



**Life Imitating Art: The Influence of *Money Heist* Iconography**

By Alex Okoth

Abstract

*Anti-mimesis* is a philosophical position that directly opposes Aristotle's proposal of *mimesis*. In his proposition, Oscar Wilde opines that "Life Imitates Art more than Art Imitates Life." By dwelling on the iconography of the *Money Heist* show, and pointing out how the show has influenced people and events across the world, this article gives a conclusion that art has a way of influencing life.

**Life Imitating Art**

The general idea of imitation originates from the concept of *mimesis* of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle regarded imitation as one of the greatest distinctive aspects of human nature. He described the purposes and the process of *mimesis* as the childhood instinct implanted in a man (Kyriakou, 1993). According to Aristotle, we all learn from imitations, and art is a product of imitation as such tragedy (art) existed because of imitation. *Mimesis* is a type of representation. In *Poetics*, two cause of poetry is indicated by Aristotle: the universal instinct of a man to engage in mimetic activities and the tendencies of a man to have pleasure on mimetic products (Sachs, 2011). By extension, these are the general cause of *mimesis*. Poetry (art) is a *mimesis* of human action and reality. According to Halliwell (1990), poetry can be seen as deriving, getting satisfaction, the impulse of understanding the human world through remaking the actions and representations.

However, Oscar Wilde had a different opinion to that of Aristotle. In his essay *The Decay of Lying*, he opines that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life". In arguing his idea, Oscar gave an example of the tendency of children to imitate what they have read in stories and books (Wilde, 2018). He also referred to "the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin," turned to be ruthless criminals that wreaked havoc to the innocent citizens in the 18th century as a perfect example of how life imitates art.

Violent video games, for example, have been the reason for the lashing out of some teens that are exposed to them. For instance, in Columbine, two students went on the rampage at their school. The two students, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, went out on a senseless spree shoot that ended up killing up to 13 people and wounded a lot more teachers and students. According to Campbell (2018), the two students enjoyed playing Quake and Doom video games, which were very popular at the time as well as listening to heavy metal dark music of Marilyn Manson. Doom was a gory video game whose characters were heavily armed with rocket launchers and shotguns that were used to kill and dispose of the legions of demons and zombies. It is argued that the exposure to virtual violence (art) and the dark music of Marilyn Manson prepared the basis for which the real-world killings at the Columbine school happened.

Joker (2019) by Todd Philipps is another perfect example of how life is influenced by art. It is noted that the comedian Arthur Fleck was mistreated and disregarded by the society of Gotham city. He eventually embarked on a downward spiral of severe revolution, and bloody crime that brought him face to face with his alter ego. The actions of Joker in realizing himself has influenced some of the political and civil rights protests across the world. Mounier (2019) posits that the distinctive face of Joker started appearing in several political demonstrations around the globe. According to William Blanc, historian and a political commentator, the Joker (2019) have real evocative power that has echoed and instigated political protests against the inflexible deaf political systems. Just as the Joker, protestors believe that they can meet their alter ego face to face.

Art has a way of moving human beings. Be it the work of a play, a film, a song, a poem, a painting or a novel, art touches, moves, transports a soul to a place never experienced by the physical body. Through works of art, viewers and fans getaway to cherish uncertainty, intuition, and creativity as well as search for new ideas and finding solutions and a better approach to complex contemporary issues. At the same time, it can influence and create an unorthodox way of handling problems. This transformative experience is what art is in constant search, influencing the way of life.

### **Understanding Iconography**

The word iconography is derived from the Greek word *eikonographein*, which has a meaning of image writing. It concerns itself with the very subject matter of a given image or an object, as well as its interpretation and meaning (Asiamah, 2015). In media studies, iconography is part of a film genre; it informs genre deconstruction and image analysis. In itself, iconography presupposes and describes the existing familiarity of concepts and themes that are transmitted and included in oral tradition and literary sources (Panofsky, 1993). According to Asiamah (2015), the descriptive discipline of iconography is concerned with gathering and classifying cultural symbols and images. Drainville (2018) defines iconography as "a method for examining, categorizing, and interpreting imagery." This method has been arguably employed during the Northern and Italian Renaissance in the investigation of works of art. For example, in many of the *Madonna* paintings, she was shown on a deep blue robe. Madonna was a virgin, and the deep blue robe was a symbol of heaven and a reminder to her queenly role in heaven. As such, the deep blue color came to be an *icon* for her religious importance, dignity as well as a spiritual mother.

Merriam-Webster defines an icon as "a conventional religious image typically painted on a small wooden panel and used in the devotions of Eastern Christians." In computer language, the Oxford dictionary defines icons as symbols that are in the computer screen that represent files or programs. This icon gives clear communication to computer users, even without text accompaniment. As such, Asiamah (2015) provides a more inclusive definition of an icon as "an enduring symbol, and an object of great devotion and stands in a similar semiotic range as the biblical definition and allows for timeless symbols and objects to be called icons." In many churches across the world (especially catholic), the virgin Mary and Jesus Christ are some of the most popular timeless icons. The use of their images is exponentially and extensively growing. Seemingly, there will be no ending to the use of the two icons in many of their Christian gatherings and religious activities.

Iconography study is based on images. According to Rask (2012), human subjects such as signs and systems are the cause for the image generation. They can, therefore, be subjected to semiotic analysis because they symbolically represent the themes in the works of art. Husley (2005) notes that when symbols are situated in a given discourse, they acquire defined meaning as they interact with icons and *indices*. In his book, *Signs, Codes, Spaces, and Arts: Papers on General and Spatial Semiotics*, Tchertov (2019) implies that an "index is a sign that correlates with and implies another meaning in space or time." For example, fire can be indicated by the image of smoke. Indices are only capable of pointing at the meaning. On the other hand, icons directly communicate the idea. Figures can be diagrams, pictures, metaphors, or algebraic expressions.

The key to understanding the meaning of a work of art is through iconography. It is essential to understand the themes, social, and cultural principles of the exact representation of the icons. Film producers have been known to be using images that belong to the iconography of a given genre to excite and satisfy the audience's expectations and also show that the film is from a particular genre. To become and remain part of the iconography of a given genre, the visual patterns have to stay constant and the same for a given period (longer). Some of the things that dictate the genre in iconography (in films) include costumes, settings, props, songs, signs, and signifiers. It is known that cowboys wear ten-gallon hats, and tough guys in thrillers are identified with black leather jackets, among others.

Interestingly, iconography relies on publicity and fame in revealing their kind. This transformation from the anonymity of the object to its popularity depends on how the masses have been able to interact with it. With masses identifying themselves with the icons, the concept of iconography can, therefore, be used to address economic, political, social, and cultural issues in national, international, and global stages. Iconography is always a direct communication to the viewers, fans, and masses. However, for them to understand the linguistic sign, the targeted group must have a semiotic dimension.

### **Iconography in the *Money Heist* Show**

*Money Heist* (La casa de Papel) is a Spanish television crime series running on Netflix and created by Alex Pina. It was first premiered on May 2, 2017. The first two seasons of the show revolves around a major robbery in a Spanish Royal Mint. At the start of the series are eight robbers that are code-named after significant cities across the world like Tokyo (Úrsula Corberó), Helsinki, Nairobi, Berlin, Rio, Denver, Oslo, and The Professor. After the first successful bank robbery, the robbers are forced out of their hideouts to go and rescue one of their own, Rio. During all these times (especially during the robbery), they wear the red coverall, the Salvador Dali mask, that are the major icons of the show. Their favorite song and one which has remained in the vocals of many fans and followers is the *Bella Ciao*, Italian folksong.

#### ***i. The Salvador Dali Mask***

To understand why Salvador Dali mask was used in the Netflix show *Money Heist*, it is vital to understand Dali's life: Personality and behavior. According to Oylar (2015), Salvador Dali was born in 1904 in Spain. From his younger age, Salvador was ruthlessly ambitious. At the age of six, he wanted to be a cook, which changed at the age of seven with a dream of being a Napoleon. However, he ended up being an artist with a 'critical paranoia' style that involved developing and accessing subconscious desires and fantasies as well as memories that

incorporated madness and sanity. His behavior, style, and personality were unconventional and colourful; and violent. At the age of five, he knowingly pushed a boy off a high suspension bridge; before the age of ten, he had pre-meditated on kicking his older-sister head as if he was kicking a ball. As a teen, he teased a girl for five years by kissing and caressing her but refusing to 'sleep' with her, claiming that female private parts were scary. This rebellious nature and behaviour of Salvador Dali would then affect his diploma graduations when he refused to be examined in his final exams, "I am very sorry, but I am infinitely more intelligent than these three professors, and I, therefore, refuse to be examined by them. I know this subject much too well" (Meisler, 2005). He was later expelled for one year, and Salvador never graduated with a diploma.

Politically, even though he ascribed to the Surrealist movement, Dali was fascinated by the fascist-like Adolf Hitler. As such, André Breton, a French poet, expelled Dali from the Paris Surrealist Group for refusing to imbibe by the Marxism spirit and expressing sympathy to Hitler. Oyler (2015) notes that Breton referred to Dali as a 'political asshole.' After the expulsion from the group, Dali started to do the paintings and drawings of Adolf Hitler openly. He also extolled Gen. Francisco Franco, Spain's fascist leader, for establishing order, truth, and clarity in Spain. In a contrary opinion, Eric Shane points out in biography *The Life and Masterworks of Salvador Dalí*, that the inclination to Hitler might "have been motivated more by the painter's desire to offend Breton." In the wake of the Civil war, Dali painted a *Premonition of Civil War: Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*. In the painting, described by Dali as a delirium of auto strangulation, was a tormented figure in tears. This painting is considered as a strong statement for an anti-war.

It could be easily argued that Salvador Dali was a brutal critic, a violent individual, a revolutionary, and an epitome of resistance. He was skeptical about several issues and very hard to convince. These must be the reasons why the *Money Heist* robbers wore Salvador Dali's mask. While it can be argued that they wore the mask to cover their faces, the physical symbol of the mask is "resistance, indignation, and skepticism towards the system" (Fernandez, 2020). Cerri (2019) also notes that the mask could be a symbol of foolishness. Dali was a political asshole, and as such, "when you wear the mask, you start seeing the world from a different perspective," claimed Alvaro Morte, a character in the *Money Heist* series. Cerri (2019) notes that the mask is a clear symbol of the craziness and foolishness of which Dali saw and lived his life.

Dali was a good person that loved giving and sharing. According to De Cabrol, Dali's assistant turned interior designer, Dali, "was amiable, and an extremely generous person...when he was in New York, he would go out to lunch and dinner every day with around 10 to 12 people. And on Sundays, he'd have dinners at Trader Vic's, and Andy Warhol would arrive with around 40 people" (Hochberger, 2018). Probably, this caring character of Dali was the reason his face was used in the mask by the robbers who were dedicated to helping the poor across Spain.

## ii. *Bella Ciao* Song

Besides Cecilia Krull, "My Life is Going on" themes song in the show *Money Heist*, *Bella Ciao*, an Italian folk song, is another tune that most fans are associating with. The viewers of

the series are first introduced to the song when the Professor (Sergio Marquina) and Berlin (Pedro Alonso) sing it in one of Tokyo's narration. It is here that we realize that the life of Professor has always been revolved around resistance. They were taught the song *Bella Ciao* by their grandfather, who had fought against the suppressing rule of the fascist in Italy. The song itself has a long political history in Italy. According to Marchenkov (2014), *Bella Ciao*, which means "Goodbye beautiful" in English, is an Italian folk song that first appeared among rice-paddy workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Italy's Po Valley. Rice farming required workers to stay in the field for hours with their backs bend in the knee-deep water. It was hard, low-paying labour. These conditions brought with them a great deal of dissent that prompted uprisings and riots. The song was used during such riots. By 1943, the lyrics had been changed, and the song was being used as an anthem to protest against the fascist regime of Mussolini and the Nazis. Since then, the song has been used in many protests against political injustice as well as a sign of solidarity among the protestors. The original lyrics before the change included:

*In the morning I got up  
To the paddy rice fields, I have to go  
And Between insects and mosquitoes  
A hard work I have to work*

The lyrics, however, changed during the second world war to the one below.

*One morning I awakened  
Oh Goodbye, beautiful, Goodbye, beautiful, Goodbye, beautiful! Bye! Bye!  
One morning I awakened  
And I found the invader*

*Oh partisan carry me away  
Oh, Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful! Bye! Bye!  
Oh partisan carry me away  
Because I feel death approaching*

*And if I die as a partisan  
(And if I die on the mountain)  
Oh Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful! Bye! Bye!  
And if I die as a partisan  
(And if I die on the mountain)  
Then you must bury me*

*Bury me up in the mountain  
(And you have to bury me)  
Oh, Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye beautiful! Bye! Bye!  
Bury me up in the mountain  
(And you have to bury me)  
Under the shade of a beautiful flower*

*And the people who shall pass  
(And all those who shall pass)*

*Oh Goodbye beautiful, Goodbye, beautiful, Goodbye beautiful! Bye! Bye!*  
*And the people who shall pass*  
*(And all those who shall pass)*  
*Will tell me: "what a beautiful flower".*  
*(And they will say: "what a beautiful flower")*  
*This is the flower of the partisan*  
*(And this is the flower of the partisan)*  
*Oh, Goodbye, beautiful. Goodbye, beautiful. Goodbye, beautiful!*  
*Bye! Bye!*  
*This is the flower of the partisan*  
*(And this is the flower of the partisan)*  
*Who died for freedom*

It is the latter that has been used in the show *Money Heist*. The song is mainly played during some big plot scenes of the show. For example, when the Professor crew finds their way out of the mint (Season 2) and when the police figure out how the thieves managed to escape. It is played during these serious plot points to send serious messages of the actual reason for the heist.

### **iii. *The Red Coverall***

Colours are a lot more powerful. Colour has the power to send varying messages to the human subconscious. Boitnott (2017) notes that there is a powerful message in wearing red. The colour red stands for many things: it is a colour of romance and physical passion; it is a representation of anger, violence, danger, and aggression. Paradoxically, red is also the colour to signify stop. In many corporate and state events, red is a colour is used to convey confidence, elicit emotions, and capture attention. Across the world, red flags are associated with revolutions.

During the struggles that rocked the rule in Rome, that ultimately brought it down, the slaves who had no other option but to revolve held high the battle standard of a red flag. The same scenario was also seen during the great peasant revolt in Germany when the peasant army moved across the country, raising the red flag amidst them as a sign of revolution. In 1831, a group of revolutionists, during the Merthyr Riots, in wales took over Merthyr for almost a week. Seven to ten thousand of these workers marched across Merthyr under a red flag before they could be stopped and killed by soldiers. After French revolutionaries seized the Hotel de Ville in Paris in 1871, a red flag was hoisted. This was the first time the working class took power. Carl Marx described it as the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag."

The core theme in the *Money Heist* show is the revolution. Thus, wearing a red coverall (the red jumpsuits) was never by coincidence but a way to support the show's theme. According to the Professor, the group leader, and the robbery mastermind, the robbery at the Spanish Royal Mint is not only about money but also a sign of resistance against the rogue system. Revolution has been in the ethos of robbers thanks to the red coverall.

### **The Influence of Money Heist Iconography**

In Italy, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right League party, was preparing for an election in the country's north-eastern region of Emilia-Romagna. Mackay (2020) notes that the party

had higher chances of winning elections in the region compared to the previous decades that saw the region under the leadership of the left since 1945. The 2018 League party rebrand assured Salvini of a win, and as such, he went all-out offensive with his party's slogan, "Let's Free Emilia-Romagna" from the mindset of the leftist; this was making impactful waves (de Fazio, 2019). However, in November 2019, the demonstration began cropping across the region of Emilia-Romagna. The groups filled different squares with tens of thousands of protestors. This protestor called themselves "Sardines". The movement had no political affiliation except that they wanted Salvini's political values to be more of decency and civility. During their protests, they sang 'Ciao Bella' as a sign of resistance to the Salvini's rule (Serhan, 2020). When the election was held, the League failed in winning the whole region of Emilia-Romagna.

On August 20, 2019, the ship Open Arms, carrying volunteers and migrants, landed in the port of Lampedusa, Sicily, Italy. On landing, the group sang *Bella Ciao*, symbolizing their anti-fascist resistance. In 2019, a picture of four Puerto Rico people was posted on Instagram by Mari Hinojosa. Maria is an executive producer and anchor with Latino USA on NPR. The four people were wearing the Salvador Dali mask and on a red coverall with the sign written in Spanish, "We are the fucking resistance". In Lebanon, October 17, during the Lebanese revolution, some of the protestors wore the same realistic red jumpsuit and Salvador Dali mask as the *Money Heist* robbers.

Across Asia and the Middle East are millions of women that migrate in search for pay as domestic workers. In these countries, there are a lot of gaps in immigration policies, labour laws, accepted social discrimination against the imported migrant workers. These include working hours with no off days, workplace confinement, poor or no wages at all, sexual and physical abuses and forced labour. In other extreme cases, immigrant workers are forced to be slaves (Thompson & Darlin, 2019). According to Thompson and Darling (2019), most governments in the middle east have failed in adopting comprehensive reforms. Many employers exhibit stiff resistance to such reforms. Always, politics of race, national origin, gender, and class has a way of negotiating over human rights. As such, protestors have found a radical expression in the *Money Heist Icons* to push for the sweeping changes. In Cairo, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria as well as Lebanon, protestors have been seen on Salvador Dali mask and the red jumpsuits singing the Italian anti-fascist resistance song that has been invoked by the Netflix hit crime show *Money Heist*.

Another sign of the Money Heist show is the fact that the thieves stay together. In many parts of the world *Bella Ciao* song, The Salvador Dali mask, and the red coverall have been used as part of being in solidarity. In 2020, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Italy was stricken hard, and many people succumbed to the virus. As such, in a sign of solidarity and being together, many people across Germany were recorded singing *Bella Ciao* to give hope and show that they are together in the fight against coronavirus (Covid-19).

### **Conclusion**

Human beings are daily surrounded by iconography. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the Italian and Northern renaissance, human beings have always communicated through visual representations. This visual representation is even more relevant today. In many films, producers use individual-specific icons to identify genres and characters. The show *Money Heist* is well known because of its three icons: the Salvador Dali mask, red coverall, and the

Italian folk song *Bella Ciao*. Understanding the linguistic language of these icons requires individuals to have semiotics dimensions. As such, the history behind the *Money Heist* iconography must have influenced and fueled different actions, activities, and protests across the world.

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