (2008), tools are further characterized by a “built-in *inertia*” (p. 156) that is largely lacking in humans. In fact, humans, despite orders supposed to discipline them, sometimes behave strangely or lazily. That is what the criminals can count on, that is what they can play with. In a film like *How to Steal a Million*, the trick is to use both: the inertia of the alarm system that goes off every single time Peter O'Toole's boomerang cuts across the laser security line and the oddity of the police guards, who simply refuse to re-activate the alarm system after it went off in an apparently unsolicited way twice. Heist heroes, therefore, do not just commit a simple crime; the robbery or break-in is often stylized as the perfect crime. Much as the criminals' skillful movements resemble those of dancers, the overall design of the plan purposefully reminds us of a work of art, and the break-in comes across as staged like a performance, a point raised by, among others, Lee (2014), Palmer (2017), and Hamilton Carroll (2011). The title of Jonathan Sobol's film, *The Art of the Steal* (2013), drives home this point (not sure, though, if the eerie closeness to Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal* was intended).

In his vicious nineteenth-century satire “On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (1827), Thomas De Quincey argued

that something more goes to the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed—a knife—a purse—and a dark lane. Design [...], grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature.

Of course, one must look at murder from a moral perspective, but, and that is De Quincey's point, “it may also be treated *aesthetically*, as the Germans call it, that is, in relation to good taste.” If we look at the break-in from an aesthetic point of view, and dare I say that as a German I feel particularly called upon by De Quincey, I would say that good taste cannot be ascribed to gangsters blowing up a whole building and destroying everything (that fun is reserved for other genres), but to see them enter smoothly without leaving traces of debris. In fact, the perfect crime is the one which leaves no traces at all. It is an in-and-out in the form of an immaculate conception. Just like the Holy Spirit entered into the body of the Holy Virgin, the perfect score is the one that seems to envision

the gangsters as so spatially mobile that a wall does not imply a barrier. In principle, everyone can destroy a door, but not everyone enters smoothly, let alone elegantly.

The heist film not only stages the break-in as a work of art, but it often deals with museum break-ins and the stealing of art. In this case, the crime does have a social effect since it harms the social institution of the museum and removes its socially shared objects, the artworks, from public access. And here one can find another facet of the overcoming of boundaries so important for the genre. In general, the heist film deals with, and depends on, the hallmarks of modernity as described by Georg Simmel (1903/2002), Max Weber (1922/1978) or Norbert Elias, (1939/1994): urbanity and the metropolis as the almost exclusive location of the break-in; the dictates of time, precision of clocks, and deadlines ticking away; the rational division of labor and the specialization of skills; the complexity of social life and the lengthening of interdependency chains; the establishment of anonymized social institutions; and the growing importance of technology. Yet, with the help of Hartmut Böhme's *Fetishism and Culture* (2014), one can see another characteristic of modernity at stake, namely its fetishization of artworks, jewels, and money, and the unacknowledged irrationality at the heart of our rationalized world. Accordingly, the protective laser that, like a halo, surrounds Cellini's Venus statuette in *How to Steal a Million*, or the altar-like glass cabinets that defend the aura of the valuables in *Topkapi* and *The Hot Rock* (Peter Yates, 1972) signal unmistakably that we are always only allowed to see the object of art, but not to touch it. Yet the crew of the break-in does not care: they peel away the protective layers and thus defy the *noli me tangere* of the fetish object.

Touch – traditionally characterized as one of the “near-senses” – implies the ultimate rejection of distance, aura, and boundaries. Not only for this reason one could consider the heist film as the most tactile of all genres this side of pornography: among its key ingredients is manual work, the specialized craft of the touching hand, but also the genre's emphasis on what not to get in contact with (the security laser, the motion detector) and how not to touch things (leaving fingerprints with glove-less hands). Not least for this reason, the heist film provides a reassuring fantasy and offers a blatant attempt at wish-fulfillment. Even against the increasing opacity of modern life and the powerlessness of the individual vis-à-vis institutions and corporations, nothing is ever out of reach, nothing can be hidden for good, nothing is safe from being ripped from the claws of institutional power. However, it is for this traditional emphasis on touch and manual skills that the

heist film has not yet found convincing aesthetic solutions to represent the stealing of the increasingly abstract money flows and immaterial wealth in our current age of globalized capital.

Coordination, Cooperation, and We-Connection

In “Social Implications in the Hollywood Genres” (1973/2003), Jean-Loup Bourget rejects the allegation that mainstream genre cinema is nothing but escapist:

escapism can also be used as a device for criticizing reality and the present state of society. A utopian world that calls itself a utopia is not escapist in the derogatory sense of the word; rather, it calls the viewer’s attention to the fact that his or her own society is far removed from such an ideal condition. (p. 52)

This is, no doubt, valid for the heist film too.

Heist films are what Jeremy Strong (2013) dubs “team films.” As much as they celebrate individual skills and expertise, they ultimately deal with the triumph of cooperation. After the “gathering” and “line-up” of the team (Strong, 2013, p. 73, 78), which allow for the formation of the crew and the introduction of talents and idiosyncrasies, the films portray a group that overcomes obstacles together. As in many war films, disaster movies, and sports films, the teamwork is harmonized, the cooperation smooth, the interaction often based on mere gestures. Together, the thieves try to ward off the specter of contingency. In a state of pleasurable suspense, viewers await an answer to the question if the group can really control all components of the plan or if they have to find quick solutions to happenstance accidents. While at every moment and at every turn something could go wrong, in the end the ingenuity of the cooperation usually secures that contingency has no effect. The almost exclusively male group wins due to a well-balanced distribution of tasks which rests on skills that, in and of themselves, would be useless. The criminals famously occupy different roles that, added together, are more than their sum – the mastermind, the organizer in the background, the hacker, the safecracker, the pickpocket, the muscle man, the driver.

While training, preparing, and acquiring the necessary skills can be part of the plot, usually the focus is on a functioning, well-oiled machine of social cooperation, and the toiling that leads to mastering a skill collectively remains merely implicit. During the heist, the crew enters into a mode best described as social flow: energized by mutual understanding, the criminals are deeply immersed in their tasks, as if making music together. Using different similes, Palmer (2017) writes eloquently about

how, in *Rififi*, “Dassin’s editing amplifies the impression that these actions are so behaviorally communal that the men seem like fingers on the same hand, limbs on the same body, driven by but one shared thought, one shared goal” (p. 54). He goes on comparing the crew to “a team of surgeons” who carry out together “a high-stakes medical operation: handing each other specialist implements (a multipart extended chisel, industrial-grade sheet metal cutters) without needing to be asked” (p. 55). The heist crew’s social flow reaches its highest degree of intensity when – as in *Rififi*, but also *Bob le flambeur* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1956), *Robbery* (Peter Yates, 1967), *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* (Antonio Isasi-Isasmendi, 1968), *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1981), or *Heist* – the team-working motor runs silently. The wordless communication, with its reliance on routines and non-verbal micro-gestures like brief glances, nods, or a tipped hat, stands for the ideal of blind unspoken understanding.

It is not difficult to construe this small group as a *pars pro toto*, that is, a metonymic social microcosm that works. And it is here that we can discover another utopian strand of the genre and its pleasures: the we-connection of the group thwarts what many sociologists and social philosophers (Bauman 2001; Honneth 1995; Putnam 2000) have decried as the individualization, isolation, atomization of the modern world. Incidentally, not a few directors have envisioned this collaboration in multicultural or multinational ways, beginning with the French-Swedish-Italian criminal cooperation in *Rififi*. In *Ocean’s Eleven*, Soderbergh takes it to the extreme by conjoining a Dream Team, scouted nationally and internationally, that consists of WASPs, Jews, Mormons, an African American, a black Englishman, and a Chinese acrobat. If we want, we can spot another one of those funny paradoxes inherent in the heist genre: the rebellion against “cold, social institutions” (Kaminsky, 1974, p. 77) is a very social act.²

However, feminist critics like Gaylyn Studlar (2017) have rightfully lamented that the cooperation usually does not allow women in central roles: “heist films are male-centered, if not male obsessed.” To describe the group, Studlar uses the apt term “criminal fraternity” (p. 83). Indeed, the homosocial bonding is strikingly obvious, and it is usually the outsider, the one who does not belong to the inner core of the group, who

2 Talking about paradoxes, consider also that in the heist film the medium of cinema deals with the ultimate medium of exchange – money; and the fictional medium of cinema toys with the most fictional medium – again: money. Daryl Lee (2014), in turn, interprets the heist as is “an allegory of the film-making process itself as collective craftsmanship” (p. 39).

messes things up. Again, it is Soderbergh who ups the ante. At the end of *Ocean's Eleven*, the criminals are lined up in front of the fake Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas. To the tune of Debussy's *Claire de Lune*, significantly based on Verlaine's homoerotic poem of the same name, they celebrate their achievement without the need to resort to language. The partners in crime have turned the heist into a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-religious bromance almost too good to be true. However, since the heist crew usually comes together one last time and then disbands at the end, the moment is steeped in nostalgia, as if the characters were hoping for their own sequel to resurrect their friendship, a dream Soderbergh made come true three years later in *Ocean's Twelve*. After all, the men's self-esteem depends on their skills, but their skills are valuable only in conjunction with the skills of the others.

This implies that the criminal microcosm adheres to the dictates of the Fordist division of labor and the functional differentiation one finds in Western societies, where specialists rule and generalists remain amateurs at best. To celebrate the collaboration, in this view, merely glosses over the fragmented conception of human activity the break-ins and robberies seem to demand. The heist film could thus be decried as a questionable celebration of alienated individuals who lack autonomy. But with Marco D'Eramo (2018), one may look at this from a more optimistic side and consider specialization as a legitimate human desire: people who are able to penetrate a field by dominating its techniques experience deep satisfaction and give sense to their lives. For D'Eramo (2018, pp. 209–210), the problem is not division of labor and time per se; problems arise when someone is forced to it. Similarly, Sloterdijk (2013) is skeptical of calling a society "labor-divided" (p. 337) – he prefers to speak of "modern achievement collectives" that are "competence-divided" (p. 376). Shifting our perspective in this direction would allow us to grasp a nice final dialectic of the heist film. The well-integrated and cooperative group members use their highly specialized competences to subvert the system that demands this fragmentation in the first place. This is – like the genre as a whole – immensely pleasurable.

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